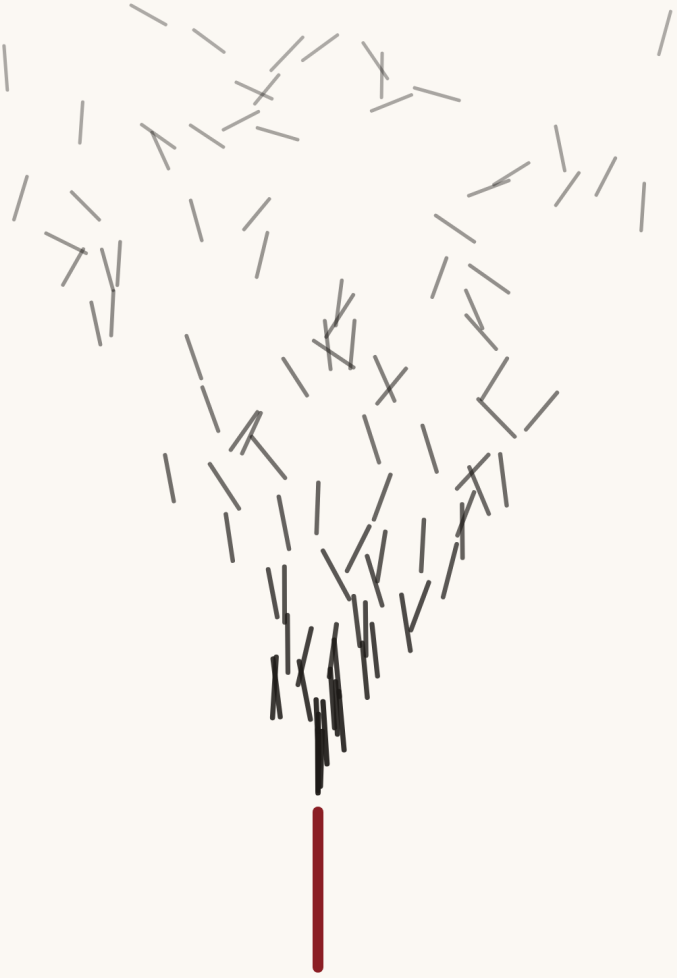


The Inkagai Way

100 Practices for a Writing Life

ANNA LISHMAN & BRAD LISHMAN

The Inkagai Way

100 Practices for a Writing Life

Where the Reason to Write Meets the Practice of Writing

Anna Lishman & Brad Lishman

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Rights and sharing

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Canonical home: https://inkagai.com/the-inkagai-way

Reader promise

This book is for anyone trying to carry a meaningful work from first impulse to enduring form.

It does not prescribe a universal process. You may plan extensively, discover through prose, dictate, write by hand, collaborate, work in fragments, use software, use AI under your control, or avoid it entirely. You may be a plotter on one project, a discovery writer on another, and a hybrid writer within the same afternoon.

The question is not whether you follow the correct ritual. The question is whether your practice helps you protect, understand, strengthen, finish, and deliberately release the work that matters to you.

The Inkagai Way offers eight principles:

1. Begin with purpose.
2. Protect the unfinished.
3. Discover freely; structure deliberately.
4. Treat the work as a connected whole.
5. Keep the author sovereign.
6. Revise with intent and evidence.
7. Publish with control and consequence.
8. Build a body of work, not a content feed.

Together, they connect the reason you write with the practice required to make the work real.

The principles are followed by one hundred short practices. Each can be read on its own, and each says plainly what it does not claim.

Opening — The Work Only You Can Write

A novel is half written. The chapters are in a drafting app, the characters in a wiki, the timeline in a spreadsheet, the feedback in email, the AI conversations in several chat histories. A nonfiction book scatters into interview transcripts, citation software, voice memos and a long list of claims that still need evidence. You can find any one piece. You can't see the Work whole.

Nobody stalls for lack of tools. You have more within reach than a publishing house once did, and the work is still hard.

The scatter changes how you judge your own book. When the purpose is far from the page you draft on, word count is easier to measure than meaning. Research filed apart from the claims lets confidence get ahead of evidence. And once suggestions arrive faster than you can judge them, production can replace authorship without anyone deciding it should.

You don't have to throw the tools out. A publishing platform wants frequent output, and an AI interface makes generating feel like progress. Each can be useful. None of them gets to decide what your book is for.

That decision is yours, and it starts as a claim of responsibility, that there is something you are willing to notice, question, invent or reveal. It may be meant for millions of readers or for one person you will never meet. Without your attention and your decisions it will not exist in this form.

This book calls the piece you are making, whatever its form, the Work, with a capital W. Lowercase, work means labor, or writing in general.

This is the Work only you can write.

That doesn't mean nobody else could touch the subject. Thousands of people can write about grief, money, dogs or war, and originality is rarely a matter of owning a topic. It lies in what you notice and connect, what you leave out, and what you can testify to.

Nor does the Work have to come from some unassisted self. Authors have always had help from inherited language, archives, editors and other people's books, and AI may augment exploration or analysis. Help doesn't remove authorship. The question is whether you still govern what becomes of it.

Governing takes more than inspiration. The reason to write has to turn into practice, then into material, then into a structure that survives revision, and publication should be something you decide. A finished Work should leave behind more than a promotional spike and a forgotten folder.

This book calls that movement The Inkagai Way. It isn't a formula for writing every book. It is a philosophy for keeping authorship intact while a Work travels from private possibility to public consequence, and its core statement is simple:

> **Write from purpose. Protect the unfinished. Shape the whole work. Revise with intent. Publish with control. Build a body of work that endures.**

The rest of the book works out what that asks of you, starting with the name.

Chapter 1 — What Inkagai Means

Inkagai is a coined name, neither an established Japanese word nor a direct translation. It joins three ideas: **ink**, **kaku / 書く**, and the conceptual resonance of **ikigai**.

Ink is the mark, a thought made visible and a trace that stays after the moment of composition has passed. Writing moves something out of the reversible interior of thought and into an artifact that can be tested, copied, misunderstood or carried forward. Digital text is ink only by analogy, yet once its marks can persist without you, a manuscript is more than a private possibility.

Kaku, written 書く, is the Japanese verb to write. In the name it stands for practice, the repeated act of putting thought into words and going back to them with enough attention to see what they have become. Drafting counts, and so do research, deletion, verification and release. A reason to write that never enters practice stays an aspiration.

Ikigai gives the name its conceptual resonance, the reason a person feels called to keep at a life activity or practice. Outside Japan it often appears as a neat diagram of four overlapping circles: what you love, what you are good at, what the world needs, what you can be paid for. That diagram can help with career reflection, but the complete or traditional Japanese meaning is larger, and Inkagai takes the larger meaning seriously. Purpose there can earn nothing and still count. A person's reason to continue can be as ordinary as caring for someone or tending a place, and from outside it can look unimportant.

Why do you return to writing? Why does this particular Work keep returning to you? You will answer more than once. A Work can change its argument, plot, form or scale and still stay connected to the reason it deserves attention.

Put together, the three ideas give Inkagai as:

> **The place where the reason to write meets the practice of writing.**

Or, shorter:

> **Creative purpose made operational.**

Operational sounds mechanical, but it only means that purpose gets a way to act.

Creative culture expects you to feel deeply in one room and manage files, rights, websites and readers in another. Yet every operational choice can protect your purpose or bend it, and whenever a choice changes what the Work can be, it has become part of authorship. Recording a source can protect an argument, and a pen name can protect a life. Releasing a complete essay instead of splitting it into daily fragments can protect its reasoning.

That is why the Inkagai Way begins before the first sentence and runs past publication.

Reflection

- What makes this Work worth sustained attention?
- Is your answer about the Work itself, or about what you hope the Work will earn or prove?

- Which parts of your current process strengthen the reason you write?
- Which parts quietly swap in another system's incentives?

Chapter 2 — Begin with Purpose

Ask a writer what the book is about and you will hear a premise, a thesis, a target reader, a market or a deadline. Each does a useful job. A premise says what a story starts from, and a deadline draws a line in time. None of them is purpose, which is the question underneath: **why should this Work exist?**

At first you may not know. A novelist may have only an image of a child standing before a city that has forgotten the sky; a memoirist may know that one family story has been told wrong for decades. Purpose can begin as irritation, grief, curiosity or refusal. A polished mission statement can wait. Notice what gives the Work gravity, because gravity helps you select.

Any substantial work throws off more material than it can hold. A fantasy world produces endless history, a mystery more suspects and subplots than it can use. Without purpose, novelty, effort already spent and fear of waste decide what goes in. With it, you can ask whether a piece belongs to the Work you are making, which is a separate question from whether the piece is good. A scene can be vivid and wrong for the book, a character fascinating enough to pull the novel off its center.

The systems around you also hand out ready-made reasons to write: publish often, grow an audience, feed the algorithm, prove you are a real writer. Any of these can be a fine goal, though each deserves a look first. A serial written to hold an audience may still make a world readers love. The trouble comes when the outside

goal is the only reason and you can no longer say what the Work should do for a reader beyond earning the next response.

None of this ranks purposes morally. Two authors can write practical books on the same subject, one wanting the clearest available guide for people facing a confusing transition and the other wanting to establish a premium consulting brand. Both can write valuable books. Their purposes will still drive different decisions about how much knowledge is held back, whether the book aims to make the reader self-sufficient or to qualify them for hiring help, and how the call to action is framed.

Purpose can also change. A novel begun as an adventure may turn out to be about loyalty; a personal essay begun as accusation may become an examination of complicity. The first purpose may have been true when you held it, and practice teaches you things you couldn't know at the start. If you haven't noticed the change, early chapters serve one purpose and later ones another, and revision turns cosmetic because the real decision was never made. Once you name the new purpose, you can go back over selection, sequence, tone and ending.

Revisit purpose before a major structural revision, before inviting outside feedback and before committing to a publication form, or whenever the Work feels active but directionless.

A useful purpose statement is specific enough to guide a decision and flexible enough to survive discovery.

For a novel:

> This Work exists to explore what loyalty becomes when every institution that defined it has failed.

For a memoir:

> This Work exists to recover the complexity that our family's official story erased.

For a practical guide:

> This Work exists to let a capable newcomer make this decision without depending on an expert's hidden judgment.

For an essay:

> This Work exists to name a contradiction that is visible in daily life but absent from the public conversation.

Generative tools sharpen the need. A model can produce plausible continuations in a dozen directions, and without a governing intention you end up picking the smoothest or most impressive output instead of the one that serves the book.

Reflection

- What would remain unwritten if you did not write it?
- What should become possible for the reader because this Work exists?
- What attractive material does not belong?
- Has the purpose changed since you began?

Chapter 3 — Protect the Unfinished

Open a draft halfway through and you will find a character carrying functions they will later shed, claims running ahead of the evidence, a scene that exists only to discover a relationship and will disappear. A contradiction may be an error, or it may be the pressure that shows you the Work's center.

An unfinished Work is a different kind of object from a finished one with pages missing. Its meaning may still be unstable, and it needs the freedom to be wrong in private, because a system that treats every state as public, searchable or permanent changes what you can safely attempt inside it.

Share early and you often get answers to a version you haven't chosen yet. Praise sticks to material that may have to go, and public commitment makes reversing course feel like embarrassment. Early sharing can still be worth it if you chose it. A trusted reader may show you where curiosity drops, or a subject expert knock out a false assumption.

Protection means boundaries that fit how mature and sensitive the Work is, and they cover more than who can open a file. A manuscript can be technically private while its content is copied into third-party tools, kept in chat histories or visible to platform operators. Interface privacy and architectural privacy are different things, and you should know which one you have:

- Where does the plaintext exist?
- What is stored after the action ends?

- Is content used for training or secondary purposes?
- Which metadata remains visible even when content is encrypted?

Every tool leaves some risk behind. A browser, a collaborator, a screenshot or an authorized processing session can expose content, so honest privacy is a clear account of boundaries and limits rather than an absolute promise.

Authors also get encouraged to narrate the process in public, announcing the project, sharing daily counts and making the road to completion into content. That can build community and accountability. It can also make the performance a second work with demands of its own, in which quiet, difficult stretches look unproductive because they produce nothing to show and a change of direction becomes a branding problem. Protecting the unfinished may then mean declining to announce a title, keeping your word count to yourself, or inviting three readers instead of three thousand followers.

Protection also makes courage possible. A novelist can write the cruel version of a scene to understand a character without committing to publish it. A memoirist can set down an angry memory before deciding what is fair.

It matters more when the Work concerns other people. You own your expression; you do not own every consequence of disclosing it. Your private notes may hold allegations, medical details or material entrusted to you under a different expectation. Sort out what should never enter a casual tool, what needs consent and what may need legal or ethical review before publication.

Scope collaborative access as well. An editor may need a chapter and can leave the research archive alone. A beta reader may need

a watermarked edition and a clear request rather than permanent workspace membership. The more complete the system, the easier it is to overshare by granting access to the container instead of the material someone needs.

Disclosure is a decision you author. A Work moves from private exploration through selected collaboration and a review edition to a public edition, and each transition should be explicit. Publication makes a public artifact from selected, reviewed material. It should never happen because a permission setting on the same object was flipped by accident.

Reflection

- Who can currently see this Work?
- Which tools receive plaintext from it?
- What are you sharing to improve the Work, and what are you sharing to reassure yourself that the Work exists?
- What should a collaborator receive, and what should remain outside their scope?

Chapter 4 — Discover Freely; Structure Deliberately

Ask ten writers how they start a book and you will hear three answers. Plotters outline before they draft, pantsers write by the seat of their pants, and plantsers claim the middle. The argument never ends because every camp can point to a real failure: a rigid plan can force living material through a dead sequence, and an unbounded draft can pile up energy and never become a work.

The Inkagai Way rejects the hierarchy behind the argument. Plotter, pantser and plantser describe where you currently put your uncertainty. They don't measure artistic legitimacy, and they say nothing about your personality. A novelist may plan the world and discover the characters, and someone can discovery-write a first version and become a rigorous plotter in revision. The method belongs to the Work and the phase.

Plotters: structure before sustained drafting

A plotter (or planner, outliner, architect) makes substantial structural decisions before producing the main draft, in beat sheets, cards, tables or detailed outlines. Planning settles some uncertainty before prose makes change expensive. In a complex mystery a plan can protect the timing of knowledge, and in a research-heavy book it exposes unsupported claims before the chapters exist.

A good plan is a current model of the Work, and it answers to the manuscript. If evidence changes the thesis or the strongest

material turns up outside the outline, the plan changes. Plotting fails when the representation gets mistaken for the reality, as when a beat sheet assigns a function to every scene while the characters stay generic.

Pantsers and discovery writers: knowledge through composition

Pantser is writing-community slang for someone who writes by the seat of their pants. The more useful term for this book is **discovery writer**, someone who starts with little advance structure and learns what the Work is by producing material.

You write this way because the knowledge you need doesn't exist yet in a form that can be planned. A character's real nature may show only when she is forced to choose. A memoir may reveal that its apparent subject is a protective story around a harder one. Discovery writing treats composition as investigation, and it takes craft. Experienced discovery writers carry internalized models of scene, causality, genre and reader expectation, and those models steer judgment even if they are never written down.

Stephen King's *On Writing* is an influential account of this orientation. His published craft discussion emphasizes starting from situations, letting characters act within them, and strengthening what emerges through revision. He doesn't say every writer should reject plotting. The method works for King because it rests on accumulated craft, practice, intuition and revision, so a writer who copies only the missing outline has copied the least important part.

Discovery writing also leaves residue, such as abandoned voices, incompatible versions, and scenes that discovered something

valuable but do not belong in the final sequence. If you never shift modes, the manuscript can end up an archive of discovery instead of a designed experience. The discovery writer still has to look at what the draft has revealed and make the structural decisions afterward.

Plantsers and hybrid writers: alternating modes

Plantser is informal language for a writer who combines planning and discovery. The preferred term here is **hybrid writer**.

A hybrid writer sets up enough orientation to begin, then alternates between making material and making structural decisions, perhaps fixing the ending while leaving the middle open, or planning chronology but discovering theme. You may know the thesis but not which explanation will make it accessible. The hybrid writer keeps asking what has to be decided now and what has to stay open long enough to be discovered.

The risk is perpetual provisionality, where a flexible plan becomes an excuse never to commit and exploratory drafting runs on long after the Work has enough knowledge. Hybrid writers need explicit moments when possibility becomes decision.

The three locations of structure

All substantial writing runs into structure eventually. What differs is **when** and **where** the structural decisions happen.

Pre-draft structure

You represent important relationships before sustained drafting. This helps when dependencies are expensive to discover late or when collaborators need a shared model.

Emergent structure

You discover relationships while drafting and update a lightweight model as the Work develops, which helps when character or voice will alter the design.

Retrospective structure

You first create substantial material, then study the draft to find the Work's actual shape. This helps when the central knowledge doesn't exist before composition, or when early planning would create false certainty.

Most mature practices use more than one. A plotter may discover during drafting and restructure afterward, and a discovery writer may build a detailed revision map.

Anne Lamott: permission, scale, and imperfect beginnings

Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* comes at discovery and structure from a different direction. Its first move is to shrink the unit of attention. A book held as one enormous demand can be psychologically impossible, where a paragraph or a scene can be done.

The second is to permit an imperfect first draft, because early material makes later judgment possible. A draft can be clumsy,

sentimental, angry or incomplete and still reveal something you could not have known in advance.

The third refuses perfectionism as a gate on drafting, since perfectionism asks the sentence to prove the whole book before you have the knowledge the book is meant to create.

Lamott doesn't argue against planning. A plotter also needs permission to write material that doesn't yet fulfill the plan.

Templates are questions, not verdicts

An outline is only one form of structure. You can structure through scenes on cards, claims and evidence, timelines or motifs. A template imports assumptions; three acts imply a particular movement, and a mystery grid implies information management. Put a template to the draft as a set of questions. Where is the commitment? What changes after the midpoint? What promise is still unresolved?

Judge a structure by what it reveals, however sophisticated it looks. A list or a pile of paper cards can be enough, and a complex visualization that doesn't change a decision is decoration.

Discovery and structure solve different problems

Discovery creates knowledge that does not yet exist, and structure makes relationships visible so that the knowledge can become coherent. In fiction, structure may reveal which character knows what and when, or where the same emotional beat repeats without development. In nonfiction it may show which claim depends on which evidence, or where examples substitute for proof.

Discovery may show that the intended structure is wrong, and structure may show exactly what you still need to discover.

An adaptive Inkagai loop

A practical writing process can be represented as:

> **Orient → Discover → Represent → Decide → Draft → Inspect → Revise → Repeat**

Orient establishes why the Work matters and what currently guides it. **Discover** creates knowledge you do not yet possess, and **Represent** makes the relevant relationships visible in whatever form is useful. **Decide** converts possibilities into commitments, and **Draft** gives those commitments material form. **Inspect** compares the material with purpose, reader experience, evidence and the connected whole; **Revise** responds to diagnosed needs. **Repeat** is there because writing is iterative rather than a one-way pipeline.

Writers enter the loop at different points. A discovery writer may draft first and represent the structure after tens of thousands of words, while a hybrid writer may cycle through it chapter by chapter.

Treat the loop as a diagnostic model. When progress stops, ask which function is missing. Are you drafting while a structural commitment remains unmade? Are you planning because writing feels vulnerable, even though the plan already contains enough information? Are you polishing prose below a structural problem?

Writer's block is sometimes a mismatch between modes. If you don't know what happens next, ask whether you need more material or a decision about the material you have.

The system should adapt to the author

A serious author system shouldn't push everyone through the same funnel. A plotter should be able to build outlines, timelines and dependencies before drafting, and a discovery writer should be able to open a clean editor with almost no setup and build structure retrospectively. Onboarding shouldn't ask a writer to choose a permanent identity that hides half the product.

AI assistance may propose a structure or summarize what has emerged, and those suggestions stay hypotheses until you review and accept them. Retrospective structure shouldn't become silent automated authorship.

Reflection

- What do you genuinely not know yet?
- Which uncertainty requires exploratory writing rather than more planning?
- What is the smallest representation that would reveal the relevant relationship?
- Which possibility are you avoiding turning into a commitment?

Chapter 5 — Treat the Work as a Connected Whole

A character introduced in chapter two explains a choice in chapter eleven. Move or cut the first scene and the second quietly stops making sense, and nothing on screen warns the writer.

Writing software shows a manuscript as a sequence, page after page, and there is a good reason for that, since the reader will meet most books in sequence. But sequence leaves out most of the structure. A historical date may constrain a character's age, a journey and the timing of an event. An interview may support several chapters while carrying a consent limitation that affects publication.

Those relationships are real whether or not the writing application can represent them. If it can't, you carry them in memory, which works until the book outgrows working memory. A series outgrows it quickly. Collaboration spreads the memory across several people, and revision keeps changing the very relationships you are trying to remember.

The usual answer is more documents, such as character profiles, timelines, source lists and style sheets. Each one solves a local problem, and between them they wrap the manuscript in a second layer of fragmentation. Treating the Work as a connected whole starts from seeing that they all describe one system, which is larger than the manuscript and holds its sources, revisions, editions and promises to readers as well. Plenty of writers will never need a graph database. They need their meaningful connections kept, so they aren't rebuilding them by hand.

A nonfiction claim has wording, and it also has a definition, a scope, evidence and counterevidence, provenance and relationships to other claims. Moving it earlier may mean introducing concepts sooner, and removing one source may weaken several chapters. Connected thinking improves revision because the question stops being “where does this text appear?” and becomes “what does this decision affect?” When a source is discredited, you can find every claim that depends on it.

The reader’s path belongs to the whole as well. You carry backstory, research and alternative versions that may never reach the page, and a connected model helps you keep apart what exists in your system and what the reader’s sequence has disclosed so far. Whether you know the answer matters less than whether the reader has received the right information at the right time, most of all in mystery, suspense and argument.

You don’t have to work on the whole at all times. Deep work often means hiding the system and entering a local surface. Write the sentence without looking at the dashboard, then step back and look at what the chapter is for; being connected is what lets you move between those scales on purpose.

Nor does the whole stop at publication. A title, cover, excerpt or author page is not the book, but each makes claims about it, and if those claims drift from the Work’s purpose they attract the wrong reader with a promise the manuscript never meant to keep. Each edition is a projection of the same Work too. A translation forces conceptual choices, and a serialized version changes sequence and suspense.

So the connected whole argues against accidental disconnection. Use only as much structure as gives you better judgment, and

preserve the links that would be costly, risky, or impossible to reconstruct later.

Reflection

- Which important relationships exist only in your memory?
- What would break if this scene, claim, source, or chapter changed?
- What does the reader know at this point, rather than what do you know?
- Which public promise must the manuscript fulfill?

Chapter 6 — Keep the Author Sovereign

Keeping the author sovereign doesn't mean refusing influence. You can work with editors, co-authors, translators, publishers, software and AI and still be sovereign, as long as you keep legitimate authority over the decisions that make the Work what it is, including which changes enter it and what stays private.

That authority usually drains away in small steps, none of which feels like surrender. An editor's change goes in because reversing it feels awkward. An AI system produces polished language that enters the manuscript without close review. A publishing contract turns out to control future uses you never anticipated, and the Work ends up serving systems you never consciously chose.

Sovereignty begins with visibility, because you cannot govern a process you cannot inspect. Of any tool, find out what it receives, retains and publishes, and whether you can export the result and reverse the decision. Simple tools deserve those questions too. A grammar checker can flatten a voice you chose on purpose, and a distribution platform can end up defining your commercial relationship with your readers.

AI makes the issue easier to see because it can take part directly in language and reasoning. Asking whether using AI makes someone a real author is the wrong debate, since authorship has never meant producing every influence, fact, phrase, or physical mark unassisted. The better question is **where judgment resides**. Using AI to generate alternatives or test objections expands your agency when you choose the context, review the output, and decide what

enters the Work. The same tool reduces your agency when it silently consumes broad context, commits changes automatically, or pushes you toward acceptance through speed and volume.

The governing principle is:

> **Technology serves authorship; authorship does not serve the technology.**

Sovereignty makes the mistakes yours as well. If you accept a false generated claim, the reader gains nothing from the fact that a model produced it, and if private content goes to a provider under unclear terms, convenience does not stand in for consent.

It also means being able to leave. A system that stores the only usable copy of your Work, or tangles it into a proprietary structure you cannot recover, creates dependence, and export is evidence that the Work is still yours in practice. A graph or a collaboration history may not translate into a simple file without loss. A system still owes you documented paths to recover the manuscript, metadata, assets and other essential material.

Names are another boundary. One account owning a legal name and a pen name is no reason for a platform to collapse them into one, and you should be the one who controls which identity publishes which Work and what personal information is disclosed.

None of this rules out choosing a publisher, an exclusive platform or a public schedule, as long as you choose it informed.

The same holds inside the manuscript. Voice is the pattern of decisions that stays recognizable across your language, selection, rhythm and perspective, and editors and tools can strengthen that

pattern or normalize it toward generic clarity. To tell an improvement from a replacement, put four questions to every intervention:

- What problem is this solving?
- What value might it remove?
- Can I explain why I accept it?
- Does it make the Work more itself, or merely more conventional?

Reflection

- Which decisions in your current process are being made by default?
- Which changes enter the manuscript without explicit acceptance?
- Could you recover the Work in usable forms today?
- Where would assistance strengthen your judgment, and where might it replace it?

Chapter 7 — Revise with Intent and Evidence

A chapter can be rewritten twice and come out different and no better at what it is trying to do, because neither pass named what was wrong. The Inkagai Way treats revision as a response to evidence, meaning an observable reason to believe the Work is not yet doing what it is for. A reader who consistently misunderstands a key relationship is evidence. So is a source that does not support the strength of your language, or tension that falls because consecutive scenes do the same job.

A useful revision task names four things:

1. The observed problem.
2. The effect on the reader or Work.
3. The intended change.
4. The evidence that would show improvement.

For example:

> The reader learns Mara's fear only after she refuses the offer, so the refusal reads as arbitrary. Establish the fear through an earlier choice or physical response, then confirm that the refusal feels surprising but motivated.

A note like "Improve character motivation" or "tighten the argument" gives you nothing to act on.

Revision happens at several scales.

Purpose revision

Is this still the Work you intend to make, or are you holding on to an early concept the manuscript has outgrown?

Structural revision

Does the sequence produce the movement you intended, and does every major section do a job no other section does? For a writer who discovers the book in the drafting, this may be the first time the true outline gets made. For one who plots, it is where the planned model meets what the draft became.

Developmental revision

Do characters, claims, themes, examples, and reader expectations develop with enough depth and continuity?

Scene or chapter revision

What does the reader carry out of this scene or chapter that they did not bring in?

Prose revision

Is the language precise and right for the voice? Does clarity preserve complexity rather than erase it?

Production revision

Do formatting, metadata, captions, links, permissions, and edition-specific choices accurately represent the Work?

Work from the largest unresolved decision downward. Polish the prose before the structure settles and every deletion hurts, and fix every local sentence and you may never notice that a whole chapter serves no purpose.

A reader's confusion is real, but their proposed solution may be wrong, and an editor's preference may reflect a market you chose not to serve. Keep what people observed apart from what they prescribe; "What happened to you while reading?" usually gets you more than "How should I fix it?" Collect the patterns, such as where attention dropped, where trust weakened and what question readers thought the book was answering. Then go back to purpose and decide.

The connected model of the Work supplies evidence too. A timeline reveals impossible movement, a source ledger can show an entire chapter resting on one weak reference, and a diff can show a revision that removed a necessary setup.

AI can help with diagnosis, but its confidence is no evidence. A model names plausible issues because it has learned common patterns, so treat what it names as hypotheses and check them against the manuscript and the sources. AI-generated revisions may solve the stated problem while bringing in a new voice or adding unsupported facts. Before you accept one, read what it actually changed.

Revision ends when the Work is ready for its intended consequence, however many improvements are left over. A Work

can always be made different, so perfection can't be the gate. Ask whether the Work fulfills its central promise, whether known factual and continuity risks are resolved, whether remaining ambiguities are intentional, and whether publication and rights conditions are satisfied. When the answers are yes, more revision is probably avoidance.

Reflection

- What known need is your current revision answering?
- Are you polishing below an unresolved structural decision?
- Which feedback describes an observation, and which merely proposes a preference?
- What evidence would allow you to declare the Work ready?

Chapter 8 — Publish with Control and Consequence

Publication changes what the Work means, because it changes the Work's relationship to other people. A private draft can accuse someone, borrow an image, overstate a claim, or carry a placeholder, and publication turns each of those into a consequence, however much formatting the file and pressing a button feels like writing ending and distribution beginning. So before release, settle what exactly becomes public, under which identity, in which edition, under what rights and with what promise. These look administrative, yet they shape the reader's experience and how much control you keep afterward.

Start with the name on the cover. A legal name may tie together professional, personal, political, and family contexts. A pen name creates distance but takes careful operational separation, and anonymous publication protects you while making provenance harder to establish.

Editions differ in pacing, discoverability, cost and how easily you can revise. A web edition can be corrected quickly but may be read in fragments. A print edition is physically permanent, and so are its errors. A translation forces decisions about meaning that may expose ambiguity in the source.

The title, cover, description and excerpt all tell the reader what to expect. A dramatic cover may attract readers who will hate the actual pace, and a clipped social excerpt may turn a qualified argument into a certainty. Where marketing defines the contract

with the reader it is part of authorship, so make the promise accurate and still compelling.

You may own the manuscript and still lack permission for an image, quotation, lyric, private letter or identifiable personal detail inside it. A source can be citable without being freely reproducible, and a platform's terms may grant broader distribution rights than you expected. Resolve rights before release, because reconstructing them after someone objects is much worse.

At publication the private workspace and the public artifact have to come apart. A public page should hold only selected publication data, never a live view into private notes or draft metadata, and an excerpt should come from an approved edition, not the changing manuscript. Check internal filenames, hidden text, revision marks, image metadata, and document properties. The publication preview is where you see the difference between private and public before the action becomes irreversible.

Reception is out of your hands. You still set the conditions of release, and for sensitive work you can prepare for the outcomes you can foresee with legal review, safety planning, clear correction procedures and support for people named or affected.

Commercial work adds the economics of distribution. A retailer provides discovery while controlling the customer relationship. Direct sales give you the reader relationship along with tax, support, refund, and delivery duties.

Publication is also a decision to stop. Digital work can be updated forever, so release can stay provisional forever, and perpetual silent revision damages citation and trust. Significant changes

may call for a new edition, a version note, or an archived record, so that a public Work has an identifiable state.

Reflection

- What exact artifact are you publishing?
- What promise do the title, cover, and description make?
- Does the public artifact contain only intentionally public material?
- Which consequences can you prepare for, and which must you accept?

Chapter 9 — Build a Body of Work, Not a Content Feed

A published Work shouldn't vanish into the stream that announced it. In a feed the newest item sits at the top, and yesterday's work becomes context for today's post before it sinks under tomorrow's. A body of work is organized by relationship and endurance instead. Works refer to one another, questions deepen, and each finished Work changes what you can make next.

You can use feeds. The trouble comes when the feed becomes your model of authorship, so that every idea gets judged for immediate publication and fragments gather audience approval that makes them hard to transform later. You end up responsible for staying visible instead of for building something durable. Kept below the body of work, the feed can serve it. A newsletter may develop an idea or keep up a relationship between releases, and an interview can carry the Works to a new audience.

A completed book leaves more than sales behind. It may leave a research library, characters capable of further stories, source and permissions records, and lessons about structure, production, and release. Left scattered, these force the next Work to begin by reconstructing the last. Connected, they let it begin from a higher level, and that is how authorship compounds.

In fiction a location cut from one book may become the center of another, and research into a historical period may feed several stories. In nonfiction a definition tested in one Work can become the foundation for the next, and reader objections can show where another book is needed. A body of work can also change genre,

subject or form radically, with the continuity lying in your standards or way of seeing and no shared topic at all.

Keeping it together takes preservation: usable source files, recorded rights, canonical metadata, edition history, research stored with provenance. Keep your public identity separate from platform-specific handles, since platforms change and a body of work should outlast the tool that currently shows it.

It takes curation, too, because an archive stops being usable when everything in it is equally important. Separate canonical work from active material and supporting research, and decide what should be deleted. Deletion can protect the body of work by removing false options and privacy risk. An author page, bibliography or series order then lets a reader come to the work on purpose.

A follower count is something a platform observed, whereas a reader relationship is evidence that someone chose to receive, buy, read, or return to the Work. It carries permission and expectation, so treat it as a mutual boundary in which you offer work and communication under stated terms and the reader chooses their attention and access.

A body of work takes longer to build than a feed and can look less active while it forms, but you stop starting from zero with each release. That is why The Inkagai Way ends with the long term.

Reflection

- Which durable assets did your last Work create?
- What will you need to reconstruct before beginning the next?
- Which platform currently owns access to your readers?

- Does your public activity serve the body of work, or has the body of work become material for the feed?

Transition — From Principles to Practices

A principle tells you what you are trying to protect, then leaves you alone with the page, and most writing advice goes wrong in that gap. Advice that stays at the level of principle changes nothing, while advice that jumps to procedure turns one writer's habits into everyone's rules.

Each of the hundred practices begins from a principle but is written as a small act, something specific to notice, try or decide, with a limit on how long it should take and a way to tell whether it worked. Each is a bounded experiment, never a rule, and each says where it stops helping, because nearly every piece of craft advice that has helped one writer has, somewhere, hurt another.

The practices are grouped in ten parts, in roughly the order a Work asks for them, from attention and beginning to completion and the writing life. That order is a convenience. A discovery writer may need revision and feedback in Part 9 before planning and structure in Part 3. A memoirist stuck on whether she is allowed to tell a story may need Practice 40 and nothing more for a month.

Skip what doesn't fit the work in front of you; a mismatch says nothing against the practice, or against you. Each chapter stands alone, and where one leans on another it cites it by number, "Practice 12" for one of the hundred and "Chapter 3" for one of the nine chapters before this one.

Nobody is meant to follow all hundred. Keep the few that make your next page easier to write and your last page easier to judge, and put the rest back on the shelf.

Part 1 — Practice and attention

A writer says the novel has a structural problem, though she has not opened the file in nine days. Another says he has run out of ideas, and his notebook holds forty he has stopped seeing. A third calls it a confidence problem and waits to feel confident, which is a little like waiting to feel fluent before speaking a language. Each of them blames the Work. The trouble usually sits nearer, in the conditions under which the Work gets touched at all.

Those conditions come before structure, character, scene, and sentence, because you can only work on any of them once you have arrived at the page, in a state to look at it, on a day nobody else had claimed. The ten chapters here are practices in the plain sense, things you do repeatedly so that you can do them. Chapter 4 treats method as a continuum a writer can move along from one Work to the next, and a writing life has the same freedom. A routine you chose, tested, and adjusted is yours. One inherited from a famous writer's schedule, or from last year's resolution, may only look like discipline.

So the writers in these chapters are not offered as templates. A Victorian novelist wrote by the watch before breakfast. A science fiction writer rose at two or three in the morning to write before a factory or warehouse shift. A novelist has said she was never able to write regularly, and a naturalist published an abstract because the large book was still years from done. Each solved a particular problem of time, money, temperament, and form, and the solutions only look alike once you strip away their circumstances.

Where a writer's account is quoted or paraphrased, it comes from something the writer published or said on the record, and the chapter names it; the authors' own reasoning is usually marked as such.

Fiction and nonfiction both appear, because beginning, protecting time, and noticing are not genre skills.

The part starts with the single session, widens to finishing and to the life around sessions, turns to reading and to fear, and ends on attention, which everything else seems to draw on. It can also be entered by problem. Practices 1 to 4 are for when starting is the difficulty, and 5 for things that start and do not end. Go to 6 if everything is in order except the life, and to 7 if you read a great deal and your own pages do not benefit. When fear is doing the talking, 8 and 9 are the nearest; when the pages are competent and strangely flat, try 10.

Each chapter ends with something to do, most of them with a stated time or count, meant to be done on actual pages. Some will not fit your life as written. When one does not, change it and notice what you changed, since that is already information about the conditions this part is trying to make visible.

PRACTICE 1

Make Beginning Ordinary

Write often enough that beginning becomes ordinary.

A writer who waits for the right day turns the start into an event. She holds out for a free Saturday, a clear head, a day without errands. The day comes and the Work is cold, and cold Work is harder to enter. Where was I, what was this scene for, was it any good? Each question is small, but a long gap multiplies them until sitting down is a decision that takes courage, and by then avoidance looks reasonable. The usual remedy, a heroic weekend of ten thousand words, repeats the pattern, because three weeks of cold Work follow it.

A start has three costs. Reconstruction is working out where you are, decision is choosing what to do next, and exposure is the plain fact that the page will show you how good it is today. Repetition lowers all three. Work touched yesterday is still warm, the next act is usually visible, and the page has seen you fail before and gone on existing. That breakdown, like the point about cold Work, is the authors' own reasoning and not a finding, and the cases below are what it has to answer to.

Anthony Trollope wrote with a watch on the desk. He says so in his *Autobiography*, which his son published after his death in December 1882: three hours every morning, a requirement of two hundred and fifty words to each quarter of an hour, and the words, he reports, arrived as regularly as the watch ran. Easier to miss is what came first. He began each morning by rereading the previous day's pages, which took about half an hour, because by

hearing what he had last written he caught its tone and avoided the fault of seeming unlike himself.

Octavia E. Butler, in her essay "Positive Obsession," says that after college she did office, factory, and warehouse work, and that she got up at two or three in the morning and wrote, then went to work. She hated the jobs and says so. What she describes is a small act repeated under bad conditions, early enough that nothing else had yet claimed the day.

Toni Morrison's account in a 1993 *Paris Review* interview holds both halves of the argument. She describes rising before dawn for years, first because she had small children and later by choice. She also says plainly that she has never been able to write regularly, because of a nine-to-five job, and that for a first draft she would, when something was urgently there, move everything aside and write for sustained stretches. Asked whether she has to do a first draft straight through, she says she does, and adds, "I don't think it's a law." Her method, as she describes it, is bursts supported by a dawn habit. A writer with nothing but bursts starts cold every time.

The start should be unremarkable, with no ceremony and nothing anybody, the writer included, would think to describe. How often it has to happen depends on how quickly a particular Work goes cold for a particular writer, and the interval would probably differ by form. A poet with a short poem in hand may lose little in a week, while a novelist inside a long draft may lose the thread sooner.

Practice. Define the smallest session that still keeps you in contact with the Work. It can be a duration (ten minutes), a count (one hundred words), or an act (reread the last page and add one

sentence), and it should be one you could keep on a bad day of an ordinary week, not a catastrophe. Over the next two weeks keep it on at least four days of your choosing, noting each time how many minutes pass between sitting down and writing the first word. At the end, compare the first number with the last. If you could not meet the floor, it was set for a different life; lower it before you blame yourself.

Related practices: 2. Shrink the Doorway; 3. Build a Practice That Does Not Need Inspiration; 98. Build a Practice for Every Season.

PRACTICE 2

Shrink the Doorway

Make each session small enough to start and substantial enough to matter.

Nothing in the phrase tells a writer's hands what to do first when she sits down to "work on the book." It names a place, and a writer who sits down in front of a place with no task in it is correctly paralyzed. The more the Work matters, the larger it can loom, and the more the next step can seem to require having understood everything at once.

Anne Lamott tells in *Bird by Bird* about her older brother at ten, close to tears, with a report on birds due the next day that he had had three months to write. Their father, as she tells it, told the boy to take it bird by bird. The story is told so often that it has become a slogan, which hides what was actually done. The father did not tell the boy to be calm, or to believe in himself. He changed the unit from a report on birds, which is a subject and a looming, to one bird, which is an afternoon.

Small enough to start means the unit has a visible first act. *Substantial enough to matter* means that when the session ends, the Work is different in a way someone could check. A session spent retitling the folder is small, and it is also nothing. Setting out to do the whole second act in one sitting picks something substantial that cannot be started.

When Lamott is overwhelmed, she limits herself to what she could see through a one-inch picture frame: describe the main character the first time we meet her, when she walks out the front door and

onto the porch, in a single paragraph, and leave the expression on her face when she notices the blind dog in the car for later. A paragraph can be good or bad, and a book cannot be, yet, so the frame gives her a unit complete enough to judge.

Ernest Hemingway, in his 1958 *Paris Review* interview, describes building the next day's doorway at the end of the last one. He writes in the morning, rereads, and always stops when he knows what is going to happen next, so he can go on from there.

The explanation is the authors', and Lamott claims neither part of it. A bounded task can be held in mind whole, which leaves attention for the task instead of for dread of the surrounding mass. It also gives the session an end that is neither exhaustion nor giving up, and that makes coming back easier (see Practice 1). A planner's outline is a doorway-making device, and so is a discovery writer's habit of stopping mid-scene.

A researcher with three hundred boxes cannot start on "the archive." The doorway is box 14, folder 3: read it, list every claim about the strike, mark which ones have a second source. A memoirist cannot start on "my father." She can start on the sound of his car in the driveway.

Some of the Work needs the whole. Lamott herself passes along E. L. Doctorow's remark that writing a novel is like driving at night: you see only as far as the headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way. That is true of drafting. It is less true of a day spent deciding where the road goes, and such days are legitimate, because synthesis, reframing, and deciding what the book is actually about cannot be done through a one-inch frame. A writer who only ever works at paragraph scale can end up with well-made paragraphs and no book. What separates planning from

staring at the whole is a bounded task for the wide-angle session, such as a reverse outline (see Practice 28) or a one-page statement of what the Work now promises.

Practice. Take the phrase you use for your current Work, probably some form of "work on the book," and replace it with one physical action that has a verb, an object, a place, and an end: *open the file for chapter 6 and write the first paragraph of the kitchen scene*; *transcribe the first nine minutes of the interview and underline every date*. Do that action and nothing else, for one hour at most. Afterward, answer one question in writing: what is different on the page or in the notes that was not different an hour ago? Nothing you can point to means the doorway was too small; not starting means it was too big. Adjust one notch and go again tomorrow.

Related practices: 1. Make Beginning Ordinary; 4. Give Yourself Something to Fix; 27. Leave a Marker and Keep Moving.

PRACTICE 3

Build a Practice That Does Not Need Inspiration

Inspiration is welcome; routine is dependable.

Practice 1 meets Morrison as a writer of bursts with a dawn habit under them. The habit itself, as she told *The Paris Review*, is a cup of coffee made while it is still dark, and it must be dark, and then the coffee drunk while she watches the light come. The light, she explains, is the signal that a transition is under way, and what matters is being awake before it comes. In the authors' reading, a small, repeatable sequence tells her mind which room it is entering.

Inspiration is what arrives: an image, a voice, a solution to a scene that was stuck. *Availability* is being at the Work, in a state to receive and handle whatever turns up, and it is the only thing a routine controls. Writers who wait for inspiration before starting tend to hand availability over to something that cannot be counted on. An idea that finds no one working may, in the authors' reasoning, be half-recorded, or lost, or turned into a different, easier idea by the time the writer arrives. None of this obliges a writer to stay in the schedule when the Work has caught fire; a dependable practice sits under such events as a floor and puts no cap on them.

The trouble comes when the trigger hardens into a prerequisite. A writer who "can only write after the walk, with the green mug, in the north chair" has rebuilt the dependency the maxim was meant to remove, with objects instead of moods. A healthy trigger is one

you can skip on a bad day, replace with a lower grade of ceremony, and still begin. Morrison describes her ritual as preparation, and she writes in hotels and on scraps when something arrives.

Practice. Design a start signal of two or three physical acts, done in the same order every time: where you sit, what you open, one small action (making tea, reading yesterday's last paragraph aloud, setting a timer). End the sequence with a defined first act on the page, so the ritual hands you directly to the Work and does not substitute for it. Use it for five sessions. On the sixth, remove one element and begin anyway. Record whether the signal shortened the time to the first word, and whether the sixth session was possible. Beginning on the sixth day without the missing element means the ritual is a floor under your work. If you could not, it has become the north chair and the green mug.

Related practices: 1. Make Beginning Ordinary; 6. Protect the Conditions; 98. Build a Practice for Every Season.

PRACTICE 4

Give Yourself Something to Fix

A poor page is raw material; an unwritten page is not.

A writer writes a sentence, finds it wanting, deletes it, writes another, finds that wanting too, and at the end of the afternoon has a clean page and a worse mood. Many stalled drafts, the authors suspect, come from composing and evaluating in the same act. Both activities are real and necessary, but they seem to draw on different kinds of attention, and the sentence that could have been the third stage of a good paragraph gets killed as the first stage of a bad one.

John McPhee, in a 2013 *New Yorker* essay called "Draft No. 4," quotes a letter he sent to a former student, Joel, about being stuck. Say you are writing about a grizzly bear and for hours no words have come. McPhee's instruction was to write "Dear Mother" and tell her about it: the block, the despair, and the bear itself, which he describes as a heavy animal that is very fast and would still rather lie down and rest most of the day. Go on that way as long as you can. Then delete the "Dear Mother" and the whining, and keep the bear. Nobody is graded in a letter to one's mother, which is probably why the bear, withheld all those hours, arrives.

In a note to his daughter Jenny, in the same essay, he says the hardest part is getting anything at all in front of him, and he will sometimes do it in a frenzy. Once a draft exists, his mind keeps working on it in the gaps of the day, and the better phrase tends to arrive while he drives home or sleeps. Without a draft there is nothing for that work to improve: "Until it exists, writing has not

really begun." An unwritten page cannot be looked at, moved, cut, or corrected.

Maya Angelou's slow composition is the alternative worth taking seriously. In her 1990 *Paris Review* interview she describes four or five hours in a rented hotel room that might yield a sentence about a rat on a mat, which she then pulls at for weeks. She writes in the morning, goes home, and in the evening reads what she wrote and cuts hard; of nine pages, she says, she might keep two and a half or three. Her judging runs hours after the writing rather than a minute after it, and like McPhee she always has an object for it to happen to.

The poor page has to be returned to. Pages written with no intention of ever being read again are a different thing, and a writer who produces nothing but provisional pages and never revises has found another way to avoid the work. Provisional material is also most useful while nobody else is reading it (see Chapter 3), because the first reader's reaction attaches to the page you have not yet chosen.

Practice. Write one intentionally provisional page, about three hundred words or twenty-five minutes, on whatever your current Work needs next, and label it PROVISIONAL at the top. Correct nothing while you write: no deleting, no reread. Put it away. The next day, read it once and mark each paragraph KEEP, FIX, or CUT. You should end with three short lists, which is more than an unwritten page would have given you.

Related practices: 8. Stop Treating Resistance as Prophecy; 81. Discover First, Decide Later; 83. Do Not Polish the Unsettled.

PRACTICE 5

Finish Enough to Learn From Endings

Finish enough work to learn what endings teach.

Jane Austen wrote an ending for *Persuasion* in July 1816 and then replaced it. Her nephew's *A Memoir of Jane Austen* says the first version, a reconciliation at Admiral Croft's lodgings, did not satisfy her: she "thought it tame and flat." The canceled chapters survive. In the printed book Wentworth's declaration comes in a letter instead. If the family account is right, she had to finish the draft ending before she could find out what was wrong with it, and what she changed was the event, not the sentences. (Practice 86 reads the canceled chapters more closely.)

A writer who is always beginning never gets to do that. She opens a novel, then a different novel, then an essay, each with a strong first chapter, because openings tend to be where interest is highest and the stakes lowest. Over years that can produce real skill at beginning and little at the later stages. She has never had to make the pieces converge, or discover whether the promise made on page one was kept, or put down a last sentence and be unable to take it back.

Endings probably teach things little else can, because an ending is the first place the whole is visible. The opening made a promise, the middle spent resources, and only at the end can anyone ask whether the books balance. It is there that a writer learns the real subject was something other than the announced one, or the proportions were off, or a character the draft treated as minor

carried the book. These are lessons about the beginning, delivered late, to writers who have arrived. They reach planners and discovery writers in different forms. The planner finds at the ending that the plan's last beat does not do what the outline hoped; the discovery writer finds that the ending the material was heading toward is not the one the story needed.

Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* calls itself an abstract. In the Introduction to the first edition, Darwin says that his work is now nearly finished but will take two or three more years to complete, that his health is far from strong, and that he has been urged to publish this Abstract; he adds that it must necessarily be imperfect. He also mentions that Alfred Russel Wallace has reached almost the same conclusions and sent a memoir. Whatever the pressures behind that decision, a writer with a larger work still two or three years from done chose to complete a smaller one that could be finished, and the book we read as the *Origin* is that finished small thing.

The maxim asks only for enough finished pieces to have the experience more than once, so that endings stop being mysterious. A finished six-hundred-word piece counts. So does a finished chapter, if it has a boundary. Finishing here means bringing a piece to a decision about its own end, which may be publishing it, filing it, or abandoning it on purpose with a note about why.

Some work cannot be closed on demand, and finishing everything is a vice of its own; a writer who forces dead material to an end out of sunk cost may learn mostly how to waste time. An abandoned piece has been looked at and put down with a stated reason, and it taught something. A drifting piece has simply stopped being opened. When the large work is years from done, Darwin's way out

of the all-or-nothing choice is open to anyone: find the smaller complete thing inside it.

Practice. Choose a piece you can finish in one sitting or one week: an essay, a short story, a poem sequence, a long scene given its own last line, five hundred to fifteen hundred words. Before you write, state in one sentence what will count as complete. Finish it before beginning anything else new, including the more exciting idea waiting beside it. When it is done, write one paragraph on what the ending taught you about the opening, and change the opening accordingly. That last step is the exercise, because a piece that is merely stopped has taught you less than one that has been allowed to change its beginning.

Related practices: 50. Resolve the Governing Movement; 91. Finish According to Purpose; 100. Release What Fear Is Holding.

PRACTICE 6

Protect the Conditions

Protect the conditions that let you write.

An hour, as the authors reason it, is only the visible part of a session. Offered to a writer with no private surface, no quiet, no money for paper and printing, a tired body, and a household that treats the Work as a hobby, it will not produce what it produces for a different writer. The rest of the session decides how much of those sixty minutes reaches the page and how much goes to getting started, recovering from interruption, or defending the time itself.

Some of those conditions are material, such as money, a room, tools, health and light. Some are social, the obligations, interruptions, and attitudes of the people nearby. The psychological ones come down to permission: whether the writer believes this Work is allowed to take space, and whether it is safe to write badly, or write about this subject, in this house.

Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), says she can offer only one minor point: a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction. Her argument is historical. Those two conditions had been withheld, and without them the question of talent cannot be answered. It is also structural, since some conditions cannot be fixed by one person's arrangements, and an audit that tells a caregiver without money or quiet to try harder is, in the authors' view, a small cruelty. "Protect" means guarding what can be guarded and being accurate about what cannot.

Practice. On one page, make three headings: material, social, psychological. Under each, list the two or three conditions that most help your writing and the two or three that most damage it, and tag every item *change it this month*, *needs someone else's agreement*, or *work around it*. Choose one item tagged *change it* and change it within seven days: move the desk, buy the lamp, ask for the closed door and agree its hours. Note afterward whether the next session was different. Then count the items tagged *needs someone else's agreement*. Those are the conditions Woolf's argument concerns, and moving the desk will not touch them.

Related practices: 1. Make Beginning Ordinary; 3. Build a Practice That Does Not Need Inspiration; 98. Build a Practice for Every Season.

PRACTICE 7

Read for Cause

Read widely for range and closely for cause.

Bleak House opens with a word and a period. "London." Charles Dickens follows it with a sentence about Michaelmas term lately over and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall, then another: "Implacable November weather." Three sentences in a row, and none has a finite verb. Then the mud, so deep it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus waddling up Holborn Hill; the smoke, a soft black drizzle with flakes of soot as big as snowflakes, gone into mourning for the death of the sun. Then "Fog everywhere," and a long paragraph of fog up the river, down the river, on the marshes, in the eyes and throats of Greenwich pensioners.

Readers often stop at admiring it. The maxim asks what produced it. One reading of the missing verbs is that a verb would name a doer and a time, and the passage offers neither, only a city given as a list of conditions, in a present with no actors. Mud that would admit a dinosaur has become geological, older than the people stuck in it. The court, named in the second sentence, disappears under mud and fog, and when the Lord High Chancellor returns, he sits, as the text puts it, at the very heart of the fog. Dickens names his target and buries it in weather, and so makes an argument about a court without making a statement about one.

Reading for cause traces an effect backward through the choices that produced it: syntax, the order of information, the point of view, image, and omission. Nonfiction repays it too. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf's narrator is in the middle of a grand digression

on the psychology of the other sex, a subject she calls dangerous and fascinating and suggests the audience may investigate when they have five hundred a year of their own. Then the digression is interrupted by the necessity of paying the bill, which came to five shillings and ninepence. Woolf slips her central claim, the five hundred a year, into an aside, then punctures her own grandeur with an arithmetic fact, and either choice could be tested by taking it out.

Admiration stays with the passage that caused it, but a cause can travel; that is the authors' account of why this works. "Delays the verb to hold the reader at the edge of the sentence" can be used on a different subject in a different decade. Read only one writer this closely, though, and the authors suspect that writer's solutions harden into rules. Reading across forms and periods, and outside your own genre, helps keep you from mistaking one writer's habit for the nature of prose.

Commentaries, teachers, study guides, and now AI tools will produce a fluent account of why a passage works. Any of them can hand you a reading, and a reading is a claim to check against the page. The gain comes from noticing the choice yourself, so a summary you did not test teaches little, whether you consult it before your own pass, after it, or never. A cause traced from one passage is a hypothesis too, since the effect may have depended on everything around it and a fragment is a poor test.

Practice. Choose one page of writing in the form you want to write, from a public-domain text or a book on your shelf. Beside each paragraph, write a verb phrase naming what it does for the reader: *delays the name*, *converts rumor into fact*, *changes the temperature*. Then pick one choice you think is doing real work, a very short sentence, a withheld detail, a shift in tense, and rewrite

the passage without it. Read both and note what the reader loses, all within forty-five minutes.

Related practices: 51. Choose the Word That Knows What It Means; 56. Let Syntax Think; 99. Extend Judgment Without Surrendering It.

PRACTICE 8

Stop Treating Resistance as Prophecy

Treat resistance as part of the process, not as a verdict on the work.

"Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to 3rd World Women Writers," the Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa's letter to other women of color who write, reprinted in *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), has entries dated 21, 24, and 26 May 1980. It is partly a record of not wanting to write it. In the first entry she asks why writing feels so unnatural to her and admits, "I'll do anything to postpone it." A recurring voice asks who she thinks she is to write. She also says the piece began as a poem and that when she tried to turn it into an essay the result was "wooden, cold." In the second she lists her evasions, including a trip out for an apple danish, though she had been off sugar for three years, and says they come when she is nearly at a dark place where something may jump out. In the third she says it makes perfect sense to her now how she resisted: writing is dangerous because of what it reveals.

She treated none of it as a ruling on the letter. She links the voice to her situation, asking whether class, culture, and the white man have not told women like her that writing is not for them. She took the wooden essay as a problem with the form she had tried, and the piece that exists calls itself a letter.

Reading resistance as prophecy comes in two forms that point opposite ways. The pessimistic one says that because this is so hard and I dread it so much, it is not working, or I am not suited to

this. The reverse is Steven Pressfield's, in *The War of Art*, where he treats fear as a compass: the more a work or calling frightens us, the surer we can be that it is ours to do. Pressfield deserves credit for treating resistance as universal and impersonal, an internal force that does not care who you are. His rule of thumb still turns a feeling into a verdict, in the encouraging direction, and so takes the intensity of an emotion as information about the Work's worth.

The maxim treats resistance as information about the situation, which includes more than the Work. Fear, boredom, perfectionism, uncertainty, and avoidance are plausibly different things with different causes, and lumping them together makes each harder to treat. Anzaldúa's entries suggest a mechanism, offered here as the authors' own reading. In a first draft the most is undecided, every sentence affects those before and after it, and the page shows how far the draft is from what the writer hoped. When the material is also dangerous to its author, exposure rises further. High uncertainty and high exposure are likely to feel aversive, and the aversion tracks where the writer stands and what the passage risks, not whether the Work is good. A strong project and a failing one may both feel awful at the same stage.

Resistance can still carry real information, especially when its pattern changes, so the question is what the feeling is about before what it means. Boredom that outlasts a change of scene and a change of task may mean the purpose has shifted; Chapter 2 treats a changed purpose as something to name. Dread that attaches to a particular passage may mean the passage asks for something the writer is unwilling to do, such as writing about real people (see Practice 79).

Some writers find resistance a reliable signal, and are not wrong to. If your own record shows that fear has accompanied your best work, that is evidence; the error is to generalize from one writer's record, or from a single bad morning, to a law. Anzaldúa ends her list of reasons for writing with being "scared of writing" but more scared of not writing, a report of her own motives that settles nothing for anyone else.

Practice. Name the precise consequence you fear if the Work becomes real. Set a timer for ten minutes and finish this sentence as many ways as you can: *If this is finished, then ___ will happen to ___*. Sort each item on your list as about the page (it will be bad), about people (someone will be hurt or will judge), about the self (I will have to be a person who did this), or about time (it will take years). Choose the item that surprised you. Then design one small test of that specific fear at a scale you can afford, and run it within a week: show one paragraph to one person, or write the hard scene in a file nobody else will see. You end with a named fear and one piece of evidence about it, which is more than a mood gives you.

Related practices: 4. Give Yourself Something to Fix; 9. Let Confidence Follow Evidence; 100. Release What Fear Is Holding.

PRACTICE 9

Let Confidence Follow Evidence

Confidence usually follows evidence of practice.

Practice. For three weeks, keep a plain log, on paper or in a file only you see. Each time you complete a writing action, add one line: the date, what you did, what now exists that did not. Count a reread, a rewritten paragraph, a sent query. Do not count intentions, and do not require a streak; record gaps without comment. When the three weeks are up, read the log as if it described someone else and write three sentences: what this record shows you can do, what it does not show, and the next thing it would be reasonable to attempt. Copy the third sentence onto the first line of next week's page. It is a declared target with three weeks of dated lines under it.

Among Octavia E. Butler's papers is a commonplace book in which she wrote notes to herself. One reads: "I shall be a bestselling writer." It goes on to say that her novels would reach the bestseller lists whether publishers pushed them hard or not, whether she was paid a high advance or not, and it ends by resolving to find the way. The Library of America, which published the note, adds that she did not realize this ambition in her lifetime. Her novel *Parable of the Sower* reached the *New York Times* bestseller list in September 2020, more than fourteen years after her death.

The note looks like confidence manufactured by declaration, but Butler's own essay, "Positive Obsession," describes something else. She says she "couldn't fake" herself out. She had doubts, and she describes relying on persistence in spite of fear and doubt, which she calls positive obsession. She sold two stories at twenty-three,

by her account, and then nothing for five years, and for those years nothing external confirmed her. She had the continued writing.

Confidence, in the authors' usage, is a justified expectation that you can do the next thing, with a record of having done similar things under imperfect conditions as its basis, and so it comes after the acts. A declared target held ahead of the facts can still be a useful instrument for some writers. The claim here is only that it works best paired with a record, and that Butler's essay credits persistence. A record of practice is not a record of quality. A log that says *I wrote* does not say *it was good* (see Practice 97 on how to read the responses). It supports the confidence to continue, but not the confidence to stop revising or stop seeking readers.

Related practices: 1. Make Beginning Ordinary; 4. Give Yourself Something to Fix; 97. Interpret Rejection Narrowly.

PRACTICE 10

Notice What the World Has Stopped Seeing

Pay attention: what others overlook is often where the work begins.

People stop seeing what they see every day, and writers seem to be no exception; they tend to reach for the interesting, the dramatic, the already narrated. Suppose a writer describes a kitchen and gives the steam on the window and the smell of coffee, because every kitchen scene already has them. The page is accurate and could belong to anyone, competent in the language of what is already known and flat for that reason. In the authors' view attention is the first creative act, since it determines what material a writer has at all, and what others overlook is probably unclaimed. The obvious has a whole vocabulary prepared for it. The overlooked has none yet, so describing it requires looking.

Joan Didion, in her essay "On Keeping a Notebook," recalls interviewing a very rich woman in an orchid-filled sitting room on the second day of a paralyzing New York blizzard. On Didion's arrival, the woman asked whether it was snowing outside. Didion's notebook records the encounter, and she says the woman taught her a significant lesson about the very rich, one she adds she could have learned from F. Scott Fitzgerald. She never spells it out. It gives her no plot and no argument, only a small, odd fact, which she treats as holding a whole class of experience. A notebook, she says, is not an accurate factual record of what she was doing or thinking; *how it felt to me* is closer to the truth. In nonfiction, then,

an observation is a starting point and not a proof, and a claim built on what one saw still has to be checked (see Practice 71).

Anton Chekhov's advice on the subject is widely quoted, usually in a form he is not known to have written. The compressed form, don't tell me the moon is shining, show me the glint of light on broken glass, is probably not Chekhov's. Quote Investigator suggests it was built as a summary of a letter he wrote in May 1886 to his brother Alexander, who had literary ambitions. As Yarmolinsky renders the letter, Chekhov's advice is to build a description of nature from a few small details, grouped so that a reader with closed eyes can see the scene. His example is a glint of broken bottle glass on a mill dam, like a small star, and the dark shape of a dog or wolf rolling past like a ball. He had already used almost the same images in a story published in March 1886.

The instruction is to *seize* and *group*, so the detail is selected and arranged, not merely logged; noticing without arranging gives an inventory. Chekhov may complicate it himself, since a technique for noticing, used as a formula, can stop the noticing. A decade later, in *The Seagull*, the same device turns up, assigned to the fashionable novelist Trigorin and described by the younger writer Treplev as a process Trigorin has worked out for himself, one that makes description easy. The scholar W. H. Bruford, in his 1957 study of Chekhov, reports that David Magarshack, Chekhov's translator and biographer, took Chekhov's intention in giving Trigorin the example as ironical.

Matsuo Bashō, in the frog poem usually dated to spring 1686, does with three items what a paragraph might do with thirty. In the authors' plain rendering: old pond; a frog jumps in; the sound of water. The poem names its objects and explains nothing, and what it records is the sound, not the splash.

Practice. Pick a place you know so well you no longer see it: your kitchen, a commute, a corner. Spend twenty minutes there and record ten details that would normally escape description, each one sentence, free of judgment words such as *beautiful* or *strange*, and checkable by another observer. Circle the one that most surprised you and write three sentences about what it implies. Then stop.

Related practices: 11. Save the Fragment Before Explaining It; 58. Give Abstraction a Body; 71. Label the Kind of Knowing.

Part 2 — Material, purpose, and form

A writer can have a shoebox of index cards, six pages of research notes, and a sentence written on a Sunday about why the project matters, and still not know whether the project is a poem, an essay, or a screenplay. Nothing is missing, exactly. The material exists, the reason exists, and a container of some kind is waiting. They have just never been introduced.

The first part of this book was about arriving at the desk often enough that arriving stops being an event. This part starts with what you do once you are there. Where does material come from, and what should happen to it? What is the piece about, as distinct from what it describes? What has the reader been promised, and what shape will carry it? And once the Work has a point, how does the point get in without taking over?

Treat every answer here as provisional. The sentence you write for Practice 15 may well be wrong by the third draft, and the promise you write for Practice 16 may be rewritten when the first reader reports what she actually felt. Something definite to be wrong about beats a vague confidence that the Work will announce itself. None of this assumes a method. A planner meets these questions before the outline exists, often in a document titled “premise” or “pitch.” A discovery writer may meet them at page forty, or after a complete draft, and a hybrid writer may meet them repeatedly, at different scales (Chapter 4 describes these patterns, and the practices in Part 3 return to them). Whoever

meets them, the person asking should have the authority to change the answer.

If you are beginning something, read the practices in order, because it is hard to choose a form for a work whose reader you haven't imagined. If you are in the middle of something, go by symptom. Practice 11 is for keeping fragments alive before they know what they are for, and a notebook too full to use needs 13. A draft that is competent and inert needs 12, on the particular, and then 15, on the subject beneath the topic. A project that cannot say what it is for should start with 16 and then go to 15. A piece that feels like the wrong size or the wrong species needs 17 and 18. A story that has begun to prove a point, or an essay that pretends to discover what it already knows, needs 19 and 20.

Named writers appear because something they did can be examined. Where they disagree, as Orwell's earned conviction and Montaigne's cultivated doubt disagree about how much a writer should know before beginning, the disagreement is part of the instruction.

PRACTICE 11

Save the Fragment Before Explaining It

Capture fragments before demanding that they explain themselves.

A writer catches a line, an image, half an argument overheard on a train, and at once wants to know what it is for. Which book? What does it mean? The fragment can't answer, because part of its charge is that nobody knows yet. Asked every time, the question turns catching into an exam, and the writer either stops catching or files each scrap under CHARACTER or SETTING, which nails it to one function. Something that might have connected to something next month is closed.

Chekhov's notebooks, in the 1921 English translation by S. S. Koteliansky and Leonard Woolf, contain entries like these. "Every one has something to hide." "O how nice it would be if bachelors or widowers were appointed Governors." None says what it is for. According to the volume's prefatory note, his papers included sheets in a special cover marked "Themes, thoughts, notes, and fragments," and the note mentions no sorting into character, setting, or dialogue. The only status it names is used or not yet used. When he used a piece of material, he struck it out.

So catching and explaining stay apart, with time between them. Catching has to stay quick. Explaining is slow, and it needs context that doesn't exist yet. The delay probably works because a fragment's gaps are information, which an explanation on arrival swaps for whatever the writer can think of that day, while the

person rereading the notebook a month later has read and written more and begins to see connections that were invisible at capture. Many fragments will never be used, and sorting is allowed, but the demand for meaning waits until there are enough fragments for meanings to appear between them. On the spot, add only a date and a place, because that context can't be reconstructed later. Joan Didion's "On Keeping a Notebook" opens with an entry logged that way (a hotel bar in Wilmington, 9:45 a.m., an August Monday), and she can still recall the scene it came from, though later in the essay she asks what a recipe for sauerkraut is doing among the entries.

Sei Shōnagon's *Pillow Book*, composed at the Japanese court around the year 1000, shows another way to hold fragments. Arthur Waley, whose partial translation appeared in 1928, notes that the text is arranged not by date but under headings such as "Disagreeable Things" and "Amusing Things," a scheme that in his words often breaks down. Under "Things that make one Happy" she lists picking up a torn-up letter that someone has thrown away and finding that one can "fit the pieces together well enough to make sense." (Waley adds that the relative age and trustworthiness of the surviving manuscripts had not been fully investigated, so the arrangement may not be wholly hers.) A pile of fragments, the passage suggests, can be sorted by reaction without being sorted by use.

Collecting is pleasant, it feels like labor, and a pile never fails, so a bank of fragments can pass for writing. The strike-out is the check, since whatever is never struck out was only collected. Some fragments will stay mute for years without that counting against them.

Practice. Pick one container you will always have with you: a pocket notebook, a note on your phone, a plain text file. (If you already have a defined project with research obligations, source and organize that material from the start; this exercise is for material that has no project yet.) For seven days enter whatever catches you: overheard speech, an image, a question, an unfinished scene, a sentence from nowhere. Give each entry a date and a place and write it as it came, with no title, tag, explanation, or folder. Aim for three a day, and don't judge them. On the eighth day read the whole run once, aloud, pen down. Pick the fragment that bothers you most and write for ten minutes from it without deciding what it is for; if those minutes yield something you keep, strike the entry through, as Chekhov did. By then you should have twenty or more dated entries, and perhaps one struck through.

Related practices: 4. Give Yourself Something to Fix; 10. Notice What the World Has Stopped Seeing; 13. Gather More Than You Use.

PRACTICE 12

Trade Generality for Particularity

Specificity makes invented worlds credible and factual worlds intelligible.

Midway through an argument about how much living costs, *Walden* stops to itemize the price of Thoreau's house. Boards, $8.03½, "mostly shanty boards." Refuse shingles for the roof and sides, $4.00. Laths, $1.25. A thousand old bricks, $4.00. Hair, thirty-one cents, annotated "More than I needed." Transportation, $1.40, annotated "I carried a good part on my back." The total is $28.12½. He explains himself: very few people can say exactly what their houses cost, and fewer still the cost of each material.

The claim the ledger serves is general and easy to wave away, that a person can have a shelter for life at a cost no greater than a year's rent. Stated plainly it would be an opinion. Itemized, it can be checked line by line, and felt in the body: hair, more than he needed.

A general draft sounds nothing like that. The house was neglected. She was furious. Costs are rising for working families. Each sentence hands over a conclusion the writer has already drawn, and the reader, who has seen nothing, can only accept or reject it, or hand it back. A particular is evidence, and the conclusion a reader draws from it is the reader's own. Writers fall into generality honestly, because the general is where the thought arrived, and drafting tends to keep the verdict and drop the

evidence that produced it. The writer remembers how the house felt, and not the state of its gutters.

A particular is something a stranger standing in the place could see, hear, handle, count, or check, and a good one is short, the right few facts with no ornament. An invented world turns credible through specific, consistent detail, because specificity signals that someone knows. A factual world turns intelligible when its abstractions are tied to a number, a name, an object, a date. Particulars also put a claim at risk. In nonfiction a number or a name can be wrong and can be caught, which may be why vagueness is so comfortable, and why in reporting and memoir precision is a matter of accuracy as well as of style.

Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* does the invented case with unusual economy. Before Gulliver meets anything impossible, the book gives him a departure date (May 4, 1699, from Bristol), a captain and a ship (William Prichard, the Antelope), a latitude (30 degrees 2 minutes south), and a death toll (twelve of the crew). Then comes a creature not six inches high, with a bow and arrow. The premise is absurd, and Lilliput is scaled with the same steady bookkeeping: the tallest horses and oxen four to five inches, sheep an inch and a half, geese about the bigness of a sparrow.

Particulars can also go wrong, as Virginia Woolf argues in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1924). She quotes pages of Arnold Bennett's *Hilda Lessways*: the canal, the flour-mill, a row of houses called Freehold Villas, a terrace built by the heroine's grandfather, the teapot manufacturer, and the difference between copyhold and freehold land. All the while, Woolf complains, Hilda is still looking out of the window. Bennett has made a house, she says, and hopes we will therefore imagine a person living in it; he has "never once looked at Mrs. Brown," the stranger Woolf imagines in

a railway carriage. This is a rival novelist's polemic, written by someone who wanted fiction to go elsewhere, so read it as one side of an argument about Bennett; a reader fond of Bennett's Five Towns could answer that the houses are the character. Her test holds either way. Do the particulars lead into a person, or stand in for one? Details unconnected to what the work is about are just more stuff, and choosing among them is selection (Practice 13).

Practice. Take one page of a current draft and underline five sentences that state a quality instead of presenting a fact: angry, neglected, expensive, tense, important. For each, write a replacement that names something a stranger in the room could see, hear, handle, or count, with no quality word in it; in nonfiction, add a source or a figure you can point to. Reread the page with the replacements in. Keep each one that tells you something the general sentence did not, and restore the general sentence wherever the particular only added bulk, all within thirty minutes. If a general sentence has nothing to be replaced with, you have found a place where you do not yet know your material, and that is worth knowing (Practice 14). Write the number of surviving replacements in the margin; each should be as checkable as thirty-one cents for hair.

Related practices: 10. Notice What the World Has Stopped Seeing; 58. Give Abstraction a Body; 72. Match Evidence to Consequence.

PRACTICE 13

Gather More Than You Use

Gather generously; select ruthlessly.

Research goes wrong in two opposite directions from the same mistake, the belief that the amount gathered and the amount used should match. One writer treats research as a debt owed to the reader: three weeks went into the guild system, so the guild system goes in, and the reader gets proof of effort instead of a work. Another gathers too little, then has nothing to choose among and fills the pages with whatever there is.

When John McPhee's editor at *The New Yorker* returned his forty-thousand-word manuscript about oranges, McPhee recalls, the envelope was large but slimmer than a postcard. Robert Bingham had condensed the piece. McPhee took a train into the city and told William Shawn, the magazine's editor, that eighty-five percent of what he had written was gone. After five days of talk with Bingham, enough was restored to run the piece in two issues, but not all of what had been cut. McPhee had meant to write something under ten thousand words, until a visit to a citrus research station in Florida turned up several dozen people with doctorates in oranges and a library of a hundred thousand titles. The library, he concludes, had beguiled him so thoroughly that he "lost the advantage of what is left out."

Gather generously anyway, because the shape of a topic appears only when more of it is on the table than the piece can hold, and then select for the reader, who is owed a work and not a record of your acquisitions. You needn't destroy what you cut, and you may not drop what complicates your claim; in nonfiction, selection

that removes the disconfirming case distorts the account (Practice 73). The reader's promise (Practice 16) supplies the standard, but a standard can only be applied to a pile large enough to refuse.

Robert Caro met the same surplus by enlarging the container. According to *The Guardian*, his editor Robert Gottlieb cut 350,000 words from *The Power Broker*, which is why the Johnson biography was planned in several volumes, so that nothing major would have to go.

Practice. Find one fact, example, scene, or digression in your current draft that you find interesting, the kind you would tell a friend about, and ask what the reader would lose if it vanished. Move it to a separate file, read the passage without it, and then decide in writing, within fifteen minutes of starting: gone, restored, or moved elsewhere. Notice whether the passage became more or less sure of itself. If nothing was lost, you have also learned something about the edge of the Work.

Related practices: 11. Save the Fragment Before Explaining It; 16. Define the Reader's Change; 84. Cut the Good That Harms the Whole.

PRACTICE 14

Let Curiosity Precede Certainty

Write from curiosity until the work earns certainty.

Joan Didion says she begins each novel with no notion of character, plot, or even incident. What she had for *A Book of Common Prayer* was pictures, and the one that organized the others was the airport at Panama at six in the morning. In "Why I Write" (1976) she recounts imagining a woman in that airport ordering tea and insisting that the water be boiled for twenty minutes. She did not know where the woman had been or why she kept going to airports. A narrator arrived with a sentence that began "I knew why Charlotte went to the airport," and Didion had to ask who this "I" was. Had she known the answers, she says, there would have been no reason to write the novel.

Opinions are allowed if the work is allowed to test them. Certainty becomes a problem when it arrives before anything was looked at; it has to be earned by a scene tested, a source checked, an objection faced.

Orwell did not write from doubt. In "Why I Write" (1946) he says his starting point is always partisanship and a sense of injustice, and that wherever he lacked a political purpose he wrote lifeless books. He tells how *Homage to Catalonia* contains a long chapter defending men falsely accused, and how a critic he respected said it had turned a good book into journalism. Orwell agreed and said he could not have done otherwise: he knew that innocent men were being accused, and without anger he would not have written the book. He had been in Spain and had seen, and his certainty came after the seeing.

Montaigne made the other stance into a form. His word *essai* means a trial or attempt, and around 1576 he had a medal struck showing a pair of balanced scales and the Greek skeptic's word *epekhô*, "I hold back". In "Of Cannibals" he sets aside the cosmographers and relies instead on a plain man who had lived ten or twelve years in the New World, reasoning that such a witness has no reason to embellish. His finding is that there is nothing barbarous in the people described, except that everyone gives the name barbarism to whatever is not the custom of his own country. He grants the barbarous horror of the revenge rite he reports and adds that we see their faults so clearly and are so blind to our own.

He also admits that in one conversation his interpreter was so poor that he got nothing of moment. That limit is a warning, because admiration can arrive as early as any other conclusion, and his rests largely on a man in his household, some seamen and merchants, and a failed conversation.

Begin by knowing instead, and the essay proves a conclusion reached before the first source was opened, or the novel illustrates a premise settled in week one. That can work if the writer has already done the checking. It goes thin when nothing is allowed to surprise the writer and disconfirming evidence is filtered out before it can complicate anything. In fiction, a scene written to find out what a character will do often carries information the planned version lacks, and planners can do the same inside their plans by asking, of each outlined event, what they don't yet know about it (Practice 22). Curiosity has to end in commitments eventually, too; a deadline is one way.

Practice. Write three questions your current argument or draft cannot yet answer, taking twenty minutes to write them. Each

must be something you do not know, not a rhetorical question in disguise, and each must name an act that could answer it: a document to find, a person to ask, a scene to draft in which a character is free to choose, a counterexample to look up. Then do one of the acts this week and note whether the answer moved your central claim or scene, even slightly. If every answer confirms what you already thought, suspect the questions.

Related practices: 19. Know Whether You Are Testing or Arguing; 71. Label the Kind of Knowing; 73. Challenge the Convenient Source.

PRACTICE 15

Find the Subject Beneath the Topic

Distinguish the topic from the subject: what a work depicts is not always what it is about.

Writers take the topic for the subject all the time. A writer says the novel is about a road trip and then revises the road. An essay is about technology and never reaches the dependence or loneliness that made its author choose the topic. Topic is the answer given at a party, and a writer who stops there tends to polish the depiction and leave the point alone. Announce the subject in the first paragraph instead and the piece may have nowhere left to go.

Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art" approaches its subject in disguise. The opening stanza sounds like advice: losing, it says, is an art anyone can pick up. The poem then lists what there is to lose, from door keys and an hour badly spent to a mother's watch, two cities, two rivers, a continent. Stop at almost any stanza and you would say the poem is about losing things, and you would be right about what it depicts. The last stanza breaks the register. It begins "Even losing you," and the cheerful instruction can no longer be kept up; the final line interrupts itself with a parenthetical order to the poet to write it down, and then comes the word the poem has until then used only to deny. The inventory was the topic. The subject is the loss of a person.

Vivian Gornick's *The Situation and the Story* is a book about personal narrative, but she applies its distinction to literature at large: "Every work of literature has both a situation and a story."

The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot. The story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer, the thing one has come to say. One of her examples is a poem, Bishop's "In the Waiting Room," where the situation is a seven-year-old sitting in a dentist's office and the story is a child's first experience of isolation. Topic and subject map roughly onto her terms, and like her distinction they reach beyond memoir. Topics matter, and a subject can be stated openly.

James Baldwin's "Notes of a Native Son" has both at work in one text. It opens with dates: on the twenty-ninth of July, 1943, his father died, and a few hours later his father's last child was born. More than a month earlier there had been a race riot in Detroit. A few hours after the funeral service, which fell on Baldwin's nineteenth birthday, another broke out in Harlem, and the next morning the family drove to the cemetery through streets of smashed plate glass. When *Harper's* printed the piece in 1955 under the title "Me and My House," a reader could have taken it for an account of a family death and a riot.

Baldwin's story arrives later, in plain statements. His real life, he realizes, had been in danger "from the hatred I carried in my own heart." By the end he is holding two ideas that seem to oppose each other, acceptance of life as it is and refusal ever to accept injustice as commonplace, and he understands that the fight begins in the heart. The father is dead and the city is burning, and the essay is about what hatred does to the one who carries it.

Knowing only the topic, a writer finds anything adjacent eligible, and the work grows by accretion. With the subject in hand each scene or paragraph can be asked what it does for it, and since the subject is what a reader carries away after the details fade, it is in effect what the work delivered (Practice 16). Some work is

honestly about its topic. A report on a flood is about a flood, and forcing a deeper subject onto such work is a kind of vanity. The subject a writer names may also be wrong, a rationalization, and readers may find another; when they do, the question is whether the work supports it. A work can hold more than one subject, as long as one governs.

Practice. Complete this sentence about your current Work: "This Work appears to be about ___, but is really investigating ___." Then list three scenes, sections, or stanzas and write one line each on how it bears on the second blank, and mark any that cannot say. Write the sentence again with a different second blank and see which version accounts for more of the draft; a section that bears on neither is a candidate for Practice 13. Stop at twenty-five minutes. Whichever version accounts for more of the draft is your working answer to what the Work is about.

Related practices: 16. Define the Reader's Change; 20. Let Theme Happen Through Consequence; 40. Separate the Selves of Memoir.

PRACTICE 16

Define the Reader's Change

Know what experience, understanding, or change you are promising the reader.

Montaigne begins the *Essays* by telling the reader not to expect much. The note "To the Reader," dated 1 March 1580, says the book has "a domestic and private end": he has made it for kinsfolk and friends, so that after his death they may recover some traits of his humors. "Myself am the matter of my book," he writes, and there is no reason for the reader to spend leisure on so frivolous a subject. The promise is made by refusal, and it is exact about the intended reader (someone who knew him), the experience (recognition of a person), and the limits (no borrowed beauty, no service).

A writer who can't say what a reader will have at the end tends to produce pages that inform without orienting. The reverse failure is a cover, a title, and an opening that promise one thing while the pages deliver another. A book that presents itself as a practical guide and turns out to be one person's memoir of a failure will be judged a poor guide whatever its merits as memoir, and the reader's disappointment tends to be read as a defect of quality when it is really a mismatch of contract (Practice 88).

What the work offers might be a feeling, an understanding, a doubt, or the ability to do a task. No writer can guarantee that anyone changes, so this is a promise about the offer. It is different from a message or a moral (Practice 20), and it is not pandering, since it holds whatever a given reader demands.

Nor does a promise give the writer control over the reader. Montaigne wrote for kin and friends, and strangers have been reading him ever since. A discovery writer may learn what the promise was only after a draft exists, and the promise should be revised when the first real reader reports what she experienced. Stated, it is the standard for judging cuts, additions, sequence, and the opening.

Practice. Write the promise in one sentence: “A reader who finishes this will [feel / understand / be able to / question / see] ___ that they could not before.” Use a verb for the change; “the importance of resilience” does not count, because it has no reader in it. Then read your first page and your last page and ask whether the first makes the promise and the last keeps it, finishing inside twenty minutes. If you can, give only the opening to one reader, ask what they expect to get, and set their answer beside your sentence.

Related practices: 13. Gather More Than You Use; 18. Treat Genre as a Conversation; 88. Investigate Conflicting Expectations.

PRACTICE 17

Let the Material Choose Its Container

Choose the form the material needs, not the form with the most prestige.

A form is more often chosen by prestige or by habit than by what the material needs: the novel, because novelists are taken seriously; the poem, because poetry seems purer; the memoir, because it sells. The mismatch shows up as padding, when an idea the size of a long essay is stretched across a book, or as crushing, when material that needs room is forced into fourteen lines, and it tends to make a work harder to finish, because every page is working against its container.

Jorge Luis Borges made the unusual choice and said so. Composing vast books, he writes in the prologue to *The Garden of Forking Paths* (1941), is a laborious and impoverishing folly: five hundred pages to set out an idea that can be told in a few minutes. The better procedure is to pretend those books already exist and offer a summary or commentary on them. Carlyle did it in *Sartor Resartus*, he says, and Samuel Butler in *The Fair Haven*. Then, calling himself more reasonable, more inept, and lazier, he reports that he has preferred to write notes on imaginary books. In the same volume "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*" takes that shape, a literary-critical notice about a writer who never existed.

Different forms make different things cheap. A lyric poem makes compression and sound cheap. A play is bodies in a room and

speech under pressure, with interior life available only if someone says it aloud. These are tendencies, plenty of good work defies them, and they are no argument for changing forms often.

Anne Carson's *Nox* is material finding a container no standard book offered. Its publisher describes it as an epitaph in the form of a book: a facsimile of a handmade book she made after the death of her brother, with old letters, family photographs, collages, and sketches pasted in, her typed poems added, and her translation of Catullus's poem 101, written for his dead brother, as the lens through which she approaches the loss. It arrives as a book that folds out like an accordion, in a box. Carson's book works because it was a real object before it was a published one. An experimental container chosen for its own sake is prestige too.

Charlie Kaufman's *Adaptation* (2002) found its container through failure. According to published accounts, Kaufman was hired to adapt Susan Orlean's 1998 nonfiction book *The Orchid Thief* and struggled with the job. The screenplay he delivered is about a screenwriter named Charlie Kaufman struggling to adapt that book, and it is credited to him and to his fictional twin brother, Donald. It was a bet that could easily have failed, made after the plainer route had stopped working.

The habitual form can be exactly right. A poet may need the same stanza all her life, and constraint is not a prison (Practice 69). "What the material needs" also includes what can be finished under your actual conditions, commissions, venues, and deadlines among them. A short essay that exists beats a novel that doesn't.

Practice. Take one idea you want to write about and sketch it in three forms, 150 words each and forty-five minutes in all: the

opening stanza of a lyric (or the whole poem, in ten lines); the first paragraph of an essay, with its central claim; and the opening scene of a story, play, or screenplay, saying who wants what and where. Beneath each, note in one line what the form made easy and in one line what it made impossible. Then ask which sketch you keep wanting to extend, which is not necessarily the one you like best.

Related practices: 18. Treat Genre as a Conversation; 67. Write for the Medium; 69. Use Constraint to Remove the Obvious.

PRACTICE 18

Treat Genre as a Conversation

Genre creates expectations; use, bend, or break them knowingly.

Practice. Choose the genre your current Work belongs to, or comes nearest to. Read the opening chapters of two books you admire in it and, from them, write down three promises, meaning pleasures the reader came for rather than rules. Then write one sentence naming a deliberate transformation of the genre in your Work, and one sentence on what it costs and what it gains. If you can, ask a reader who loves the genre whether the Work still feels like one. The whole takes forty-five minutes.

A writer who doesn't know the conventions either reinvents them badly or breaks promises the reader came for without noticing. One who treats them as a checklist produces something that satisfies the form and does nothing else. Whether you use, bend, or break them, "knowingly" is the word that matters.

Detective fiction is the field where the laws were written down. Ronald Knox, in the late 1920s, set out ten commandments for the form. The first: the criminal must be mentioned early in the story but must not be anyone whose thoughts the reader has been allowed to know. Another: the detective's Watson must not conceal from the reader any thoughts that pass through his mind. A few years before, in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), Agatha Christie had made the first-person narrator, Dr. Sheppard, the murderer. On its face Knox's first commandment forbids the arrangement she used; whether he had her in mind we have found no evidence either way. Sheppard's narration surprises because readers of the

form assume that a narrator-friend is honest, and the trick exists only inside that habit of the genre.

A genre's promises are stored anticipation, and a surprise needs an expectation in order to register. A transformation spends that anticipation, and if the reader doesn't know the convention it passes unseen, so the knowledge cuts both ways.

Knox's fifth commandment barred any Chinese figure from the story outright. A genre's habits can encode the prejudices of their moment, which is a reason to inspect conventions rather than inherit them. Strict fidelity can still be right. A reader of a cozy mystery came for particular pleasures (Practice 94 takes up learning a form before breaking it). A writer who delivers them with precision has done difficult work.

Related practices: 16. Define the Reader's Change; 19. Know Whether You Are Testing or Arguing; 94. Learn the Form Before Breaking It.

PRACTICE 19

Know Whether You Are Testing or Arguing

A premise tests a possibility; a thesis defends a claim.

An essay announces a discovery and merely wanders, and its reader waits for a point that does not come. A story makes every character exist to be refuted, and its reader feels a thumb on the scale. In each, one job is dressed as the other.

Fiction can argue, and essays and memoirs can test, so the form won't say which job a project is doing. A premise sets a condition, follows its consequences honestly, and accepts what turns up, including results the writer did not want. A thesis asserts something contestable, gives reasons and evidence, and answers the strongest objection. Both are legitimate.

Mary Shelley had a premise in its purest form. In the wet summer of 1816, near Geneva, Lord Byron proposed that each member of the party write a ghost story, and Shelley recalls in her 1831 introduction that she could not think of one and was asked each morning whether she had. Then came a night of talk between Byron and Percy Shelley about whether the principle of life could ever be discovered, about galvanism, and about the idea that the parts of a creature might be manufactured and endued with vital warmth. When she lay down she neither slept nor thought. With shut eyes she saw "the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together," and the thing beginning to stir.

Swift wrote a thesis in costume. *A Modest Proposal* (1729) proposes, in the calm voice of a political economist, that the poor of Ireland sell their children as food. Near the end the argument surfaces in a list of what he refuses to hear. Let no man talk to him of other expedients, he says: taxing absentees at five shillings a pound, living on native manufactures, teaching landlords some mercy, putting honesty and skill into shopkeepers, until he has some glimpse of hope that there will ever be a hearty and sincere attempt to put them into practice. The real thesis, a program of reform that Swift says nobody has seriously tried, lives in that list, and only the route to it is disguised.

If the work's outcome could contradict your hopes, you are testing. If the outcome is fixed, you are arguing, and the honest move is to build the case. Readers of a test trust that the consequences were followed honestly, and cheating there means steering the result. Readers of an argument trust that the evidence was fairly gathered and the opposition fairly represented (Practice 74), and cheating there is pretending to discover what you came to defend.

The categories drift. A premise can harden in revision into a claim the writer then defends, and a reader can take *Frankenstein* as arguing something even though Shelley says she set out to speak to the mysterious fears of our nature and to awaken thrilling horror. A work may move from one job to the other, provided the writer notices (Chapter 2 considers how purpose shifts as the Work does).

Practice. Write both for the same project. First, a premise: "Suppose [a condition]. What follows for [whom or what]?" Second, a thesis: "[A claim], because [a reason], even though [the strongest objection]." Decide which one the project is serving, and

run the matching check. For the premise, write two sentences describing a result you would not want and ask whether the draft could honestly arrive there. For the thesis, write the objection in terms its strongest defender would accept. Stop at twenty-five minutes. A test is finished when you know something you did not; an argument is finished when a fair-minded reader could be moved by it.

Related practices: 14. Let Curiosity Precede Certainty; 20. Let Theme Happen Through Consequence; 74. Strengthen the Opposition Before Answering It.

PRACTICE 20

Let Theme Happen Through Consequence

Theme is enacted through patterns of choice and consequence, not announced as a lesson.

In the last chapter of Lu Xun's *The True Story of Ah Q*, the hero, a laborer who sleeps in the village temple of Weichuang and turns every humiliation into a private victory, is arrested over a robbery in which, by his own account, he had no part. He cannot write, so he is told to sign a confession with a circle. In George Kin Leung's translation, first printed in 1926, Ah Q "used all the effort of his entire life to draw the circle," and just as the line is about to close it swerves outward, "creating a figure the shape of a melon seed." Ashamed, he consoles himself behind the barred door: "My sons and grandsons will be able to draw round circles." He falls asleep.

The story has shown this move before. Beaten earlier by the villagers, Ah Q thinks, "I will consider that I have been beaten by my sons," and walks off satisfied that the victory was his. Lu Xun doesn't stop to call this habit a disease. He builds the plot on it. The same reflex that cushioned every small humiliation now cushions a man on his way to a firing squad: he decides that being paraded and put to death is part of the "allotted destiny" of people "born between heaven and earth," and what shames him is that he lacked the nerve to sing a few lines of drama. The crowd cheers "Bravo!" Weichuang concludes that being shot is "proof of his badness." The city is merely disappointed that he sang no line from a drama: "They had followed him all in vain."

No one in the last chapter states the theme, a consoling fantasy that serves a crowd and an authority better than it serves the man. It is assembled from what happens and what it costs. Ah Q's consolation is serious because it gets expensive.

George Eliot, writing in 1866 to Frederic Harrison, said that aesthetic teaching is the highest of all teaching because it deals with life in its highest complexity, but that if it lapses anywhere "from the picture to the diagram," it becomes the most offensive of all teaching. Her complaint is with bad teaching; she is a moralist who thinks the picture teaches better. Flannery O'Connor, in "Writing Short Stories" (collected in *Mystery and Manners*), put it more severely: when you can state the theme of a story and separate it from the story itself, she says, "you can be sure the story is not a very good one." Fiction that hosts long arguments shows the limits of that strict reading. Ideas can be stated at length, provided someone holds them and then pays for them.

So the maxim is about cost, and says little about how much the writer may say aloud. A value shows it matters when it costs something, and a belief is tested when acting on it produces a result the believer did not intend. A reader who sees a person choose, and sees what follows, tends to draw the connection unprompted, and the same value meeting different pressures in different scenes is what readers recognize as theme. A conclusion assembled that way is harder to dismiss as the author's opinion. A statement of theme can only report the pattern, and it usually reports it earlier and more simply than the work earned.

Theme turns into a lecture in characters who speak it in complete sentences, a narrator who pauses to explain what the events mean, a poem whose last line translates the poem. Some forms announce their theme legitimately, though: the fable with its

moral, the essay with its thesis, the satire (Practice 19), the sermon. A character may state the theme naturally when the speech belongs to her, serves what she wants, and is then tested. And a reader who wants the point stated is not wrong; clarity matters (Practice 95), and a theme enacted so obliquely that no one finds it has effectively been buried. The craft question is whether the statement carries the meaning or merely labels it.

Practice. Find one place in your draft where a theme is stated: a character's speech, a narrator's reflection, the "what this taught me" paragraph, the closing couplet. Delete it. In its place put a choice that costs someone something, followed by a consequence the reader can see, with no comment. Read the new passage to one reader, ask what they take from it, and compare their answer with the sentence you deleted. In nonfiction, replace the declared lesson with the instance that demonstrates it. Keep the whole to thirty minutes.

Related practices: 15. Find the Subject Beneath the Topic; 19. Know Whether You Are Testing or Arguing; 62. Write the Unsaid Conversation.

Part 3 — Planning and structure

Anyone who has finished a long piece of writing has also stood in front of a pile: notes, interviews, scenes, stanzas, index cards, forty pages of material that came out in the order it occurred to you. Length is rarely the difficulty. The pieces exist, and nothing says which one comes next, or why.

A paragraph has that problem, and so does a trilogy. These chapters call whatever you currently treat as one piece a *unit*, whether a scene, a stanza, a chapter or a step in an argument, and the questions about units are the same at every scale. What has to be decided before the next one can be written? What happens when the plan and the draft disagree? Where does the whole live while you work on a part of it? And do the units do anything to each other, or do they just sit side by side?

We treat structure as a set of questions the Work puts to its author. A plan built before the Work arrives answers some of them and a draft answers others, and a published model, from three acts to twenty-two steps, is read here as one writer's list of questions, useful where it fits your Work. Writers place their structural decisions before drafting, during it, or after enough material exists to be studied (Chapter 4 describes all three), and you may be any of those writers on any given day. No chapter holds that one placement is more serious than another.

Fiction and nonfiction share more vocabulary here than their reputations suggest, and chapters that lean on a novel or a play

usually include a version for argument, memoir, or essay. Poetry appears where a poem shows a structural principle more cleanly than prose does.

Practices 21 to 23 are about stance: how much to decide in advance, how to hold a plan, and where discovery is going to happen whether or not you schedule it. Practices 24 and 25 are diagnostic, for a sequence that feels arbitrary or a scene that refuses to move. Practices 26 to 28 are working habits for the long middle of a project, and 29 and 30 look at the whole as a reader meets it. If you cannot begin because you do not know enough, start with 21; if an outline has gone dead in your hands, with 22. A stuck scene can go straight to 25, and a draft in pieces that will not line up to 26 and 28.

Each practice ends with an exercise of twenty minutes to an hour that works on notes or a rough draft and leaves a mark on paper you can inspect.

PRACTICE 21

Plan Until You Can Move

Outline until you can move; draft until you discover what the outline missed.

One writer has a thirty-eight-page outline, color-coded scene cards, and not a sentence of prose in five months, because every day the outline turns up something else that is not yet resolved. Another has a hundred and forty pages of draft and cannot say why her protagonist keeps returning to the same kitchen. Each believes all the while that she is being faithful to a method. The first is using planning to put off the discomfort of drafting, the second using drafting to avoid the discomfort of deciding.

The threshold for planning is movement. Plan until you can start the next stretch of writing without a decision you are afraid to make, and then stop. A plan removes one particular kind of uncertainty, the kind that blocks, and the other kinds are best resolved by writing. So the rule concerns what the plan does for you, and its length is beside the point. For one writer the plan is a sentence. For another it is a diagram of causes, a list of the ten claims in the order a skeptic would demand them, or a timeline that keeps three narrators' ages consistent.

The plan that got John McPhee off a picnic table was very small, which is worth noticing in a writer who plans heavily in other projects. At the end of the summer of 1966 he lay down on that table, behind his house in Princeton, and stayed there, on and off, for nearly two weeks. He had finished the research for a piece about the Pine Barrens of southern New Jersey, about eight months of interviews and reading, enough material, he says, to fill

a silo, and he had no idea how to begin. He got up with one organizing principle and no full outline. A seventy-nine-year-old Pine Barrens native named Fred Brown had some connection to at least three-quarters of the topics, so McPhee could introduce Brown and wander the woods with him, each theme arriving as something touched upon it. That answered the one question that had pinned him down, where do I enter and what governs the order of what follows, and it left what each section would contain to be worked out in the writing. After about thirty thousand words, he reports, the rest could take care of itself; the principle had given him a sense of a nearly complete structure, enough to begin on and to keep going for a long stretch. He tells the story in "Structure," published in *The New Yorker* in 2013.

The two kinds of uncertainty can feel alike. Not knowing what happens in chapter four may be a block, or it may be the engine of the book. Not knowing whether your second chapter's evidence is strong enough blocks you if you cannot begin chapter three without the answer, and if you can, it is an ordinary open question. The test is whether you can sit down tomorrow and write one useful unit. If you can't, find what is missing and plan exactly that.

Published methods put the threshold in very different places. Stephen King, in *On Writing*, says he distrusts plot partly because he believes plotting and the spontaneity of real creation aren't compatible. He starts from a situation, often a what-if question, and follows it, so for him characters in a predicament are enough to move on. Other books put far more before the first scene. John Truby's *The Anatomy of Story* is organized as twenty-two steps and Jessica Brody's *Save the Cat! Writes a Novel* as fifteen beats, and using either as a plan means settling the shape of the whole story, start to finish, before you move. That seems to suit a writer who

cannot begin without knowing where the story ends. For one who learns the ending by writing toward it, it seems a good deal to ask.

A plan can also be too thin, and then you can move fast in the wrong direction. Finding out late is expensive, particularly when material is costly to gather or other people depend on the structure. The authors of a co-written history cannot each discover the book separately, so for them the threshold is higher.

Practice. Write down, in about twenty minutes, the minimum map for the next five units: one sentence for each, stating what it must accomplish that the previous unit did not. Stop at five. If you can write the five without strain, you are probably ready to begin and should do so within the hour. If you can write only two, find the one decision that blocks the third and spend your effort on that. If you want to write eighteen, you are planning past the threshold; ask whether the extra sentences are removing a block or soothing anxiety. Then draft the first unit with the five sentences where you can see them.

Related practices: 22. Treat the Outline as a Hypothesis; 23. Every Writer Discovers Somewhere; 26. Write Out of Order Without Losing the Whole.

PRACTICE 22

Treat the Outline as a Hypothesis

Treat every plan as a hypothesis, not a contract.

Practice. Take your outline, or a quick list of your units if you have no outline, and spend twenty minutes marking each element as one of three things. *Fixed* means something outside the draft requires it: an external constraint, a documented fact, a promise already made to a reader or collaborator, or an element the draft has already tested and confirmed. *Probable* means you expect it to hold and have a reason. *Exploratory* means you are guessing and want the draft to tell you. Beside every fixed item, write the reason in a few words, and demote any item you cannot give one. If everything is fixed you have written a contract, and if nothing is, you have a mood. Start drafting at the exploratory items, where the plan has the least to say.

George R. R. Martin, asked often whether his novels would end the way the television adaptation did, took up the question in a 2022 blog post. An architect, he wrote, could give a short, simple reply, but he is much more of a gardener. The final destinations and the big set pieces have been in his head for years. The details are another matter, he said, and the story sometimes shifts under him as he writes.

An outline is full of predictions like his destinations: that if the confrontation falls here, the reader will feel the double betrayal; that three examples will carry the second claim; that the reader needs the definition before the objection. Drafting is the

experiment, and when the draft disagrees, ask which prediction failed. Maybe the second example contradicts the third, which means the claim as stated is wrong and the argument has just taught its author something. Predictions can also come true, and a confirmed plan was still a hypothesis while the draft was testing it.

A writer who holds the plan as a contract treats any surprise as a defect in herself, and may produce scenes she no longer believes because the outline says the scene exists. One who drops the outline at the first friction keeps no record of what the friction showed. Each has thrown away information. Treated as data, a deviation can be examined; treated as a failure, it only gives you someone to blame.

Some plans are rightly stiff. A textbook with chapters assigned to four authors or a legal brief with a word limit needs a structure that holds still enough to coordinate. There a change has to be negotiated with the people who depend on the plan, and recorded.

Related practices: 21. Plan Until You Can Move; 23. Every Writer Discovers Somewhere; 28. Outline What You Actually Wrote.

PRACTICE 23

Every Writer Discovers Somewhere

Discovery writers find structure through drafting; planners test structure through drafting.

On March 24, 2008, Zadie Smith told a room of Columbia writing students that novelists come in two kinds, and that she was one of them. Macro planners, she said, make notes, organize material, configure a plot, and create a structure before the title page. Micro managers build a house floor by floor, each floor finished and furnished before the next goes on top. Smith is a micro manager. She starts at the first sentence and finishes at the last, and it would not occur to her to choose among three endings, because she does not know the ending until she reaches it. The lecture, "That Crafty Feeling," later appeared in her collection *Changing My Mind*.

Read closely, the lecture maps where discovery takes place more than it sorts who does it. Every serious process contains discovery, and processes differ in where it happens and at what scale, whether in a sentence, an ending, a voice, or, in nonfiction, the claim itself. Smith finds the ending, the tone, and what the novel is, one sentence at a time. The planners she describes have their houses basically built from day one, and they discover too. They swap endings, take characters out and put them back, reverse chapters, and those discoveries are structural and come after the plan, through the draft pressing against it.

That is easy to nod at and hard to apply, because a label can excuse a blind spot. A writer who says "I'm a discovery writer" may mean

that structure arrives through drafting, which is true and respectable, or that structure is no longer her responsibility, which is not. A writer who says “I’m a planner” may mean that he reduces uncertainty before drafting, or that the plan has removed the need for surprise, which no plan does. Either way the label has hardened into an identity, when, as Chapter 4 argued, it should stay a description of where uncertainty is currently placed.

Smith says the planners’ difficulties multiply with their choices. Of herself she says that she suffers a pathology she calls Obsessive Perspective Disorder, and she reworked the first twenty pages of one novel for almost two years. That is an honest report of the revision cost a writer accepts by locating all discovery in drafting, since what the draft finds may not fit what the first hundred pages assumed. McPhee is a clear planner’s case on the other side. He settles an ending before going back to the beginning and builds a structure from coded notes before he writes, yet he says that the structure of a composition dictates itself to some extent and to some extent does not. A planner who locates discovery after the plan accepts a different cost, just as real and, like the first, hardest to notice from inside the method that incurs it: the plan may have excluded something living because it did not fit the diagram.

Practice. Take a completed or half-finished piece and, in twenty minutes, list five significant decisions you made in it. They can be small: whether the narrator knows, which example opens the argument, where the first revelation falls, what the ending turned out to be, how the voice sounds. Next to each, mark when you made it, before drafting, while drafting, or after a draft existed. Then look at the pattern. You may find all your discoveries cluster at the sentence level, or in revision, or at the ending, which tells you where your current process is exposed to surprise and where it is protected. It is not a verdict on you. If you want to, choose one

place to move a little: plan one thing you usually discover, or leave open one thing you usually settle.

Related practices: 21. Plan Until You Can Move; 22. Treat the Outline as a Hypothesis; 28. Outline What You Actually Wrote.

PRACTICE 24

Build Causes, Not Just Calendars

Organize by causality when causality matters, not by chronology alone.

"In 1998 we moved to the house on Alder Street. In 1999 my father changed jobs. In 2000 my sister left for college. In 2001 the maple in the yard came down in a storm." The paragraph comes from a memoir chapter that does not exist, written to show a pattern. Every sentence is true, and every sentence is placed correctly in time, but none of them needs the next or explains it. A reader will register the dates and wait for the point.

E. M. Forster drew the line in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927). A story, he says, is a narrative of events arranged in time sequence, and a plot is also a narrative of events, but with the emphasis on causality. "The king died and then the queen died" is a story; "the king died, and then the queen died of grief" is a plot. Of the queen's death, in a story we ask "and then?" and in a plot we ask "why?" He adds that a plot demands intelligence and memory from the reader, where a story asks only for curiosity. By his line, the Alder Street paragraph is a story.

Aristotle got there long before. He says in the *Poetics* (in the Butcher translation) that reversals and recognitions should arise from the internal structure of the plot, so that what follows is the necessary or probable result of what came before, and that it makes all the difference whether an event is a case of *propter hoc* or *post hoc*: because of this, or merely after it. Practice 47 looks at

the example he gives in the following chapter of the *Poetics*, the messenger in the *Oedipus*. Here we need only his test. Is each step made by the last, or merely placed after it?

A writer who stays faithful to what happened, or to the order it occurred to the character, may end up with a sequence in which any section could be moved without consequence. That turns up in memoir and history as well as fiction, and in argument too, where the claims stand in a row like a list of things the author knows.

When McPhee profiled Thomas Hoving, then director of the Metropolitan Museum, his notes in birth-to-present order did not accommodate the themes, such as forgery, that ran through Hoving's life. He built the piece instead as portraits arranged in two converging arms, personal and professional, designed to ask how an unpromising youth, expelled from Exeter for slugging a teacher, became the head of a great museum. The arms meet in two very long paragraphs, and McPhee says the second one answers the question. "Or was meant to," he adds.

In argument the test is old and simple. A claim is supported by reasons, and a reason is what follows "because." In the framework of Wayne Booth, Gregory Colomb and Joseph Williams's *The Craft of Research*, reasons sit between a claim and the evidence that supports them. If a section of a book cannot be tied to its neighbor by "because" or "therefore," the reader gets an assertion followed by another assertion.

The maxim is conditional. In a plot, an essay with an argument, or a case study, causality matters, and in some forms it does not. A diary is a calendar by design, and a day-in-the-life piece promises a day. An oral history, a lyric essay assembled by association, or a

poem that proceeds by image owes the reader a different kind of connection. Ask whether the reader has been promised an explanation and handed only a sequence.

Causality can also be forced, and then you have a different falsehood, the tidy biography in which nothing was accidental. Some structures keep coincidence in and call it coincidence. Forster himself allows a plot with a mystery, in which the cause is withheld until late: the queen died, no one knew why, until it was discovered that it was through grief. The cause arrives, but the reader learns it in an order that is not the order of events.

Practice. List your major events or claims, in the order they currently appear. Between each adjacent pair, write either "because" or "therefore" and finish the sentence. Where you can only write "and then," mark it. A marked gap may need a cause supplied, or the unit cut or moved, or you may decide that the pair is deliberately episodic and know why; a mark means only that the question has been asked, and the answer need not be causal. Thirty minutes will cover a chapter. When you finish, count the marks, so you know how many decisions you owe the draft.

Related practices: 25. Diagnose the Missing Pressure; 29. Arrange Pressure, Information, and Change; 30. Make Each Part Affect Another.

PRACTICE 25

Diagnose the Missing Pressure

When stuck, look for an unanswered question, an absent desire, or a weak consequence.

A writer can rewrite a scene's dialogue for a week and still not get it to move. A common case, and a composite, is two siblings in a kitchen discussing their mother's will. Both speak courteously, and each says what the writer already knows. The writer suspects the sentences, but the sentences are fine.

Desdemona is in a garden with Cassio, who has lost his place as Othello's lieutenant, in Act 3, scene 3 of *Othello*. She promises to plead his cause and says Othello will stand no farther off from him than policy requires. He answers that he fears that, absent and replaced, the general will forget his love and service. Then Othello and Iago come in. Cassio says he will take his leave. Desdemona tells him to stay and hear her speak. "Madam, not now," he says; he is ill at ease and unfit for his own purposes. He goes. Iago says, "Ha, I like not that."

Count the wants. Desdemona wants Cassio reinstated, which she thinks both generous and easy. Cassio wants his place back and, at this moment, wants more urgently not to be found here. On one reading, Iago wants Othello to ask a question and prompts it with a half-sentence that costs him nothing: Othello asks "What dost thou say?" and Iago answers "Nothing, my lord." Othello, at this point, wants merely to know who has just left. Each of them is moving toward something, and each movement presses on someone else's movement. The siblings are not moving toward anything, and their scene is slack because it lacks pressure.

Polish the wording of a scene in which nothing is at stake and you get better-worded nothing. The structural absence is usually in one of three places. There may be nothing the reader, or a character, wants to know that this scene has made urgent. A participant may want nothing from the others right now, specifically and in this room. Or failure may change nothing, so that the next scene would proceed unchanged.

In an argument the pressure takes other forms. An essay section stalls when it answers no question the reader has yet asked, and a historian's chapter drifts when it presents events without any competing explanation that the evidence is meant to adjudicate. Ask what a skeptical reader would say at this point, and whether the section takes that seriously. If the claim, wrong, would cost the reader nothing, the section can be skipped.

A quiet scene can still be held under tension. The reader may know something the characters do not, or a character may be concealing something small, in which case the desire is to not be seen. Invented shouting and manufactured crisis add noise and no stakes. Some units also rest on purpose: a scene after catastrophe, a transitional paragraph, or a sequence that lets the reader recover may deliberately lower the pressure, and may be right to, provided you know the unit is resting and the pressure on either side of it is strong enough to carry the pause.

Practice. Before you revise a scene or section that will not move, stop editing sentences and spend twenty minutes on this instead. On a separate sheet, write one line for each participant: "wants [what] from [whom] right now, and will lose [what] if they do not get it." For an argument, write the question the reader is asking and what the reader will conclude if the section fails. A line you cannot complete tells you what is missing, and the repair is to

decide, not to rephrase. Then reread the scene with those lines beside it and note what the dialogue or paragraph actually does. Whatever serves none of the lines is the first thing to sharpen or cut.

Related practices: 24. Build Causes, Not Just Calendars; 29. Arrange Pressure, Information, and Change; 30. Make Each Part Affect Another.

PRACTICE 26

Write Out of Order Without Losing the Whole

Write out of order when useful, but track dependencies.

In 1967 *The Paris Review* asked Vladimir Nabokov whether he worked to a preplanned chart and whether he moved from the beginning through to the end. The pattern of the thing, he answered, precedes the thing. He fills in the gaps of the crossword at any spot he happens to choose, and writes these bits on index cards until the novel is done.

A crossword can be filled in at any square only because the grid exists, so every answer is constrained by the others. Drafting out of order can protect energy, since you write the scene you can see and leave the transition you cannot, but an out-of-order draft without a grid is a heap of pieces that each assumed something about the others. It leaves orphans at the seams. A scene refers to a letter that has not yet been written. A collaborator writes section nine against a version of section four that has changed.

Each orphan is a broken dependency. Some dependencies are facts, such as a date, an age, or a distance that a trip requires. Some are information the reader must have before a scene can mean what it means, and a setup in chapter two creates an obligation in chapter nine. In an out-of-order draft they are all present at once and have to be held somewhere: in memory, which gets harder with every unit added, on index cards like Nabokov's, or in any tool that lets you link notes.

Linear drafting is a perfectly good answer to the same problem. Zadie Smith, whose method Practice 23 describes, writes from the first sentence to the last, so for her the dependency problem is solved by order itself, each unit written with the earlier units behind it. She gives up the freedom to follow energy across the manuscript.

Practice. Pick the ten unfinished units you expect to write next, or all of them if fewer than ten remain. For each, write two short lists: what this unit needs from elsewhere in the Work, and what elsewhere needs from it. Think of facts, information the reader must have, decisions you have not made, and promises. Draw arrows on paper, or note the numbers of the units; the map should take about half an hour. Write first the unit with the most arrows leaving it, the one other units wait on; units with arrows only inward can wait. Amend the map as you finish each of the ten, and if a unit has no arrows at all, ask whether it belongs.

Related practices: 27. Leave a Marker and Keep Moving; 28. Outline What You Actually Wrote.

PRACTICE 27

Leave a Marker and Keep Moving

Use placeholders to preserve momentum.

A writer stops at a missing date and spends forty minutes finding it, and when she comes back, the thought that was driving the paragraph has gone. Or she invents a plausible number and keeps going, and three weeks later the number is in the text with no trace that it was invented. The second is worse, because a plausible invented fact looks exactly like a true one on the page.

Reporters have a third option. One drafting at speed writes that the mayor, who has served since TK, announced a plan costing TK. Newsrooms use TK as shorthand for “to come.” Poynter’s glossary of journalism terms defines it as a placeholder used in drafts to indicate that specific information is to come and will be added later. The letters were chosen, according to the usual account of the practice, because very few English words contain the sequence T-K, so a search for it finds the markers and little else.

A good marker names exactly what is missing, whether a date, a source, or a decision between two options. It uses a string that does not occur in the ordinary text, so a search can count how many remain, and it cannot be mistaken for prose and sent to a reader. TK, a bracketed note, or a doubled symbol would each do, as long as you know the convention and use it consistently. Uncertainty you can find does not have to be resolved immediately, and the writing goes back to its forward motion.

None of this excuses leaving the hard part blank forever. A manuscript made largely of "[scene goes here]" has only postponed its problems. Markers must be counted and resolved before the Work leaves your hands, and in work where facts matter, the closing pass is where verification happens.

Some writers cannot work this way, and they have reasons. A line that depends on the exact word can lose its rhythm to a bracket in the middle of the sentence. Zadie Smith describes finishing each floor of a novel before the next goes up (Practice 23), and a writer who builds in that order has little room for a marker, since whatever is missing is missing from a floor already declared finished. A poet may not be able to leave a hole in a line without losing the line. For writers like these, a short pause for the missing word is the better way to keep moving.

Practice. Find the problem that is stopping you now. It may be a missing fact, a name you have not chosen, a transition you cannot write, or a decision about the order of two scenes. Replace it with a marker in the text, using a string that appears nowhere else, and add a note that says what is needed and where you will look. Then write for twenty minutes beyond the marker without returning to it. At the end of the session, search for the string, count the markers, put the count somewhere you will see it, and choose the day on which you will close them. If the count falls from one session to the next, the markers are working as a device. If it keeps growing, they have become a way of postponing the problem.

Related practices: 4. Give Yourself Something to Fix; 26. Write Out of Order Without Losing the Whole.

PRACTICE 28

Outline What You Actually Wrote

Reverse-outline the draft to see the work you actually made.

Practice. Summarize every existing section in one sentence, in the order they appear, each with a verb of function, allowing an hour for a chapter. Do not fix anything. Put the list aside for a few hours or a night, then read it aloud from top to bottom, listening for the place where you stop believing the sequence, and mark it. Then ask only one question of the list as a whole: if a stranger saw only these sentences, what book would they think I had written? The answer may be a different book from the one you meant. Sometimes you will prefer it, and then the list is your revision plan.

A doctoral student, a composite, has a nine-thousand-word chapter that everyone says is “almost there” and that feels off to her in a way she cannot name. She makes a list, one line per paragraph, in order, recording what each paragraph does. Four consecutive paragraphs make the same point with different examples. The paragraph that states the chapter’s real argument is number eleven. Two paragraphs refer to a concept that is not introduced until paragraph nineteen.

Her list is a reverse outline, the plan made backward. The UNC Writing Center’s guidance on reorganizing drafts describes it for academic writing: read the draft, make very brief notes about what each paragraph is trying to accomplish, transfer them in order to a fresh sheet, and so make, in the Center’s words, “an

outline of what is actually in your paper, rather than what you intended to have in it or think should be in it," and then examine it. Among the things the Center says it can reveal are gaps in reasoning, unnecessary repetition, places that need transitions, and whether ideas are presented in a logical order.

The verb does the work. A line reading "discusses the economy" summarizes the topic and learns nothing. A line reading "introduces the economy as the first of three causes," or "repeats the point of paragraph four," or "answers the objection raised in paragraph six," says what the unit does. The method probably works because you tend to believe your own intentions: if you know what a chapter is supposed to do, you read it as doing that, and the reverse outline replaces memory of intent with a record of function.

The tool is for a draft with enough material to have a shape. Made too early, on a half-finished draft, an outline can freeze the draft into premature shape.

Related practices: 22. Treat the Outline as a Hypothesis; 23. Every Writer Discovers Somewhere; 30. Make Each Part Affect Another.

PRACTICE 29

Arrange Pressure, Information, and Change

Structure is the arrangement of pressure, information, and change across time.

In the first chapter of Volume II of *Emma*, Emma forms what the narrator calls an "ingenious and animating suspicion" about Jane Fairfax, the charming Mr. Dixon, and Jane's not going to Ireland. We are given Emma's false theory, her pleasure in it and her certainty, and nothing of Jane's mind. In the tenth chapter of the third volume, Mrs. Weston tells Emma that Frank Churchill and Jane have been engaged since October, "formed at Weymouth, and kept a secret from every body." Everything the reader has been told rearranges itself. The pressure built in the space between what Emma thought she knew and what was true (Practice 37 shows how a point of view opens a space like that). Go back for a second reading and the same pages say something different, because the information has changed places.

Structure, in these terms, is a controlled relation between what the reader knows, what the reader expects or fears, and what has changed. At any page, whoever is reading believes some things, expects others, and hopes or dreads a little, and structure is the sequence of changes to that state; change is a belief being replaced. Information can be released, delayed, or distorted by a point of view. Pressure rises when you promise something, threaten something, or ask a question you won't answer for a long

time. Put the same events in a different order and you have a different book.

A draft can treat a template as a structure: the writer takes a published model, which may be a good one, and fills in the slots. The model might be a three-act arrangement, John Yorke's five-act account in *Into the Woods*, or one of the longer beat sheets. Each divides a story at the points where something turns, which is a useful way to ask where your turns are. Run one over the draft once it exists, as a checklist, and it can show whether a turn you meant to make actually happens where readers of the genre expect it. A planner can use the same model before drafting by asking, of each beat, what the reader knows and expects at that point. Without that question a model records events, and on our reading a book can contain every required beat in the right proportion and still feel inert, because the reader learns everything at the moment it happens and nothing is ever withheld, anticipated, or reinterpreted.

How information is distributed is a real craft decision, and the Gatsby letters record an editor and an author making one. On November 20, 1924, Maxwell Perkins, reading *The Great Gatsby*, wrote to F. Scott Fitzgerald that when Gatsby gives his biography deliberately to the narrator, the book departs from its own method, in which almost everything arrives in the regular flow of events. He suggested letting the truth of some of Gatsby's claims come out bit by bit in the course of the actual narrative. In a letter of about February 18, 1925, finishing proofs, Fitzgerald told Perkins that among other changes he had broken up Gatsby's long narrative in Chapter VIII.

Someone reading an argument holds a belief and a set of reservations, and in nonfiction your structure decides which

reservation comes up first, which evidence arrives when, and where their position finally moves. An argument that states its thesis and then proves it in a list gives the reader no change to go through. One that raises the best objection before the reader does and then answers it builds pressure and releases it. The authors of *The Craft of Research* count the response to objections as one of the five elements of an argument, which is a structural claim about the reader.

Sometimes the right chart is not about knowledge. A lyric poem may arrange mood, sound and image instead, and charting what its reader knows would give a flat line and a false verdict. Work that depends on the reader's disorientation can use the chart to confirm that it disorients on purpose.

Practice. Take ten consecutive units and, in forty minutes, make three columns. In the first, write what happens; in the second, what the reader believes or knows afterward; in the third, what the reader expects, fears, or wants to find out. Read down the second column and mark any stretch of three or more units where nothing changes, then down the third, marking where the pressure goes slack. The marks are not necessarily errors. They are the places where the reader's experience is flat, and each one needs you to decide whether you meant it.

Related practices: 24. Build Causes, Not Just Calendars; 25. Diagnose the Missing Pressure; 30. Make Each Part Affect Another.

PRACTICE 30

Make Each Part Affect Another

Each part should create necessity for what follows or alter the meaning of what came before.

"Because I'm chicken," David Brower says, and the section ends. In *Encounters with the Archdruid*, McPhee describes a raft trip on the Colorado River in which the party stops to study Upset Rapid. Brower, the conservationist, stays ashore and walks around it, and when the raft lands, Floyd Dominy, the dam builder, asks him why he did not ride through. After a half inch or so of white space the next section starts in another register entirely: a Sierra Club climbers' guide, quoted with dates and climbing partners, listing thirty-three peaks first ascended by Brower. McPhee says he left the white space to say something about courage and lack of courage and how they can exist side by side. The two sections had been two cards, "Upset Rapid" and "Alpinist," and he calls their juxtaposition what made that phase of the work most absorbing.

The guide neither continues the rapid's story nor answers any question it asked. It changes what the first section meant: a reader who has just heard Brower admit to fear now meets a man who clung to rock faces by his fingernails, and the confession turns into something more complicated than cowardice.

That is one way a unit can connect to another, by altering the meaning of an earlier unit. The other is to create necessity, so that the next unit has to exist because of this one, and good units often do both. Chekhov's gun shows necessity in its simplest form: a detail introduced early creates an obligation that a later unit has to meet (Practice 48 follows that device in detail). Thomas De

Quincey described the backward kind in an 1823 essay on the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth*. Since boyhood he had been puzzled that the knocking after Duncan's murder "reflected back upon the murder a peculiar awfulness and a depth of solemnity." His explanation was that the murder suspends ordinary human concerns, and that we feel the suspension most completely at the moment it ends and ordinary life is suddenly resumed.

A memoir might set a chapter about a childhood summer before a chapter about the narrator's divorce, with nothing joining them except the order they happen to stand in. Neither makes the other necessary, and neither changes how the other reads. A reader could swap the two chapters without noticing, and may start skimming or supply a connection the writer never made.

Necessity is not always plot. Alice Munro, introducing her *Selected Stories*, sets a house against a road. A story, she says, is something you wander around in, learning how the rooms and corridors relate and how the world looks from the windows, and the house has a sturdy sense of being built out of its own necessity. Parts can relate as rooms do, by position and by what you see through the windows between them. Some units earn their place by texture, by the world they build, or by the rest they allow. What the maxim asks is that every unit have a relationship to others and that you know what it is. Sometimes the honest answer is "none, on purpose," and then it should be an answer you chose.

Practice. Take the sequence of your sections or scenes and, in thirty minutes, write one of four words for every adjacent pair. *Generates* if the second exists because of the first. *Answers* if the second resolves something the first raised. *Reframes* if the second changes how the first should be read. *None* if you can honestly find no relationship. Do every pair, not only the ones you like. The

pairs marked *none* are your candidates. For each, decide whether to link it, move it, cut it, or keep it as a deliberate rest, and write the decision beside the pair. Brower's "Because I'm chicken" and the guide's thirty-three peaks would be marked *reframes*. Then count how many of your pairs earn a word like that.

Related practices: 24. Build Causes, Not Just Calendars; 28. Outline What You Actually Wrote; 29. Arrange Pressure, Information, and Change.

Part 4 — Character, narrator, and point of view

Before a reader finishes the first page, two questions have been answered, whether or not the writer meant to answer them. Who is this person? And who is telling me about her? Answer either one weakly and it tends to show up everywhere else, in scenes that happen to a mannequin, a voice that explains too much or notices too little, and an ending with no one for it to land on.

In fiction a *character* is made, and the author is responsible for her design. In memoir, biography, reportage and the personal essay the people on the page are real, and the writer is responsible for evidence and for consequences, which Part 8 takes up. Nearly every technique here still applies to them, with a different obligation attached. A novelist may decide why a character did something. A memoirist who does not know has to say so. An essay has a narrator even when no one calls it that, and a poem has a speaker, so anyone reading a poem is quietly deciding who is talking, to whom, and from where.

The close readings use public-domain texts, mostly from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, chosen so that we can quote them exactly and you can check every line against the page; the choice implies no ranking, and the techniques are alive in recent work. Recent books about craft we mostly paraphrase. Where a work is a translation, the chapter names the translator.

The ten chapters start with the smallest unit of character, a want, and move outward: 31 to 36 are about the people on the page, 37 to

40 about the telling. Each can also be read alone, against the problem in front of you.

None of this assumes a way of working. You may build the competing desires and what each viewpoint knows before you draft, or put someone under pressure and find out what she does. The questions are most useful put to pages that exist, however they came to exist. Each chapter ends with a task of an hour or less, and two of them, 32 and 33, finish by handing pages to one reader.

PRACTICE 31

Give Desire Competition

Character begins with desire and deepens through competing desires.

A protagonist can want something, meet obstacle after obstacle, and still read like a vector, steerable and easy to forget. Every obstacle only slows her down, and nothing she does costs her anything we were shown she cared about. A common first lesson is that characters need goals. That gives her direction. It doesn't yet give you a person.

Tolstoy gives Anna Karenina two wants and won't let her keep them together. She has been in Petersburg for days without seeing her son. She has written to Countess Lidia Ivanovna, a close friend of her husband, and the answer has been that there is no answer. So on Seryozha's birthday she goes to her husband's house at eight in the morning, presses a three-rouble note into a porter's assistant's hand, names a false sender, and is let up to the nursery. The boy wakes, says he knew she would come, and will not let go of her. Then the nurse whispers that the master always comes at nine. Anna cannot say goodbye, manages a few broken words, and leaves with the parcel of toys she bought the day before; Tolstoy tells us she had not had time to undo it (Part Five, chapters 29 and 30, in Constance Garnett's translation).

The other want is Vronsky, for whom she left the house she now has to sneak into, and neither is named in the nursery. In the days before, Tolstoy says, she had hidden everything about her son from Vronsky, because his cool tone would make her begin to hate him, which she dreaded more than anything in the world. In the

nursery her mind narrows to one thought, that she must go, and the bribe, the false name and the unopened parcel carry the conflict for her.

Competing desires are two specific wants, each legitimate to the character, that cannot both be satisfied here, so that every act toward one damages the other. Indecision doesn't qualify, and neither does the sigh ("part of her wanted to stay"). The wants needn't be grand: wanting to be left alone and wanting to be asked. A choice between a want and nothing is an errand. When two wants collide, the reader keeps track of both and can't tell which will lose, and we learn how much Anna wants her son by what she risks to see him.

If you plan, you can choose two wants the plot will force into conflict. If you draft first, look afterward for the places where a character hesitates, lies, changes the subject or hides something from someone; a second want may well be leaking out there.

A lean want is sometimes simply correct, in a fable, a farce, a thriller's pursuer, a minor character (35), or a narrator whose job is to guide.

Practice. Take the protagonist of the scene or chapter you are working on, or the narrator of the essay. Write down, in ten minutes, two things she wants here that cannot both be had, each specific enough that an observer could see it ("to be alone in the house when the call comes," not "freedom"). Then write half a page, in twenty minutes, in which she takes one small action that serves the first want and quietly damages the second. Ask what

she paid. If the answer is nothing, the second want is decoration, and your job is to make it cost.

Related practices: 32. Apply Pressure Before Explaining Character; 33. Make Contradiction Coherent; 44. Define Conflict as Incompatible Intention.

PRACTICE 32

Apply Pressure Before Explaining Character

Pressure reveals priorities.

"All right, then, I'll go to hell." Huck Finn has written to Miss Watson to say where her runaway, Jim, can be found, and he feels "washed clean of sin." Then he sits with the letter and cannot stop seeing Jim standing Huck's watch on top of his own so that Huck could sleep. He was trembling, he says, "because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it." He tears the letter up (chapter 31 of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*). He was "brung up wicked," he tells us, and no paragraph of praise could have ranked his priorities the way the torn letter does, at the price of damnation.

The usual substitute for a scene like that is an inventory: she was generous, short-tempered, secretly afraid of her mother. A private sheet of traits is a fine thing to plan with. On the page, traits are assertions, and readers discount assertions. Readers probably infer people from cost anyway, giving talk that costs nothing less weight than conduct that does, so Huck choosing Jim says less than what he chose Jim over.

A ranking shows only when two things the character values can't both be kept. It doesn't take a fire or a death. A host at a dinner table who must decide whether to correct a guest in front of the guest's child is under pressure if she values both the truth and the child. Heap misery on a character and you learn nothing about her unless she chooses inside it.

Some characters need no pressure at all; comedy in particular lives on display, in voice and habit. This practice is for characters whose priorities are in question.

Practice. Pick a sentence in your draft that asserts a trait ("she was proud," "he never forgave a debt") and cut it. Then write, in thirty minutes, a scene of about a page in which the character must choose between two things she values, and the cost lands inside the scene. Don't comment on what the choice means. Give the page, without the cut sentence, to one reader and ask what the character values most; if the reader names your trait, the pressure was real. If you are writing about a real person, do the same with an occasion: not "my grandmother was frugal" but the day she had to spend. (For the ethics of choosing that occasion, see 79.)

Related practices: 31. Give Desire Competition; 33. Make Contradiction Coherent; 44. Define Conflict as Incompatible Intention.

PRACTICE 33

Make Contradiction Coherent

Contradiction becomes depth only when it arises from coherent motives.

A character can do two things that clash without looking random, provided the motives behind them cohere. Dostoevsky manages it in a few pages. On a hot afternoon in St. Petersburg, Raskolnikov, a former student in rags, finds a very young girl drunk on a boulevard and a well-dressed man waiting for him to leave so that he can approach her. Raskolnikov rushes at the man, enlists a policeman, explains what he sees, and gives the policeman twenty copecks for a cab. As the policeman starts after the pair, "something seemed to sting Raskolnikov; in an instant a complete revulsion of feeling came over him." He calls the policeman back: "Let them be! What is it to do with you?" Left alone, he asks why he wanted to interfere: "Have I any right to help?" A few lines on, he arrives at this: "But what if Dounia were one of the percentage!" (*Crime and Punishment*, Part One, chapter 4, in Garnett's translation.)

He has been charitable and contemptuous within two pages, and the scene doesn't read as arbitrary, because the text holds the reason. Moments before the last line he had used a cold logic himself: "Let them devour each other alive—what is it to me?" Then he turns over the argument that a certain percentage of such girls must go to the bad every year so that the rest may stay chaste, and he mocks the vocabulary as "so scientific, so consolatory." We read the kindness and the contempt as one mind that cannot bear what it sees and is trying a way of not feeling it, a

way that fails the moment the percentage includes his sister. Other readers may weigh it differently. Either way, the page supplies a hypothesis that fits both halves.

A writer who learns that real people are contradictory may add contradiction as seasoning, the brutal man who adores his cat. Or the contradiction is an artifact of plot, a character who does whatever the scene requires. The reader, unable to find the person behind the two behaviors, finds the author instead.

From outside, a contradiction is two behaviors, and depth is a hypothesis about the person who produces both. Once a reader holding the two can work out a want or a fear that explains them, they read as one person. Her manner needn't be consistent, and you needn't explain; Dostoevsky never states what Raskolnikov's two behaviors have in common. The explanation does have to exist, and a reader has to be able to find it.

E. M. Forster, in *Aspects of the Novel*, tests what he called a round character by asking whether it is "capable of surprising in a convincing way." His examples include all the Dostoevsky characters. Surprise without conviction is randomness ("a flat pretending to be round," in Forster's phrase), and conviction without surprise is, in his terms, simply flat.

Given two behaviors, readers seem to look for one account, and they can hold a surprising choice open for pages if they sense one coming. So make sure the account exists and that at least one piece of evidence for it turns up before the second behavior, or just after. It needn't be stated; Dostoevsky offers the vocabulary of "percentage" and the sister and leaves the connection to the reader. If you discover rather than plan, you will often find the contradictory act first, because the character simply did it, and

then the practice runs backward. What would have to be true of someone who does both?

A poem's speaker may decline the demand. Whitman writes, in section 51 of "Song of Myself," "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)" A lyric speaker owes the reader no motive.

In memoir or biography, people are sometimes inconsistent in ways no biographer can trace, and the duty there is to report both behaviors, say what is not known (71), and leave the motive uninvented. When you are designing a person, though, an unmotivated contradiction is a gap in the design.

Practice. Choose two behaviors in your draft, or in the person you are writing about, that seem to clash. Complete this sentence as many ways as you can in fifteen minutes: "She does A and also B because she wants ___ and is afraid of ___." Pick the version that surprises you least and sounds most true. Then find the earliest place in the draft where a reader could glimpse that want or fear, and sharpen one detail there, such as an object, a hesitation or a word she avoids. Do not explain. Give the pages to one reader and ask only whether the second behavior surprised her and whether it felt right. If you cannot complete the sentence for a real person, write the uncertainty into the draft instead. Two yeses mean the motive is on the page; a no tells you where it is still in your head alone.

Related practices: 31. Give Desire Competition; 32. Apply Pressure Before Explaining Character; 71. Label the Kind of Knowing.

PRACTICE 34

Activate the Past

Backstory matters when it changes present choice, perception, or stakes.

Robert Frost's "Home Burial," in *North of Boston* (1914), opens at the foot of a staircase. A husband sees his wife, partway down, look back "at some fear," take a step, undo it, and look again. He asks what she sees "From up there always." She gives him no help, "sure that he wouldn't see," and he climbs until he does. Through the window is the little graveyard "where my people are," small enough that "the window frames the whole of it," and then he understands: "it is not the stones, / But the child's mound." Frost does not say how the child died or what it was called.

Late in the poem he protests that a man can't speak of his own child, and his wife, Amy, answers that he can't because he doesn't know how. She tells him what she saw "from that very window": him digging the grave, the gravel leaping "like that, like that," and then coming indoors with the earth still on his shoes to talk about his "everyday concerns." She quotes him: "Three foggy mornings and one rainy day / Will rot the best birch fence a man can build." One afternoon and one remark are nearly all the backstory the poem gives. His calm remark that the graveyard is "Not so much larger than a bedroom, is it?" now sounds like the man who talked about the birch fence.

A piece of the past belongs on the page when it changes what a character perceives, what she chooses, or what is at risk. Amy's afternoon does all three. It explains why she watches the window, it changes how his calm remarks sound, and it puts the marriage

at risk. A paragraph of past that changes none of these is information about the character. Backstory isn't banned, and you may know a great deal the reader never sees.

Delivered before the reader has a question for it, backstory seems to sit inert; delivered by a character with a reason, it changes how the next lines read. Frost plants the question in the opening lines, answers it with a window, and holds the deeper answer until Amy needs it for her case against him. Imagine, by contrast, a manuscript that opens with eleven competent pages of its heroine's childhood. The past arrives as a credential, and on page twelve she walks into a hospital waiting room like a woman with no history.

If you write backstory as a way of finding the character, keep the pages and use the test in revision, moving into the draft only what passes. If you build a full history before drafting, the temptation is to spend all of it.

Some works are all past, and memoir is one (40): there the past is the subject, and the question is which self is looking at it. The test belongs to work where the present is the story and the past is cargo.

Practice. Take the longest stretch of backstory in your draft, whether a flashback, a biographical paragraph or the history section of an essay, and work through it in forty minutes. For each paragraph, write one sentence beginning "In the present, this changes ___," and fill the blank with a perception, a choice or a risk. Paragraphs you cannot finish go, undeleted, into a file called "known, not told." For each survivor, ask who in the story has a reason to reveal it, when, and how much she actually knows, and

move it there. Then read the present scene with and without the paragraph. If it reads the same, the past was not working.

Related practices: 40. Separate the Selves of Memoir; 48. Connect Promises to Payoffs; 66. Make Exposition Change Something.

PRACTICE 35

Let Supporting Characters Exist Offstage

Give every major character a private logic and a life beyond the protagonist's needs.

Practice. Choose a secondary character and write one offstage day for her, about 350 words in thirty minutes, set within your story's timeline. The protagonist does not appear and is thought of only if this character has a reason to. Give her a goal with a deadline and one obstacle that has nothing to do with the protagonist. Then find one scene in your draft where her behavior should change because of that day (a late arrival, a refusal, a hurried answer) and revise it in fifteen minutes. Look for whether she now does something the protagonist cannot fully explain.

In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, after Charlotte Lucas accepts Mr. Collins, the narrator gives her reflections (chapter 22): he is "neither sensible nor agreeable," but marriage had always been her object, "the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune." Visiting the parsonage in chapter 30, Elizabeth notices that the ladies sit in a less pleasant back room rather than the better dining parlor, and works out why. Charlotte has arranged things so that Mr. Collins will spend his days in his own book room, at the front. Charlotte is carrying out a plan of her own, one that was in place before Elizabeth arrived.

Supporting characters often fail by being functions, the wise friend or the rival, who appear when needed, say what the scene requires, and leave. A private logic is the account a character

would give if asked why; with it, she can act in ways the protagonist did not cause and cannot fully predict, and the protagonist's plan runs into someone else's. Charlotte gets no chapter of her own, only reasons. Because Austen has shown them, the reader can see what Elizabeth's harsh judgment of her friend leaves out.

The maxim says *major* characters. A cast in which everyone has a full offstage life would likely be hard to read, and for minor characters a plausible logic that stays unseen may be enough, provided their actions do not contradict it.

In memoir and reportage the obligation is ethical. The mother in a memoir had a Tuesday the writer did not witness, and she is also a real person who may read the book (79).

Related practices: 36. Give Opposition a Worldview; 63. Differentiate Minds Before Accents; 79. Treat Real People as Participants in Consequence.

PRACTICE 36

Give Opposition a Worldview

Antagonism should be persuasive from within its own logic.

A villain whose position can be dismissed in a sentence cannot cost the protagonist anything, and when the protagonist wins, it is a walkover. Too often the villain is an obstacle, or proof of the hero's virtue, or simply the plot's way of delaying the ending.

Milton announces his purpose in Book 1 of *Paradise Lost*: to "justify the ways of God to men" (line 26). The first character to speak is the enemy of that purpose. Satan, who has lost a war in Heaven, lies on a lake of fire, and when he can stand he gives his ally Beelzebub the argument under his defiance. Of God he says that whoever "now is sovereign can dispose and bid / What shall be right," though reason makes him only an equal and force made him supreme. His answer is "The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven," and "Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven" (lines 246-263; spelling modernized). Anyone who has resented an authority knows the tone.

Alone on a mountain in sight of Eden, in Book 4, Satan argues with himself. He concedes that God "deserved no such return," and asks of his own fall, "whom hast thou then or what to accuse, / But Heaven's free love dealt equally to all?" He weighs repenting and rejects it, predicting his own relapse: "Ease would recant / Vows made in pain." He ends: "Evil, be thou my good" (lines 42-110).

Milton's narrator, after Satan's first speech in Book 1, describes him as speaking "Vaunting aloud, but racked with deep despair"

(lines 125-126). Blake wrote in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-93) that Milton was "of the Devil's party without knowing it." The page cannot settle that. It does show an author who set out to justify God and gave the other side arguments strong enough for a reader like Blake to take them for his sympathies.

An antagonist with a worldview holds a rival account of how things are and what matters, one that can be stated, that fits much of what the story's world shows, and that makes the protagonist's own position more expensive to hold. She needn't be sympathetic or victorious, and you needn't agree with her. The reader, listening, has to feel the pull, and the protagonist has to have something to answer.

Weak opposition gives a win by default; a protagonist's values are only demonstrated against force that could plausibly overturn them. A persuasive antagonist also gives the reader's own doubts an advocate on the page, so that when the protagonist answers, she answers the reader's objection too. Milton seems to build this in. Satan's speeches are the objection to the poem's thesis, and the poem lets the logic run until its cost shows. The Satan of Book 1 says the mind is its own place; the Satan of Book 4 says "myself am Hell" (line 75).

Persuasive is not the same as fully explained. Iago tells Roderigo "I hate the Moor," then, alone, adds a rumor that Othello has slept with his wife: "I know not if 't be true, / But I, for mere suspicion in that kind, / Will do as if for surety" (Act 1, scene 3). Coleridge, in a note on the speech, called it "the motive-hunting of motiveless Malignity," and in an entry in *Omniana* (1812) wrote that Iago's changing motives were fictions of a restless nature haunted by the love of exerting power. Iago works because his logic is a performance whose engine we cannot fully see.

Some opposition is not a person at all but a bureaucracy, a diagnosis, a sea, and then the question is one about rules. A bureaucracy has procedures that make sense from inside, and its menace lives there.

Practice. Write the antagonist's argument in its strongest form: about two hundred words, in the first person, addressed to a friend rather than to the protagonist, with no adjectives of villainy. Include one true observation about the story's world that the protagonist's side cannot easily answer. Read it as the antagonist's ally and mark the weakest claim, which is where the protagonist's opening lies. Put one sentence of the argument, undisguised, into a scene. In nonfiction, do the same for the opposing view in terms its advocates would recognize (74). Then cut that sentence and reread the scene, the whole exercise taking forty minutes; if the scene reads the same, the worldview has not yet reached the protagonist.

Related practices: 35. Let Supporting Characters Exist Offstage; 44. Define Conflict as Incompatible Intention; 74. Strengthen the Opposition Before Answering It.

PRACTICE 37

Use Point of View as an Information System

Point of view controls access, emphasis, blindness, and suspense.

"Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband's death." Kate Chopin opens "The Story of an Hour" from outside Louise Mallard, in the voice of the people managing her, who watch her weep "with sudden, wild abandonment" and take it for grief. (She wrote it April 19, 1894, and it was first printed in *Vogue* that December 6 as "The Dream of an Hour".) Then she goes to her room alone, and the story goes with her. We see what she sees from the armchair, treetops, a peddler, patches of blue sky, and hear the word she whispers, "free, free, free!" Her sister Josephine kneels with her lips to the keyhole, begging her to open the door.

Then her husband, Brently, unaware of any accident, walks in with his latchkey. The narration has stepped out of her to report Richards's errand and Brently's ignorance, and it never enters her at the sight of him. The last sentence belongs to the house: "When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease—of joy that kills." Only the reader holds what makes that verdict ironic.

A point of view decides what reaches the reader, in what order and in whose idiom, and what the reader cannot learn at all, and so what the reader is permitted to be wrong about. Drafts often treat it as a question of voice, first person intimate and omniscient old-

fashioned. Those feelings are secondary to who can know this, when, and what they would notice and miss. A mystery drafted in close third on the detective, whose crucial scene is the culprit's private decision to run, must break the viewpoint or report the scene secondhand.

Access is what the viewpoint can perceive and know. *Emphasis* is what it notices and weighs. *Blindness* is what it cannot see, or will not. *Suspense* is the gap between what the viewpoint knows and what the reader suspects or wants to learn.

In Dickinson's "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died," the poem gives its speaker an impossible vantage and manages it by obeying its own access rule. It reports only what can be perceived and done from the bed, down to the fly "between the light—and me." It ends where perception ends: "I could not see to see." Practice 68 reads the same poem for what its dashes do to the sound.

A reporter or essayist knows what she saw and has testimony about the rest, so a sentence like "he thought" needs a source. Without one, she has quietly adopted the access of an omniscient narrator (71).

Restriction is not automatically a virtue. A narrator who can go anywhere controls suspense by other means, dramatic irony above all. A writer cornered by a viewpoint's limits may turn to a letter, an overheard conversation, a second viewpoint, or a change in the narrator's stance (38). Whatever the tracking method, keep the record per scene: who knows what at this point, and how they came to know it.

Practice. Pick one scene and list, in twenty minutes, what the viewpoint (a character, an essay's narrator, a poem's speaker) cannot know in it: facts, other people's thoughts, events in other

rooms, the meaning of what is seen. Aim for at least five. Mark each one A (the reader never needs it), B (the reader will get it by another route, such as a letter, another scene, or a gesture the viewpoint misreads) or C (the scene fails without it, so the viewpoint should change). Then write 150 words in which one B item reaches the reader through someone's misreading, the viewpoint character's or a bystander's, as the doctors' verdict does in Chopin's story.

Related practices: 29. Arrange Pressure, Information, and Change; 38. Control the Camera's Distance; 39. Remember That Narrators Select.

PRACTICE 38

Control the Camera's Distance

Change narrative distance deliberately.

Practice. Take one paragraph of about 100 words from your draft that carries an event, and rewrite it three times in thirty minutes. Far: summary or panorama, time compressed, no private thoughts. Middle: the moment as a scene, perceptions mostly external, with a thin layer of the character's idiom. Near: inside the perception, in the character's own phrasing, with no "she thought" or "he felt." Read the original and the three rewrites aloud, and for each finish the sentence "The reader can judge ___ but cannot feel ___." Then decide where the piece wants each distance, and where your draft chose by drift.

"Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself." That first sentence of Virginia Woolf's novel stands outside Clarissa. In the next the narration moves in, and "For Lucy had her work cut out for her" is Clarissa's thought about her servant. "What a lark! What a plunge!" is her own exclamation with no quotation marks, and it opens a memory of Bourton at eighteen. A few lines later the camera swings outside again, "A charming woman, Scrope Purvis thought her," a neighbor glancing at her on the curb. Then she is inside again, hearing Big Ben, thinking, "Such fools we are." Nothing marks the moves but syntax and idiom.

John Gardner calls the distance a reader feels between herself and the events of a story psychic distance (*The Art of Fiction*). Every draft has it and few drafts decide it. Some drift, sliding without signal from an overview of the town into one person's private panic; others never move because the writer settled into one

voice. Summary, scene, interiority and panorama are positions along one range. Summary is the right distance for what the reader must traverse and not experience (65). Near, the reader tends to feel and agree; far, the reader is better placed to judge and to see what the character cannot, and Scrope Purvis's glance gives the interior that follows a shape to push against.

Deliberate can also mean never moving. A history that goes from the sweep of a decade to one afternoon in a courtroom faces the same question of how close the reader should stand. Reportage held at a far distance can sound authoritative while hiding how much the writer saw.

Related practices: 37. Use Point of View as an Information System; 49. Pace Anticipation, Event, and Reflection; 65. Dramatize the Necessary Experience.

PRACTICE 39

Remember That Narrators Select

A narrator is never transparent; selection itself creates meaning.

Every sentence of narration has selected this detail, this order, this verb for what someone said, including the ones that never say "I" at all. "Said," "admitted" and "claimed" are not the same event. Imagine a city council meeting narrated twice. In one version the council "voted 5–2 after a brief public comment period." In the other, three residents, one of whom had waited since six o'clock, were given two minutes each before the vote. Both could be accurate, and they ask the reader to feel different things. Neutral narration, the camera eye or the plain summary of a meeting, is a tempting assumption, and a style without a first person can feel clean. A writer who thinks the narration is transparent stops auditing it.

"This is the saddest story I have ever heard." Ford Madox Ford's narrator, John Dowell, says so on the first line of *The Good Soldier* (1915), and on the first page tells us, with a word in quotation marks, that of himself and his wife "one of us had, as the saying is, a 'heart'," and that his wife, Florence, "was the sufferer." Before the first part is over he says that the one woman whose heart trouble was real "was really what the other two, for reasons of their own, just pretended to be." By then Dowell has given us the order in which he wants the story known. Near the end he admits he has told it "in a very rambling way," and defends the method: one goes

back and forth, and “one may have given, by omitting them, a false impression.”

He is vivid, not exceptional. His order, his omissions and the way he speaks of his wife are narrative choices that happen to have a character attached, and every narrator has them.

None of this means that narrators lie or that facts are optional. The shape of an account, its inclusions, omissions, sequence and emphasis, is itself a statement. Wayne Booth, in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, ties a narrator’s reliability to the norms of the work as a whole, which he calls the implied author’s, against which the narrator’s accuracy and judgment can be measured. That moves the question from whether the narrator lies to what the work lets us see that the narrator does not. Dowell is unreliable against the work’s norms. A narrator can be reliable and still select.

Chekhov comes at the problem from the other side. Writing in 1888 to his friend A. S. Suvorin, a newspaper editor, about one of his stories, he argued that the artist should be “not the judge of his characters… but merely an impartial witness.” (The letters are in Constance Garnett’s translation.) In the same paragraph he adds that the writer’s business is “to know how to distinguish important statements from unimportant.” Two years later, defending himself against the charge of indifference, he wrote that he relies on the reader “to add for himself the subjective elements that are lacking in the story.” The letters suggest Chekhov knew the impartial witness was a stance that still selects. He declined to say what the selection meant.

A reader tends to assume that what is mentioned matters and that what is absent does not, and builds a picture accordingly, so the narrator’s pattern of noticing seems to work as an argument,

strongest when it doesn't look like one. No account can include everything, though, and a narrator who stops to justify each choice is unreadable. Selection is a problem only when it is concealed from the writer. Sometimes plain reporting is the right posture, and a clear, unhurried account with a restrained narrator can be the most trustworthy one available.

Practice. Take about a thousand words of narration, your own or a passage you admire. In thirty minutes, list every category of thing the narrator notices (clothes, money, weather, bodies, other people's feelings, sounds, the time of day) and then every category it never mentions. For each absence, ask whether this person, at this moment, would plausibly register it, and decide whether the silence is the narrator's design (a character who cannot bear to notice grief) or your habit. If it is habit, write one paragraph that notices what the narration has avoided and see whether the work changes. For nonfiction, list which sources are quoted and which are never heard. The silences you cannot defend are the part of this narration you did not choose.

Related practices: 37. Use Point of View as an Information System; 40. Separate the Selves of Memoir; 71. Label the Kind of Knowing.

PRACTICE 40

Separate the Selves of Memoir

In memoir, distinguish the experiencing self, the remembering self, and the narrating self.

Memoirs go wrong when the selves collapse into one: the narrator who remembers everything and understood it all at the time, or the child who speaks in an adult's vocabulary and irony, or the retrospective wisdom that flattens the person who lived through the event into a victim or a fool.

Augustine keeps all three in view. In the sixteenth year of his life he and some friends shook a pear tree late at night and carried off loads of fruit, not to eat but to throw to the hogs. The man who tells it in the *Confessions*, written between 397 and 400, cannot find an ordinary reason. In E. B. Pusey's translation: "Nor cared I to enjoy what I stole, but joyed in the theft and sin itself." The boy shook the tree and, so far as the text shows, did not ask why. The man remembering, who in the previous chapter hedges what he recalls of his parents ("recalling, as well as I may"), interrogates his memory and finds that the pears were not the point. And the writer has chosen to place this episode in Book Two, to address it to God, and to make it the occasion for an inquiry into motive. The phrase "I loved to perish" belongs to the writer.

The three terms are our working labels, not a theory with a single source, and Daniel Kahneman uses the first two in a different, psychologist's sense. The *experiencing self* is the person inside the event, knowing only what she knew then and wanting what she wanted. The *remembering self* retrieves, with gaps, reconstructions, versions told by others, and revisions by time. The *narrating self* is

the one now shaping the text, with knowledge the others lacked, a purpose, and an audience. They are not separate people, and Augustine's inquiry merges them, but the writer does need to know, for each sentence, whose knowledge it is using.

Frederick Douglass shows the narrating self deciding what the others could not. In chapter 11 of his *Narrative* (1845), about his escape, he announces his "intention not to state all the facts," because telling them might involve others in difficulty and close "the slightest avenue" by which another slave might get free. The experiencing self lived those facts and the remembering self holds them; the narrating self, writing with consequences in view, withholds them and says why.

The narrating self knows how it ended. We think that letting that knowledge leak into the experiencing self's scene removes suspense and plausibility, while letting the experiencing self's confusion leak into the narrator's framing removes authority. Kept apart, the selves let the reader see the gap between them, and much of a memoir's meaning can sit there, including the places where present understanding is still unsure. Disclosing the remembering self's limits keeps faith with the reader about the kind of testimony on offer (71). Some memoirs suppress the narrating self on purpose, in present tense and without commentary, so that the reader stands where the child stood. Others think aloud as an essay does. Both are legitimate if the writer knows which selves are speaking and why.

Practice. Choose one memory and write it three times, in forty-five minutes. *Experiencing*: present tense, only what the person then could see, hear and want, in the vocabulary of that age; no sentence may know what happened next. *Remembering*: what you recall and how, with the gaps marked, meaning what you are

unsure of, what others tell you, what a photograph or letter says against your memory. *Narrating*: from now, what you know that you did not, why you are telling this, and what you are leaving out and why. Reread the first for any sentence that knows the ending, and the third for any claim that treats memory as certain. Then decide which version, or mixture, the piece wants. If real people appear, check what you have said about them against 79.

Related practices: 34. Activate the Past; 39. Remember That Narrators Select; 71. Label the Kind of Knowing; 79. Treat Real People as Participants in Consequence.

Part 5 — Scene and narrative movement

A manuscript can be well built and still fail at the size of a room. The outline says the argument turns here and the second act begins there, and the chapter on the archive comes before the chapter on the fire. Then the writer sits down to the unit that actually gets written, a scene, a stretch of continuous time with particular people in it, and it lies flat. The sentences are fine. Everyone is present. Nothing has been decided, risked, or learned, and the next scene would start in the same place.

Part 3 treated structure as the arrangement of pressure, information, and change across a whole, and Part 4 supplied the people who feel the pressure. The practices here stay inside the room, minute by minute, and then follow how one room leads to another so that the reader wants the next.

In fiction and drama a scene is a bounded passage of continuous action in one place. A screenwriter has almost nothing else. A memoirist has scenes wherever the narrating self lets the experiencing self act, often fewer than a novelist's and longer-lived, while an essayist or poet may have none (Part 7 takes up poetry and exposition). Nothing here assumes that every work should be built from scenes. Building with them means deciding, each time, what to dramatize and what to leave to summary, the choice Practice 65 takes up directly.

The ten are not a procedure. The first four concern the single scene, which should change something (41), begin where the

pressure is (42), do more than one job (43), and rest on a collision of intentions rather than on noise (44). The next three concern cause, from what chance may and may not do (45) through what escalation really escalates (46) to which turns alter what can happen next (47). The last three follow movement across a whole work, through promises and their payment (48), the proportion of waiting, happening, and absorbing (49), and an ending that completes what the work began (50). A book whose scenes are all competent and somehow inert should start at 41 and 47; one whose ending feels like either a locked door or a shrug, at 48 and 50.

The questions are diagnostic, so they work on a plan as well as on a manuscript in its seventh revision, and on a scene remembered from the writer's own kitchen as well as one that never happened.

As in Part 4, the close readings come mostly from public-domain texts, so that anyone can read the passage in full and test what we say about it. A few works that may still be in copyright also appear, retold and quoted in a few phrases at most: Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" (1936), Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," Baldwin's "Notes of a Native Son," and the film *Casablanca* (1942). Writers on craft are paraphrased or quoted briefly, mostly where their own account of their method is the point.

PRACTICE 41

Make the Situation Different by the End

A scene begins with an unstable condition and ends with a changed one.

Two sisters sit in their mother's kitchen and discuss what to do with the house. The dialogue is accurate, the objects are well chosen, a kettle is observed, and forty minutes of reading later they leave carrying the positions they arrived with. Every line is true, which makes the scene hard to cut, and truth to life is a poor guide to whether a scene is needed.

In the third act of *Hamlet* the prince comes upon the man he has sworn to kill and finds him on his knees. Claudius is alone, and Hamlet has a sword. "Now might I do it pat, now he is praying." Claudius has just admitted, to no one, that he cannot pray while he keeps what he killed for, the crown, his ambition, his queen, and Hamlet has the chance he has circled for most of the play. The audience holds both facts and Hamlet holds one.

Hamlet sheathes the sword on an argument. To kill a man at prayer would send him to heaven, and that is wages, not revenge. He leaves, and Claudius rises and says it plainly: "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. / Words without thoughts never to heaven go." The prayer failed, and Hamlet's reason rested on something false that only the audience knows. Nobody on stage announces the change. In the next scene Hamlet drives his sword through a curtain at a cry behind it and kills Polonius, who is not the king.

Robert McKee, writing for screenwriters in *Story*, boils the test down to two questions. At the top of the scene, name the value at stake in a character's life (love, truth, safety) and whether it is charged positively or negatively; at the bottom, name it again. If the notes match, he says, the scene is a nonevent with activity but no change. His stated ideal, a story design in which every scene is a turning point, large or small, he offers as something to work toward.

The change need not be a bigger event. If one sister realizes the other has already called the realtor, and says nothing, the kitchen scene has changed more than a car chase that returns the driver to where he began. In memoir the test becomes what the narrator understands at the end that she did not at the start, a form that comes from Vivian Gornick's distinction between situation and story, which she illustrates with Elizabeth Bishop's waiting-room poem (Practice 15 tells it). In reported nonfiction it is what the reader now understands about a person.

The reason seems to lie in expectation. An unstable condition is an open question (will he strike, will she tell?), and attention tends to attach to one; a changed ending answers part of it and opens another, while an unchanged one leaves the reader's forward pull nowhere to hold.

Some scenes set up a stable condition so that a later one can break it, the ordinary morning or the household routine. Even they earn their place by being charged, by hinting that they cannot last, and a work whose subject is stasis has to change the reader's sense of how long it can go on.

Practice. Choose a scene you suspect is flat and spend twenty-five minutes on it. Write two sentences, one for its opening condition

and one for its closing condition, each saying who knows what, who holds power, what each person intends, how they stand to one another, and what could happen next. Underline whatever differs, and if something does, check that the page makes it visible. If nothing does, ask what the scene is protecting: information the reader needs (move it into a scene that turns), a mood (can it ride inside one?), or your affection for it.

Related practices: 42. Enter at the Pressure Point; 43. Give the Scene More Than One Job; 47. Make Turns Change the Field.

PRACTICE 42

Enter at the Pressure Point

Enter where the pressure begins; leave once the consequence lands.

"It was Paul's afternoon to appear before the faculty of the Pittsburgh High School to account for his various misdemeanors." That is the first sentence of Willa Cather's "Paul's Case," in its 1905 text, and the cause is already behind it. Paul was suspended a week ago, and his father has called at the Principal's office to confess his perplexity. Cather comes in after the offenses and before the verdict, and lets the room supply the history as it is needed. The teachers recite their charges. The English teacher recalls Paul shuddering away from her hand at the blackboard. The drawing master mentions, almost as an aside, that the boy was born in Colorado a few months before his mother died there, and the fact arrives as a clause inside a scene already under pressure.

A first draft tends to enter earlier, where the writer began to understand the scene. The character wakes, makes coffee, drives across town rehearsing what she will say, parks, checks her face in the mirror, and walks to the door. Each of those sentences helped you find the scene. Once it is found, all of them are in the reader's way, and the scene should begin at the first sentence the reader would miss.

Late entry does not mean starting at the climax or on the first line of dialogue. The pressure point is the moment the scene becomes unavoidable, usually when incompatible intentions first touch (Practice 44) or when something happens that the people present

cannot ignore. Leaving "once the consequence lands" means leaving when the reader can work out what has changed (Practice 41), and that can be later than the event itself.

Cather leaves the same way. The morning after Paul learns that his father has come East to bring him home, he goes to Newark, walks out along the railroad tracks, and jumps in front of a train. She gives him one moment of falling, in which "the folly of his haste occurred to him with merciless clearness," and then her last line: "Paul dropped back into the immense design of things." The story does not follow the news to his father, or to the funeral, or back to Pittsburgh.

Readers can probably rebuild a missing approach from what follows, and a cut seems to signal what matters, so what is left out becomes what they imagine. That works only if the cut material can be reconstructed. When it cannot, one clause inside the scene costs less than a paragraph before it.

Nonfiction cannot change what happened, but it can choose where to enter and where to leave. Baldwin does not close "Notes of a Native Son" at the graveside or on the end of the riot it describes. He closes where the day's meaning becomes his: it has been "laid to my charge," he writes, to keep his own heart free of hatred and despair, and he wishes his father were beside him to ask. Screenwriters pass the same advice along as trade lore, enter late and leave early, though its source is unclear. The usual reason given is economic, since a screenplay's pages become minutes of shooting and somebody pays for a warm-up.

Hemingway, the writer most associated with omission, supplies the exception. In a 1959 preface published in *The Paris Review* in 1981, he says that if you leave out important things you know, the

story is strengthened. Then he tells how “Fifty Grand” first opened with a boxer’s remark about how he handled an opponent, how a friend told him to cut it, and how he later regretted giving in, calling what he cut a “lovely revelation.” Cutting a story’s first five hundred words, he says, had improved others of his but would not have improved this one. The magazine’s headnote cautions against judging the preface as literature, since it is an informal lecture. It is cited here because a writer known for omission did not treat late entry as automatic. Suspense and ritual can make the approach itself the pressure, and Practice 46 has a case of that.

Practice. Spend thirty minutes on a scene that feels slow. Count its words, remove the first quarter, and begin at whatever sentence is now first. Save both versions and read the short one cold, ideally the next day, listing what has been lost. If the reader is disoriented, return exactly that fact, inside the scene, as a clause or a gesture; if nothing is lost, the cut stays. Then find the last line at which anything changes and see how much follows it. Keep whatever that aftermath does for the reader, and cut the rest.

Related practices: 41. Make the Situation Different by the End; 44. Define Conflict as Incompatible Intention; 65. Dramatize the Necessary Experience.

PRACTICE 43

Give the Scene More Than One Job

Every scene should earn its place through action, revelation, transformation, or resonance.

A scene needs at least one job, something it causes, and the strongest often do several at once, drawn from material already in the scene rather than from added speeches. One scene in *Casablanca* (1942; screenplay credited to Julius J. Epstein, Philip G. Epstein, and Howard Koch) does four, and they hold one another up.

Victor Laszlo, the resistance leader, has tried to buy from Rick, the café's owner, the letters of transit that would get him out of the city, and been refused at any price. Rick tells him to "ask your wife" why. The talk breaks off because German officers have gathered at the piano downstairs for "Die Wacht am Rhein," Major Strasser on his feet among them. Laszlo walks across the room and tells the band to play "La Marseillaise." The bandleader looks up toward the steps where Rick stands, and Rick, in close-up and silent, nods. The band plays and the room begins to sing. Yvonne, who came in that evening on a German officer's arm, stands and sings with tears on her face, and the room drowns the German song. Strasser tells Captain Renault, the prefect of police, to close the place. Renault has no grounds, thinks for a moment, blows his whistle, and finds some.

Strasser takes the singing as proof that Laszlo is dangerous. The café is shut, and Strasser warns Laszlo's wife, Ilsa, that life in

Casablanca is cheap. Rick, who told Renault he would "stick my neck out for nobody," has shown with a nod which side his café stands on, almost without words, and Ilsa's proud look at her husband as he sings, straight after Rick has sent him to ask her a question, makes the question heavier. A room of separate tables has become one crowd with the Germans alone in it, and Yvonne is on the other side from the officer she came in with. Rick's rule for his café was to stay out of politics, and the nod breaks it. Soon afterward he asks his waiter how long he can afford to stay closed, and the answer is two weeks, maybe three.

The scene to fear has a single job. It exists to deliver a fact, or because the outline says the two leads must meet, or because the location is beautiful. A manuscript of two hundred such scenes is two hundred rooms, and the reader tends to feel every seam between them. A reader seems to follow a scene through what it does to the people in it, so several jobs in one gesture send the reader on with several threads to carry, where one job sends one. The test is to take the job away and see whether anything is left standing.

One job, done cleanly, is sometimes exactly right. A breather after violence, a letter read aloud, or a short bridge between places can each do a single thing superbly, and the work breathes because they are plain. Overloading has its own cost, since when every scene is asked to carry everything, none can breathe and the reader sees the machinery working. If a scene's second purpose needs the characters to stop and explain it, it is exposition (Practice 66), and it must earn its place on those terms.

Practice. Choose a scene and write its primary function as one verb phrase: "forces the sisters to choose a lawyer," "convinces the jury the witness is lying." Then list any secondary functions

already present. Delete the primary function in your mind and ask whether the scene is still needed, and do the same with each secondary one. A scene with only one job leaves you two moves. Fold it into a neighbor that has room for it, or find in what is already on the page a second effect and sharpen it, without adding a speech to deliver it. Ten minutes will do for a scene, an hour for a chapter's worth.

Related practices: 41. Make the Situation Different by the End; 66. Make Exposition Change Something.

PRACTICE 44

Define Conflict as Incompatible Intention

Conflict is incompatible intention under constraint.

Writing that equates conflict with argument tends to produce people who accuse one another, and when the characters are polite, tender, or afraid, the scene goes slack. The opposite error applies conflict from outside, with characters made to disagree about nothing in particular because the outline calls for tension.

In the second act of *The Cherry Orchard*, in Julius West's translation, Lopakhin asks for an answer. The estate will be auctioned unless the orchard is leased for summer villas, and he has said so every day. "Just one word, yes or no?" Lubov Andreyevna looks in her purse and finds little money left; she drops it, and gold coins scatter across the floor. She complains about the restaurant where they lunched. Her brother Gaev drifts back to the billiard game he is playing in his head. Finally Lubov says, "Villas and villa residents—it's so vulgar, excuse me," and no one raises a voice until Lopakhin calls Gaev an old woman and starts to leave. Lubov begs him not to go.

Nobody shouts, and it is a fight. Lopakhin wants a decision from people he cares for. Lubov wants not to be asked, and also not to lose the man who is asking. Gaev wants to be elsewhere. None of them can simply leave or give in, because of the auction date, a debt, and an affection none of them can afford to risk, and that constraint is the third part of the definition. A want that meets no resistance is a plan and gives the reader nothing to predict, while

one want blocking another seems to set the reader forecasting what each will do and what it will cost. Without the constraint either person can leave, and the reader tends to sense that they could.

Ursula K. Le Guin's essay "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" makes the most serious objection. She argues that the story shaped like a spear, built around conflict and a hero, is the Hero's story rather than the only kind, and that the natural shape of the novel might instead be that of a sack or bag. She allows that conflict may be one relationship among the elements of a novel, but says "the reduction of narrative to conflict is absurd." The maxim governs scenes meant to turn something and makes a narrower claim than a theory of what fiction is for. A lyric essay, a quiet novel of accumulation, or a book of patient reporting can run on curiosity and tenderness.

Practice. Work for thirty minutes on a scene that argues but does not move. For each person in it, including anyone who only appears to listen, write one sentence of the form "X wants Y to ___," completing it with something Y could do now, not a feeling or a trait. Mark every pair of wants that can both be satisfied, and if any pair can, change one want or add a constraint: a deadline, a witness, a relationship neither can risk. Then rewrite the scene using only what each person would do to get what they want, and forbid anyone to state the want aloud. In nonfiction the same test works on an interview. What did the reporter want from the subject, what did the subject want from the reporter, and where did those wants fail to fit?

Related practices: 31. Give Desire Competition; 32. Apply Pressure Before Explaining Character; 62. Write the Unsaid Conversation.

PRACTICE 45

Let Coincidence Create Trouble

Coincidence may begin trouble; it should rarely solve it.

Readers tend to feel a fortunate rescue as cheating even when they can't say why. Our explanation, which is reasoning rather than a finding, is that a rescue by chance lifts the consequence out of the character's choices and hands it to the author.

Hardy shows the better use in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Days before her wedding, Tess pushes a letter under the door of Angel Clare's room, confessing what she has been unable to say aloud. In her haste she thrusts it beneath the edge of the carpet as well as the door. On the morning of the wedding she finds it still there, sealed, unread. Chance has done something, since Angel never saw the letter, but Hardy does not let chance finish the work. She destroys the letter, and the narrator notes that in her conscience she knows the misplaced letter need not have prevented a confession; there was still time. When she tries to speak on the landing, Angel brushes it aside, a second small human choice.

Readers will usually grant one stroke of luck to start things, because something has to start the story and life is full of accidents that do. Once the characters are in trouble, though, readers care how they get out, and chance that rescues them throws that away, while chance that worsens the trouble adds to it.

Dickens resolves *Oliver Twist* through coincidences that solve. The gentleman whose handkerchief Oliver is accused of stealing turns out to own a portrait that Oliver strikingly resembles, and the house Oliver is dragged to burgle shelters a young woman who

proves to be his mother's sister. Mr. Brownlow, explaining to Oliver's half-brother, says Oliver was "cast in my way by a stronger hand than chance." The novel converts coincidence into providence, and for readers inside that convention the pattern is the point. A modern reader may refuse it, and a writer who borrows it should do so knowingly.

Practice. Find, in half an hour, one fortunate solution in your draft: someone arrives in time, overhears, finds, remembers. Rewrite it so that it is produced by something the character did earlier, by a skill the reader has already seen, or by a price the character pays now. If you cannot, move the coincidence earlier, where it can cause trouble instead of ending it. Then compare the two versions for how much of the scene's tension survived. If the tension holds, the luck was not carrying the scene and can go; if it drains away, the scene was resting on the rescue and needs a stronger cause.

Related practices: 24. Build Causes, Not Just Calendars; 47. Make Turns Change the Field; 76. Resist False Neatness.

PRACTICE 46

Escalate the Cost, Not Only the Noise

Escalation increases cost, uncertainty, complexity, or irreversibility.

Most of us hear escalation as volume. Chases get faster, explosions bigger, accusations louder, and the reader's attention tends to do the opposite of what the writer hopes, because size and stakes are different things. Louder events tend to teach the reader that the book will keep getting louder, so each new peak must be taller than the last. Escalation can also be misread as repetition, a third version of the same difficulty with the character failing slightly harder.

George Orwell's narrator in "Shooting an Elephant," a police officer in Burma, is summoned to deal with an elephant that has been ravaging a bazaar. He takes a rifle too small to kill it, thinking the noise might be useful. By the time he finds the animal it is eating peacefully in a paddy field and, he judges, no longer dangerous, and he has no intention of shooting it. Behind him a crowd has been following, two thousand at the least and growing, and he realizes he can feel their two thousand wills pressing him forward. If he turns back he will be a white man laughed at. The elephant has stopped being dangerous while the price of declining has gone up. Then the road behind him closes, because the first shot does not kill the elephant, and the animal takes a long time to die.

Orwell escalates cost, what the character stands to lose. Macbeth escalates irreversibility, how much of the road behind has closed. After Banquo's murder he decides to go back to the witches, saying he is "in blood / Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er." The play gets him there step by step. The first murder is preceded by long deliberation. For Banquo's he keeps his wife ignorant of the details. By the time he learns that Macduff has fled to England, he resolves that "the very firstlings of my heart shall be / The firstlings of my hand," and orders the killing of Macduff's wife and children. His hesitation shrinks with each act while the cost to others grows.

Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" escalates uncertainty, how little anyone can predict, by narrowing it. The opening has the children assembling and a pile of stones in the corner of the square. The drawing proceeds by family, then by household, then by member, so that the circle of risk tightens until it closes on one person. No stage is louder than the last, and each is calmer in procedure and narrower in hope than the one before. Complexity, how many things must be managed at once, needs no canonical case. A character keeping two lies straight has more to manage with each scene.

Cost comes first here because readers tend to weigh events by what they cost the people in them. However loud the room, a character with nothing yet at risk is not in danger. A character with a particular thing at risk, who has just been shown how little room is left to protect it, makes every small decision enormous.

A work does not have to climb, though. A story that raises the stakes in every scene can numb the reader, who cannot judge a new high against so many. Plateaus and reversals let the reader recover scale, and a deliberate drop is itself information (Practice

49). Some works descend, circle, or hold, and for a quiet book the right escalation may be one choice per chapter that closes off one more way back.

Practice. Spend thirty minutes on the next significant choice your character must make, and name it. List three things the character values. Rewrite the choice so that making it, or refusing it, would cost one of those three, at a price the character can see and name, and draft the scene at three different prices. Compare what the character does when the price is high enough to hurt. Then ask, of the version you keep, whether anything has become harder to undo.

Related practices: 32. Apply Pressure Before Explaining Character; 44. Define Conflict as Incompatible Intention; 47. Make Turns Change the Field.

PRACTICE 47

Make Turns Change the Field

A true turn changes a goal, a fact, a relationship, a balance of power, or the field of possibility.

Practice. After each major turn in your draft, write one sentence in this form: before this, ___ could happen; after this, ___ can no longer happen, and ___ now can. If you cannot complete it, you have an event, and the scene's work is not yet done. Then check that the next scene behaves as if the sentence were true. Often the turn itself is already strong enough, and the fix is a following scene that finally notices it. Twenty minutes covers a chapter.

In *Oedipus the King*, in Francis Storr's translation, a messenger arrives from Corinth with good news. Polybus, whom Oedipus believes to be his father, has died of old age, so the oracle that said Oedipus would kill his father cannot be fulfilled, and Oedipus calls the oracles "dust, ashes, nothing." One fear remains, his mother. The messenger, eager to help, asks what troubles him and then tells him his fears are baseless. "How baseless," Oedipus answers, "if I am their very son?" Polybus, the messenger says, was no kin to him by blood. A few lines on, Oedipus is asking whether he was a foundling.

Aristotle uses this event in the *Poetics* as his example of reversal, since the messenger comes to cheer Oedipus and, by revealing who Oedipus is, produces the opposite effect. A fact changed, because Polybus was not the father, but the larger change is to what can still happen. Before the messenger, the play is about whether Oedipus has done what the oracle foretold. After him that

can no longer be the question; the question is who Oedipus is, and the play can end only in an answer.

Some turns surprise and change nothing. The twist arrives, the reader gasps or shrugs, and the next scene proceeds as if it had not, and a reveal that leaves every option where it was is information, a different kind of thing. Readers seem to follow a story by forecasting what can still happen, so a changed goal, fact, relationship, or balance of power is a turn only to the degree that it changes what characters, or readers, can expect next. Other turns are gradual, and some works have no single hinge. In a story built by accumulation a change can be complete before anyone names it, and a scene that announced a turning point might falsify it.

Related practices: 30. Make Each Part Affect Another; 41. Make the Situation Different by the End; 46. Escalate the Cost, Not Only the Noise.

PRACTICE 48

Connect Promises to Payoffs

Setup creates expectation; payoff rewards, complicates, or overturns it.

A letter from Chekhov of 1 November 1889 to Aleksandr Lazarev (who wrote under the pen name Gruzinsky) is cited as saying that one must not put a loaded rifle on the stage if no one is thinking of firing it. Reminiscences by Ilya Gurlyand, published in 1904, and by Sergei Shchukin, published in 1911, give the idea in different words, with the gun hanging on the wall in the first act. None of the versions is as tidy as the legend. Under all of them sits the idea that you should avoid promises you do not mean to keep, whatever object carries them.

The rule can harden into a mechanism, and Hemingway, in a lecture-preface unpublished in his lifetime, mocks it. He calls untrue the idea, which he attributes to what students are taught, that a gun hanging on the wall at the start must be fired by a certain page; the chances are, he says, that it will not even shoot, and it may be there because someone liked to look at it. That is a joke by a writer who prized omission, and it deserves a serious answer. A detail that pays nothing is not a fault in itself, since texture seems to keep a world from feeling like a mechanism. The fault is a detail given the weight of a promise, held, lit, handled, and then dropped.

In the second act of *The Seagull* (Marian Fell's translation), Konstantin Treplev walks onstage with a gun and a dead gull and lays the bird at Nina's feet. "So shall I soon end my own life," he says. The play turns to other matters. At the end of the fourth act a

shot is heard from the next room while the company sits down to lotto. Dr. Dorn goes to look, returns, and says a flask of ether has exploded. A moment later he draws Trigorin aside and whispers the truth, that Treplev has shot himself. The payoff arrives as sound, is explained away, and is then confirmed.

A promise that nothing pays leaves the reader with loose threads, and a payoff nothing promised feels like a trick. A reader probably keeps open every question a work raises without deciding to, so a dropped one registers as a gap and an unplanted payoff as an arbitrary event.

A promise is anything the work introduces that creates an expectation, from an object or a threat to a convention of genre, a title, or a memoir's implied "I will tell you how I came to this." The payoff is the work's answer. It may reward, giving the reader what was expected, or complicate, giving it with a cost or a twist, or overturn, giving the opposite and making the reader reread the promise.

Three Sisters (Julius West's translation) overturns. The sisters' longing for Moscow is spoken in the first act, and by the third Irina is begging to be taken there. They never go. The play ends with Olga's cry, "If only we could know," and the three of them resolving to live and work without knowing why. The promise is paid by non-payment, and what it complicates is the audience's sense of what the promise was for.

In "Silver Blaze" Arthur Conan Doyle hides a setup in plain view. The curious incident of the dog in the night-time is introduced as an aside, and Holmes later explains that the visitor must have been someone the dog knew. The reader was given the clue in the open and not told what it was for.

A planner keeps a ledger of promises as the book grows. J. K. Rowling's hand-drawn chart for *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, from 2001 and shown at the British Library in 2017, lists day, month, plot, and prophecy among its headings, which puts the calendar and the plot in one grid, the form the ledger below takes. A discovery writer can build the same ledger after the draft, from the page as it stands. Either way a setup and its payoff can sit chapters apart, and a row puts them side by side. (Chapter 5 treats such links across a whole Work.)

Practice. Make a ledger with four columns: what is introduced and where; what expectation it creates; where it pays, or why it deliberately does not; and what the payoff does, rewarding, complicating, or overturning. Work through a chapter, or twenty scenes. A finished row should read like Treplev's: dead gull in act two, shot in the next room in act four. Mark every promise nobody keeps and every payoff nobody set up, and for each, decide whether to cut it, pay it, or move it. An hour is enough for a first pass.

Related practices: 22. Treat the Outline as a Hypothesis; 28. Outline What You Actually Wrote; 50. Resolve the Governing Movement.

PRACTICE 49

Pace Anticipation, Event, and Reflection

Pacing is the management of anticipation, event, and reflection.

Book 22 of the *Iliad*, in Samuel Butler's prose translation as Project Gutenberg prints it, runs about 5,400 words. Roughly 2,800 come before Achilles throws the first spear, about 600 cover the fight through Hector's fall, and roughly 2,050 follow. The Greek, 515 lines, splits the same way: 272 lines before the first throw, 58 for the fight, 185 after. (Counted by whitespace, dividing at the first throw and at the fall. Where to draw those lines is a judgment; the chase counts here as waiting.)

The waiting is Hector's, alone outside the gates of Troy while Achilles crosses the plain toward him. His father begs him from the wall to come in; his mother bares her breast. Hector stays and argues with himself that he could lay down his shield and offer Helen and half the city's treasure, then stops himself: "why argue with myself in this way?" Achilles would kill him "as easily as though I were a woman." Hector runs, and they circle the city while the gods deliberate and Athena, in the shape of his brother Deiphobus, talks him into standing. The length seems meant to make the reader dread the event, through parents, argument, and a chase in which, as Butler renders it, "the one cannot escape nor the other overtake." The fatal stroke fits in one sentence: the point goes through the neck but "did not sever his windpipe so that he could still speak." He says his last words and dies. Achilles drags

the body behind his chariot, and the book turns to the people who were not there, Priam grovelling in the mire, Hecuba, and Andromache, who is at her loom with a bath heating for Hector until the crying from the wall reaches her. Her lament, the last, runs past the death to what it will do to her son at other people's tables.

Anticipation is pressure not yet released, a character preparing, a threat approaching, a question held open. Event is the release. Reflection is meaning absorbed, whether as aftermath, as interpretation, or as a character or narrator working out what happened. Pacing is the order and weight of the three. As we reason it, anticipation raises the value of an event and reflection lets it register, so a release nobody was waiting for tends to pass quickly and a result with no room after it tends not to land. A book of constant action grows monotonous, because the reader cannot feel an event as an event without waiting for it or absorbing it. A book of reflection without pressure goes inert, since thought has nothing to push against.

The Hector count is one poem's ratio, and what carries over to other pages is the choice. Thrillers often compress reflection, and for them the compression is part of the form. Drama and screenwriting usually give characters less room to reflect aloud, though a soliloquy can be exactly that room, so reflection there is more often performed in a silence, a held look, a person who sits down. Reporting hands the writer events in the order they happened, and what is left to decide is how long to make the approach, how little to say of the event, and how much room to give what it did to people who were not there. In memoir the pull is often toward reflecting too soon, narrating the lesson before the reader has felt the event.

Practice. In forty minutes, take a chapter or a run of twenty scenes. Label each unit in the margin: A for anticipation, E for event, R for aftermath or reflection, T for transition, a short bridge between units. Chart the sequence and look for runs: five events with no aftermath, three aftermaths in a row with nothing about to happen, an event that arrives with no anticipation at all. Change one run by cutting, adding, or reordering, and read the result aloud. If the pace feels different, you have found a lever.

Related practices: 42. Enter at the Pressure Point; 65. Dramatize the Necessary Experience.

PRACTICE 50

Resolve the Governing Movement

An ending should resolve the work's central movement, even when it leaves questions open.

Practice. Write two sentences, taking fifteen minutes. The first: "This ending completes ___." Fill the blank with a movement, a question or pressure, not an event. The second: "It deliberately leaves alive ___." Name something a reader could still wonder about, and ask whether that question belongs to the book's movement or is a dropped one. Then give the ending, without your sentences, to one trusted reader and ask what they feel is still unresolved. If what they name is what you wrote in the first blank, the ending has not completed it, and it needs revision.

In the last scene of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), the narrator has locked the door of the rented nursery where her physician husband, John, has confined her for her health, and thrown the key into the front path. She has been forbidden to "work," and told that what she feels is a draught. Now John pounds on the door and calls for an axe. She tells him, "in the gentlest voice," where the key is, and he fetches it and comes in to find her creeping along the wall. "I've got out at last," she tells him, and "you can't put me back!" He faints across her path, "so that I had to creep over him every time!"

The story does not say whether John recovers, what the household will do, or what becomes of her, and readers rarely feel cheated by that. All through it others have decided what is wrong with her

and what she may say, and she has answered only in a hidden journal. At the end she answers to his face, and he is something she steps over. Her perception, pressing against the authority that denied it, finally breaks through, and that pressure was what the story was about. A reader probably follows a work's governing movement, the question, desire, or pressure that makes it cohere, rather than the full inventory of its questions, and checks the ending against that.

Some works owe a fuller answer. A traditional mystery is expected to say who, and a courtship comedy usually closes on the match because that is what it asked, so what the work promised sets the test (Practice 48). Serial, ongoing, or unfinished work may end on a pause rather than a conclusion, as long as the pause is chosen.

Related practices: 5. Finish Enough to Learn From Endings; 48. Connect Promises to Payoffs; 91. Finish According to Purpose.

Part 6 — Language, voice, and style

Readers never meet your outline. They meet sentences, one at a time, in an order they did not choose, and whatever the Work has to say it must say through them. Structure, character, research and purpose all arrive as grammar.

Sentence-level craft is also the easiest part of writing to turn into rules, and the rules are everywhere: prefer the active voice, distrust adverbs, show instead of telling. Most of them are partly true, and writers you admire have broken most of them to good effect. This part adds none. Each practice takes a habit of language as a decision with a mechanism and a cost, and sends you to real sentences to see what the decision does.

Some of those sentences are from public-domain works by Austen, Dickens, Darwin, Crane, Shakespeare, Dickinson, Woolf and Hemingway, among others, quoted briefly and read closely. Some belong to living or recent writers on craft, whom we name and mostly paraphrase, with a few short quotations. The rest we invented to isolate one effect, and each of those is labeled "Sample" so nobody mistakes it for a quotation. Where we describe what a writer did, we trace it to a published source; where we could not, we left it out.

The practices build from the single word to the places where ambition goes wrong, but you can enter by problem. Overwritten pages call for 51 and 60 first. Pages that are correct and strangely lifeless call for 57 and 55, and pages where readers lost the thread,

for 53 and 58. If you cannot hear anything distinctive in your own prose, or you hear one distinctive thing too often, begin with 54. If a sentence you love will not sit still on the page, 56 and 60 will tell you why.

This book elsewhere argues that revision should proceed from large scale to small and that you should not polish a passage whose function is unsettled (Practices 82 and 83). Sentence-level attention is not only a finishing task, though. Many writers find a scene by finding its sentences, and Joan Didion's account of how she writes, discussed in Practice 55, puts the sentence at the start of thinking rather than the end. Use these practices as diagnosis on a finished page or a half-finished one.

Plain language is not more honest than ornate language, and ornate is not richer than plain. The opening paragraph of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, which Practice 54 takes apart, is plain in vocabulary and built from long chains of coordinated clauses. Woolf's paragraphs in *Mrs. Dalloway* are lavish and also exact. The question to put to any sentence is the one Practice 60 turns on: what is this sentence for?

The exercises take ten to thirty minutes on your own pages and each leaves something you can see, marks in a margin, a list, or two versions side by side. Keep a copy of the page before you change it; Practice 89 explains why.

PRACTICE 51

Choose the Word That Knows What It Means

Prefer the exact word to the impressive word.

Few writers mean to be vague. They get there one defensible word at a time. “Significant” is safer than naming the size. “Issue,” “aspect,” “factor” and “situation” can stand for almost anything, which is why they tend to turn up when the writer is not sure what.

In 1946, in “Politics and the English Language,” George Orwell ran the slide on purpose. He took a verse from Ecclesiastes, which says that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, but that time and chance happen to them all, and translated it into the English of an official report: objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities shows no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity. The race, the battle and the bread had dissolved into “competitive activities,” and the reader had nothing left to picture.

To test an impressive word, see whether a plainer one could replace it with no loss of information. Sometimes the exact word is the long one: a memoir about a stroke may need “ischemic,” because it is what the doctor said and what the writer had to learn to pronounce. Our explanation is that a reader builds the scene or the claim from the words supplied and fills any gap with a default, the most average version available, so a room described as “nice” is furnished from the reader’s own idea of nice.

A word exact for a specialist can still be opaque to the general reader and need a gloss or a substitute. In a first draft a vague word is often an honest placeholder (Practice 27 argues for them), and a character who gropes for a word is being exact about groping.

Practice. Take a page of your own, around three hundred words. Find five words you could not point at or draw: “thing,” “aspect,” “impact,” “interesting,” “utilize,” whatever your own habit supplies. For each, write one plain sentence saying what you actually meant, then find the word that names it. Replace the original only if the sentence now claims something that could be wrong. If one of the five turns out to cover a claim you would rather not commit to, that is the finding; decide whether to make the claim or cut the sentence, all inside twenty minutes. As a rough guide of ours, replacing four of the five suggests the page was mostly hedging, and replacing none suggests it already committed to its claims.

Related practices: 12. Trade Generality for Particularity; 52. Put Weight on Nouns and Verbs; 58. Give Abstraction a Body; 60. Remove Competitive Flourishes.

PRACTICE 52

Put Weight on Nouns and Verbs

Let strong nouns and verbs carry the sentence, then add texture deliberately.

"None of them knew the colour of the sky." Stephen Crane opens "The Open Boat" (1897) with a sentence about something four men are not looking at, and the next one tells us where they are looking: "Their eyes glanced level, and were fastened upon the waves that swept toward them." The paragraph never says the men are afraid. It gives us a sky nobody checks, eyes that are fastened, waves that sweep, and a horizon that, a few lines on, "narrowed and widened, and dipped and rose." The nouns are the plainest available, sky, eyes, waves, horizon, rocks, and whatever frightens is in the verbs.

Drafts often lean on modifiers instead.

> Sample (invented): The enormous waves moved very quickly toward the extremely frightened men.

"Moved very quickly" is "raced" in installments. "Enormous" gives a size without a measure. "Extremely frightened" asserts the very feeling the sentence ought to produce, and a reader told to be frightened may simply not be.

A reader seems to picture the subject, verb and object first and let modifiers adjust the picture afterward. When the verb is "was," "made" or "took place," or the action is buried in a noun ("made an attempt to" for "tried," "gave consideration to" for "considered"), the sentence has no event to show, and the writer makes up for it

with adjectives and adverbs. Joseph Williams and Joseph Bizup, in *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, give two principles of clarity that point the same way: make main characters the subjects of sentences, and make important actions verbs.

> Sample (invented): There was a tendency for the committee to make the decision in favor of delay.

The committee did the deciding and is hiding in a prepositional phrase, and the decision has become a noun.

"Then add texture deliberately" is not an instruction to delete modifiers. Even William Strunk's 1918 rule, "Omit needless words," says a sentence should contain no unnecessary words, as a drawing should have no unnecessary lines, and then, in the same paragraph, that this does not require all sentences to be short or details avoided, "but that every word tell."

Dickens keeps his adjectives in the opening of *Bleak House*: "Implacable November weather," and smoke that comes down "making a soft black drizzle." Strip them and you have a weather report. The word "implacable" passes judgment on the weather as a thing that will not be moved, which no noun or verb in the paragraph could do. We take it to point ahead to the lawsuit the novel is about, which will not be moved either, though Dickens does not draw that link himself. "Soft black" holds a contradiction in two words, and the drizzle carries "flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes," snow's shape in the opposite color.

Practice. Copy one paragraph of your own, about a hundred and fifty words, from any kind of writing. Underline every verb. Circle each "to be," "make," "have," "get" and "take," and each noun that is really an action in disguise. For each circled word, ask who or

what is doing something, and rewrite with the strongest verb that names it. Then go to the nouns: where you wrote “things,” “people,” “area” or “stuff,” put the particular noun. Only now reinstate modifiers, one at a time, keeping a modifier only if you can say what fact or judgment it adds. Compare the two versions aloud (Practice 57). Don’t count adjectives at the end; ask of each survivor whether it is doing work. Twenty-five minutes.

Related practices: 51. Choose the Word That Knows What It Means; 56. Let Syntax Think; 57. Use the Mouth as an Editing Tool; 60. Remove Competitive Flourishes.

PRACTICE 53

Make Complexity Followable

Clarity does not simplify thought; it makes complexity followable.

A writer can get worse at clarity by believing it is a polite word for simplicity, so that a clear writer must say less, or by believing the mirror image, that real thought is hard and difficulty on the page is evidence of depth. Both beliefs treat clarity as a property of the ideas. We would place it in the relations between them.

> Sample (invented): Notwithstanding antecedent procedural irregularities, the sustained diminution of institutional legitimacy is attributable principally to perceived arbitrariness in the application of remedial measures.
>
> Sample (invented): People stopped trusting the court because it applied its remedies differently to similar cases, and they had already watched it break its own procedures.

The second sample is about as complex as the first and keeps both ideas, the broken procedures and the uneven remedies. It adds who did what and which thing caused which, through "because," "and," "already." Words that carry relations, such as *because, although, so, unless, which means*, are small and easy to cut without noticing, and without them the reader has to infer a structure the writer never wrote down.

Length is no bar. Darwin wrote a sentence of sixty-six words that, in our judgment, an attentive reader can follow in one pass at ordinary speed; the last paragraph of *On the Origin of Species* (1859)

begins with it, by our count. It asks the reader to contemplate "an entangled bank," and by its end to reflect "that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us." The sentence has one governing idea, that it is interesting to contemplate this and to reflect on that. The long middle is a list of parallel "with" phrases, each an image you can see, plants of many kinds, birds singing on the bushes, insects flitting about, worms crawling through damp earth, and on our reading the reader holds the pattern rather than the contents. The thought that demands the most, that unlike things are produced by one set of laws, comes after those images and just before the full stop. In Williams and Bizup's general form of the point, readers prefer to begin sentences with what they already know and to end them with what is new and complex.

A mystery keeps the culprit back, a lyric essay leaps between images and trusts the reader to build the bridge, and a research article may use a hard term of art because its readers came for the term. Followable is relative to the reader the Work has promised (Practice 16), and some difficulty is the point (Practice 95). What you can't defend is accidental difficulty, where the reader cannot tell whether a gap is a design or a slip. If you leave out a connection, leave it out where the reader can tell you meant to.

Practice. Take one page of exposition or argument of your own. Between every pair of consecutive sentences, write in the margin the relation you could state: *and* (adds), *but* (contrasts), *so* (consequence), *because* (reason), *for example*, *which means*, *then* (time). Where you cannot name one, write a question mark. Count the question marks. Each is a place where the reader must work alone, and each has one of two causes, a connective you forgot to write or a step you forgot to think. Supply the connective or the

step. For a scene of fiction, run the same test with *then*, *so*, *but* and *meanwhile*. Fifteen minutes.

Related practices: 16. Define the Reader's Change; 56. Let Syntax Think; 58. Give Abstraction a Body; 95. Preserve Difficulty, Remove Needless Confusion.

PRACTICE 54

Recognize Style as Repetition

Style is the pattern formed by repeated choices.

Practice. Take three finished pages of your own, roughly eight hundred words, and look for recurring choices in six places: how sentences begin; whether you join clauses with “and” and “but” or subordinate them; the range of sentence lengths across twenty consecutive sentences (count the words); what kind of detail you reach for first, whether sight, sound, number, institution or gesture; how paragraphs end, by statement, image, turn or question; and which words come back. Choose five patterns. Beside each, write whether it is a choice, a habit or an accident, without judging yet. Then mark which you would keep as the Work’s grammar and which you would interrupt on purpose. After thirty minutes you will know how much of your style you chose and how much arrived on its own.

Ernest Hemingway is remembered for short sentences, but the first paragraph of *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) has four, and by our count they run 26, 30, 20 and 50 words. The paragraph is 126 words long, and fifteen of them are “and.” In “Troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powdered the leaves of the trees,” events that another writer would rank by importance are laid side by side at equal weight. “Leaves” appears four times, “the road” three, “the trees” twice, as though the paragraph were reluctant to leave the objects it has named. The last sentence ends on a subtraction: “afterward the road bare and white except for the leaves.”

The reason seems to be learning. A reader tends to pick up a pattern within a paragraph or two and begin to read by it, so after the fourth "and" the reader may expect equal weight, and a sentence that finally subordinates registers as an event. Hemingway's "and" is a style because the paragraph could have been written otherwise and wasn't. A writer who never examines a real pattern may watch it harden into a tic, the sentence that begins with a participle every time, the paragraph that always ends on a one-line turn. It has become a tic once it stops being a choice, which you can test by trying to break it on purpose.

No single method of finding a style is correct. A discovery writer may find hers by drafting and then counting; a planner may choose a pattern for a Work in advance and hold to it. A writer may also shift pattern between Works, because a pattern that suits a retreating army may be wrong for a love scene.

Related practices: 55. Find Voice in Attention; 56. Let Syntax Think; 57. Use the Mouth as an Editing Tool; 82. Revise From the Outside In.

PRACTICE 55

Find Voice in Attention

Voice comes from recurring habits of attention, judgment, rhythm, and omission.

In January 1909 *The Independent* printed Sui Sin Far's "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian." Sui Sin Far was the pen name of Edith Maude Eaton, daughter of an English father and a Chinese mother, and the essay is a chain of scenes, almost all in the present tense. At about four she walks ahead of her nurse in an English lane, hears the nurse tell another woman that her mother is Chinese, and watches the woman turn and scan her "curiously from head to foot." At six, at a children's party, a white-haired old man adjusts his eyeglasses and pronounces her a "Very interesting little creature!" Then: "I had been called from play for the purpose of inspection. I do not return to it."

Scene after scene records what is said about her within her hearing, and the looking that goes with it. People scan, survey, and "gaze upon" her family as upon "strange animals in a menagerie." The pattern also shows in how things are weighed. Her father, who "deems it wisest to be blind and deaf to many things," gets one dry clause. At a dinner table where her employer, the town clerk and her landlady discuss whether the Chinese are human, she lets their words stand uncommented and passes judgment on herself: "A miserable, cowardly feeling keeps me silent." It shows, too, in what is left out. The scene on the West Indian island ends on the naval officer's last offensive line, and she adds nothing. The tone varies, comic over an engagement ring and

grave over a child's "Why?", while the narrator throughout notices being noticed and leaves the verdict to the reader.

It is tempting to treat voice as tone, a manner chosen in advance and laid over content: wry, lyrical, confiding, brisk. A writer who sets out to sound like themselves can produce mannerism, because "themselves" on the page is already an arrangement, not an object to be found. The opposite habit flattens the voice on purpose, in the name of seeming professional, and leaves prose from which no consciousness can be inferred.

On our account, a reader infers a mind from the pattern of what a text selects, and voice is the name for that inference, drawn from what is noticed, how it is weighed, how the sentences move, and what is left out. So every form has a voice. An essay has one, and so does a research report, whose restraint is itself a stance.

Joan Didion's "Why I Write" (1976) describes voice from the inside. She says she writes to find out what she is thinking, what she is looking at and what it means, and that each of her novels began with pictures in her mind, as Practice 14 describes. She also says that changing the structure of a sentence alters its meaning as definitely as moving a camera alters what is photographed, and that the picture dictates whether a sentence is long or short, ends hard or falls away. Her own grammar, she says, is something she plays by ear, which she offers as a report of her own habits.

We would expect readers to trust consistency of attention. If a narrator notices what a surveyor would notice and then, for no reason, what a mourner would notice, the reader loses the instrument they were reading by.

The habits that make a voice may be the ones you stop noticing in your own pages, so a reader may hear yours before you do. You

may learn more by borrowing another writer's manner, or by writing as a narrator who notices differently than you do (Practice 39). Some Works want little voice at all, such as a manual or a report in house style, where the writer's attention should stay out of the reader's way.

Some tools now offer to rewrite a paragraph "in your voice" or to smooth it. Treat a suggestion from one as you would a suggestion from an editor or a friend, as material for your judgment, and if you accept changes, accept them sentence by sentence and be able to say why. Smoothing may remove the habits that made a page recognizable, and only you can say whether a given habit is a flaw or the voice.

Practice. Describe the same room twice, about a hundred and fifty words each, through two different systems of attention. Choose a room you know well. In the first version, someone is pricing the contents for a sale. In the second, someone is deciding whether it is safe to leave a small child there. Ban emotion words and any statement of what the observer wants; the system has to show in what is selected and how the sentences move. Then list the nouns in each version and count how many they share. Ask which version resembles your habitual attention, and what in your own pages looks like neither. Thirty minutes.

Related practices: 10. Notice What the World Has Stopped Seeing; 39. Remember That Narrators Select; 54. Recognize Style as Repetition; 56. Let Syntax Think.

PRACTICE 56

Let Syntax Think

Sentence length and syntax regulate energy, emphasis, and thought.

On a working rule of ours, the end of a sentence receives the most stress and the beginning the next most, so what you put in the middle is quietly subordinated. What a writer subordinates and what she coordinates tells the reader what she thinks matters. Length is only the visible part.

> Sample (invented): Though she knew it would cost her the job, she stayed.
>
> Sample (invented): She stayed, knowing it would cost her the job, knowing too that there would be no other afternoon in which the choice was still hers.
>
> Sample (invented): She stayed. It would cost her the job. She knew that. She stayed.

In the first, the cost comes before the decision and is overridden, and it is a story of resolve. In the second the decision comes first and the awareness trails after it, widening into something larger than the job. The third has no deliberation at all, only a bare act repeated. None of the three is correct, since each says what the writer thinks the choice is.

In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny Price has refused a proposal and been scolded for it, and when the dinner is finally over Austen gives her evening in one sentence. In the text as Project Gutenberg prints it,

the evening "set in with more composure to Fanny" than she could have hoped, and then the sentence turns to what Fanny tells herself: she trusted, "in the first place," that she had done right, and was willing to hope, "secondly," that her uncle's displeasure was abating, and would abate farther as he considered the matter "with more impartiality," and felt, "as a good man must feel, how wretched, and how unpardonable, how hopeless, and how wicked it was to marry without affection." (Editions differ in punctuation; the words are the same.) "In the first place" and "secondly" are a nervous mind arranging its comforts as an argument, as if enumeration made them true. The sentence is long because the reassurance is long. Its weight falls on the last clause, which also goes on a little too long, four adjectives in a pair of pairs, and in that overrun we hear Fanny hoping her uncle will feel what she needs him to feel. Ursula K. Le Guin discusses the passage in *Steering the Craft*, observing that the length of the sentence gives weight to its last clause while the rhythmic repetitions keep it from being heavy.

Sentences also go wrong by sameness, all arriving in one shape, subject, verb, object, trailing phrase, until the reader hears a metronome, or by a reflex of length, all short or all long. Le Guin is blunt about it: no sentence length is best, and what serves is variety. Prose of only short, simple sentences, she says, gives a false simplicity; long sentences require clear connections or they sag. Verlyn Klinkenborg, in *Several Short Sentences About Writing*, argues that strong long sentences are really strong short sentences joined in various ways, and that long ones tend to collapse, the end of a long sentence commonly forgetting its beginning. Which of them is right depends on you. If your long sentences forget themselves, Klinkenborg's discipline is a cure; if your short ones thump, take Le Guin's variety.

Practice. Pick a sentence of your own that carries a decision, a reversal or a feeling. Write it three ways: main clause first with trailing qualification; main clause delayed to the end; three or more short sentences. Read each aloud and mark where the stress lands, since it will fall on the last words. For each, write one line saying what it treats as important and what it subordinates. Choose one, or build a hybrid, and say why. Fifteen minutes.

Related practices: 49. Pace Anticipation, Event, and Reflection; 53. Make Complexity Followable; 54. Recognize Style as Repetition; 57. Use the Mouth as an Editing Tool.

PRACTICE 57

Use the Mouth as an Editing Tool

Read prose aloud; the ear detects false emphasis, monotony, and strain.

Practice 56 reads Austen's sentence for its length. Say aloud "how wretched, and how unpardonable, how hopeless, and how wicked it was to marry without affection" and the adjectives come in two pairs. We hear the mouth fall into a rocking rhythm that the eye passes over, with the heaviest word, "wicked," just before the quiet run-out of "it was to marry without affection." You can check that in your own mouth.

A woman has a paragraph about her mother's funeral that has looked fine on the screen for a week (a composite case, not a particular writer). She reads it aloud for the first time and runs out of breath in the third sentence. She hears herself say "in terms of" four times. And she laughs at a line she meant to be solemn, because two words that rhyme have ended it. The page had been read many times and never heard.

Our explanation is that the eye is a generous reader. It takes in words at a glance, completes what it half-sees and forgives what it expected, so reading your own work silently, you read what you meant. The mouth has to say every word, in order, at a pace, and it has to breathe. A sentence that cannot be said in one breath without strain shows itself in the saying, and so does a stress that lands on a throwaway word, a cadence repeated three times until

it becomes a drone, or a stack of abstract nouns that no one could speak without sounding like a form letter.

None of this means writing the way you talk. Le Guin, in *Steering the Craft*, takes pains to deny that short-sentence prose is "more like the way we speak"; people, she notes, often speak in longer, more articulated sentences than they write. Her claim is that an awareness of what your writing sounds like is an essential skill, because readers, even silent ones, carry what she calls a mind's ear, and the faults we call dull, choppy, droning or jerky are faults of sound. Robert Pinsky, in *The Sounds of Poetry* (1998), calls poetry "a vocal, which is to say a bodily, art," whose medium is the human body, the breath shaped into sounds in the larynx and the mouth. If that is the medium, a line you cannot say without strain has a flaw in its material, and saying it aloud is how you find the flaw. Mary Oliver, in *A Poetry Handbook*, likewise treats sound as one of the things a poem is made of, so a stumble in the mouth tells you something about the poem's construction. Carrying the step over to prose is ours; prose is less regular in its sound and not exempt from it.

In *Rules for the Dance* Oliver also observes that one reader may hear a stretch of verse as an iamb where another legitimately hears a spondee, because scansion has rules but also elasticity, "a willingness to coexist with a reasonable amount of individuality." Reading aloud is not a hunt for the one true performance. It tells you whether the stress falls where you meant, and if a sentence can be read two ways, whether you meant both.

In particular cases there are good reasons to doubt the method. Some prose is built for the eye, such as a legal clause, a technical procedure, a passage that depends on layout, lists or citations, and a sentence that is hard to say may still be right on the page. Not

every writer can or wants to speak their drafts aloud. Those who prefer not to can have a person or a screen reader or a text-to-speech voice read the page back. A synthetic voice tends to mispronounce names and invented words and to put its own stress on things, so it is probably better at exposing breath and monotony than emphasis.

Whoever reads, the aim is to hear the page at a distance from your own intention. Your own voice works against that, because it performs what you meant, and that is why the exercise has a delay in it.

Practice. Choose one page, around three hundred words. Record yourself reading it aloud at ordinary pace, without stopping to correct. Wait at least an hour, or overnight if you can. Then play it back with the page in front of you and a pencil. Make a slash where you stumbled or breathed in the wrong place; a circle where the stress fell on a word that did not deserve it; a wavy line under any stretch where the delivery went flat for three or more sentences; an X where a repeated sound or accidental rhyme made you wince. Do not edit while marking. When the playback ends, look at where the marks cluster and change no more than five things, the ones that bother you most. The whole exercise takes thirty minutes, including the wait if you work in two sittings. The kind of mark you made most tells you whether the page's trouble is breath, stress or monotony.

Related practices: 56. Let Syntax Think; 60. Remove Competitive Flourishes; 67. Write for the Medium; 68. Hear Meaning Before Explaining It.

PRACTICE 58

Give Abstraction a Body

Concrete detail gives abstraction somewhere to stand.

Some prose stacks its nouns from the upper floors, “resilience,” “systemic inequity,” “narrative tension,” “engagement,” with nothing at ground level. Argument, theory and analysis need abstraction, and so do poems about time, and the answer is not sensory adjectives or more description. Each abstraction needs somewhere to stand, such as a case, an object, a number or an act that someone could see happen, so the reader can check the claim against something.

In the second chapter of *Hard Times*, Mr. Gradgrind asks a pupil he calls “girl number twenty” to define a horse. She is Sissy Jupe, whose father “belongs to the horse-riding,” and she knows horses intimately, but the demand throws her “into the greatest alarm.” So Gradgrind turns to a boy, Bitzer, who answers in one breath: “Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth,” and on through shedding and shoeing. The definition is accurate, and nothing in it lets a reader see, hear or smell a horse. Dickens is satirizing a theory of education and gives no advice to essayists, but Bitzer has abstraction without a body and Sissy has the animal with no handle to lift it by. Writing that explains needs both, and in our reading much of it errs on Bitzer’s side.

A reader seems to connect an abstract claim to their own memory only when the writer offers something to connect to. An instance also tests the claim. If you cannot find a single concrete case of what you are asserting, the assertion may be empty, and if the

case you find contradicts it, you have learned something before a reader has.

Concreteness can bury an argument too. An essay with an anecdote under every point begins to read as a string of anecdotes, and a vivid case can mislead, since its force comes from its vividness, which says nothing about whether it is typical. For claims about frequency or cause, a case illustrates and does not prove, which is a problem for the research chapters (Practice 72). Choose the instance that is representative, not merely striking, and say what it is an instance of.

Practice. Take a chapter or essay of your own, up to two thousand words. List its major abstractions, the words you would put in a summary: freedom, grief, efficiency, risk. For each, write one concrete manifestation, something a stranger could see or check: a thing someone does, an object, a number, a moment. Ask whether the instance is already in the text. If not, place it next to the abstraction. If the instance does all the work, consider cutting the abstraction. Do at least three. Thirty minutes.

Related practices: 12. Trade Generality for Particularity; 51. Choose the Word That Knows What It Means; 59. Make Metaphor Discover; 72. Match Evidence to Consequence.

PRACTICE 59

Make Metaphor Discover

Metaphor should discover a relationship, not display cleverness.

A metaphor is a claim, that A is B in some respect, and you can question it like one. Is the respect true? Is it new to this reader? Does it carry consequences? Paraphrase it, and if the literal version loses nothing, the figure was ornament. The first rule in Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" (1946) is never to use a figure you are used to seeing in print, and in his note on "dying metaphors" a newly invented one assists thought by evoking an image, while between the fresh and the dead lies "a huge dump of worn-out metaphors" used "because they save people the trouble of inventing phrases for themselves."

Shakespeare's Sonnet 73 gives its aging speaker boughs that "shake against the cold" and then calls them "Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang." The sonnet has already said autumn, branches and cold, so why reach for a church? In our reading, the bare boughs are tiers of empty seats. A choir, in the architectural sense, is the part of a church where singers sit, and a choir ruined is one from which the singing has been taken. A plainer description of autumn would have missed the relationship this finds. An aging speaker has lost song as well as leaves, and the pattern of the branches is the pattern of a place built for it. The speaker is not "like" a tree; the poem moves from age to autumn to a ruined building, and each step adds a loss.

Emily Dickinson's figure goes on discovering. "Hope is the thing with feathers / That perches in the soul." (Editions punctuate this

poem differently; Practice 68 shows how much that can matter.) Once hope is a bird, the poem has to ask what else follows. It sings a tune "without the words," so hope has no argument to offer. It is "sweetest in the gale," where hope is needed most. And in the chillest land and on the strangest sea, the last stanza says, the bird never, even in extremity, asked a crumb of the speaker. A bird that needs no food from the one it sings for is a strange bird, and in the strangeness the poem finds that hope gives and does not take.

Metaphor probably works by mapping. It carries structure from one domain to another, and the reader transfers relations as well as resemblances, which is why a good metaphor has more than one point of contact and a weak one fails when pressed. Ask what else would be true if the weak figure held, and it has no answer.

Metaphors impose as well as discover. Whatever follows from the vehicle comes in with it, whether you chose it or not, and Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) argued this about disease. Her thesis was that "illness is not a metaphor," and that the most truthful way of regarding it, and the healthiest way of being ill, is the one most resistant to metaphoric thinking. She traced the images attached to tuberculosis and to cancer, including cancer as an invasion by alien cells, and argued that they carried punitive or sentimental fantasies into the sickroom. She also admitted that it is hardly possible to take up residence in the kingdom of the ill unprejudiced by such metaphors. Her case concerns real bodies and leaves figures elsewhere alone, but any writer should price the cost it names, that a figure about a real person or illness arrives with entailments that cannot be taken back.

Practice. Collect every figure in a chapter, essay or poem, up to a dozen. For each, write three lines: the tenor (what is being described), the vehicle (what it is compared to), and the

relationship in one literal sentence. Then ask what the literal sentence loses, and what else the vehicle brings in that you did not intend. Mark each figure keep, replace with the literal, or rework to follow its consequences. Thirty minutes.

Related practices: 51. Choose the Word That Knows What It Means; 58. Give Abstraction a Body; 60. Remove Competitive Flourishes; 68. Hear Meaning Before Explaining It.

PRACTICE 60

Remove Competitive Flourishes

Cut any flourish that competes with the sentence's real work.

Every sentence in a passage has a job, whether to give a fact, to land a loss, to let a joke turn or to move the reader's eye to the next sentence. A flourish competes when it assigns the reader a different job, usually admiration. Take a sentence from a chapter about a father's last night.

> Sample (invented): My father's breathing slowed, and the radiator ticked like a small clock counting down to a verdict nobody had the nerve to deliver.

The second clause asks the reader to admire the simile at the moment the reader should be in the room. The sentence is there to say that the breathing is slowing. The "clock" and the "verdict" tell the reader that a writer is working, and the reader looks at the writer.

On our reasoning, a reader has only so much attention for any moment, and a figure or a rhythmic display takes some. When it takes it from the thing the passage is about, the passage weakens, though the flourish may be perfect in itself.

The old advice to "kill your darlings" is usually taken to mean cut whatever you love. The phrase can be traced in print to Arthur Quiller-Couch, who gave a Cambridge lecture, "On Style," in January 1914 and published it in *On the Art of Writing* (1916), where the phrase is "Murder your darlings." Quiller-Couch has just argued that style can never be extraneous ornament, and his

practical rule follows: whenever you feel an impulse to perpetrate a piece of exceptionally fine writing, obey it, and then delete it before the manuscript goes to press. He is aiming at what is extraneous.

The opening of *Mrs. Dalloway*, where Clarissa remembers opening the windows at Bourton, holds "like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave," which on a purely informational reading is ornament on the fact that Clarissa opened a window. But the novel is about how a mind remembers, and the wave is that. Cut it and you have kept the event and lost the novel. In a lyric essay, too, a sentence that exists to be beautiful may be the reason for the essay. The same sentence can be right in one Work and wrong in another, so no rule can make this call for you. A planner may decide in advance what each passage is for and cut accordingly, and a discovery writer may write the flourish in the heat of the draft and find its fault two months later. Either way the test comes after the sentence exists.

Practice. Find the sentence in your current draft that you most want the reader to admire. You will know it: it is the one you would read aloud to a friend or quote in a query letter. Copy the passage to a separate file. Delete the sentence and read from the paragraph before to the paragraph after, aloud. Ask three questions. Does the reader lose information? Does the reader lose a feeling the passage still needs? Does a neighboring sentence now have to do what this one covered? Then decide: restore, move, or leave it out. Put the cut sentence in a salvage file; it may fit somewhere else (Practice 84). If the passage got worse without it,

the sentence was working, and you can keep it without guilt. Ten minutes.

Related practices: 51. Choose the Word That Knows What It Means; 59. Make Metaphor Discover; 84. Cut the Good That Harms the Whole; 89. Preserve History Without Negotiating With It.

Part 7 — Dialogue, exposition, poetry, and dramatic form

A sentence can be correct and vivid and still do nothing. The previous part worked on the sentence as language. This one asks what a sentence is for when a person speaks it in a room, when it carries something the reader needs to know, when it is a line of poetry that stops before the margin does, or when an actor who is not the author has to say it aloud.

Each time, the writer is deciding who is speaking to whom, what the listener will do with it, and what to leave out. Dialogue makes the decision visible, because what a character says, and avoids saying, is the best evidence of what the character wants. In exposition the decision concerns the author's own voice, and the question is whether the telling changes anything. Poetry takes away scene and plot, so sound, line, and syntax have to do the work a plot would otherwise do. Writing for the stage, the screen, or the ear hands the page to other artists, so every word on it has to be something a voice can speak or a stage or a camera can show.

The order runs speech, information, form, limit, and you can read it straight through. You can also come in by problem:

- Flat dialogue, or characters who are interchangeable: start at 61. It and the three after it are about speech, and about why characters should not be used as funnels for the reader's information.

- A scene that dies whenever background arrives: start at 64 or 66. Practices 65 and 66 turn to scene, summary, and exposition.
- A story you are moving into a play or a screenplay: Practice 67. Read it before you adapt a single line.
- A poem that reads like a statement with line breaks: 68.
- A draft that feels too comfortable, too long, or too much like your last one: read Practices 69 and 70 together. The first removes habit with a constraint; the second removes slack.

Nothing here assumes a method. A discovery writer often finds a character's voice by putting two people in a room before knowing what either wants, and may produce pages of idle talk on the way to the line that matters; a planner may chart who knows what in each scene before anyone speaks. The pages that come out of either meet the same tests afterward.

The examples come mostly from public-domain texts. Living and recent writers appear too, mostly in paraphrase, and what we quote from them is a short phrase or a sentence, with the source named. Read the passages when you can.

PRACTICE 61

Make Dialogue Do Something

Dialogue is action conducted through language.

A line of dialogue is something one person does to another, and whatever it sounds like, you can ask of it whether the two people stand differently afterward. Plenty of dialogue records instead of acting. Characters greet each other, summarize their week, and answer each question in the order it is asked, and the page sounds like speech and gives the reader nothing to track. Readers probably take dialogue less as sound than as evidence of intention.

Early in the first act of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Algernon is holding a cigarette case that Jack left behind after a dinner. Inside is an inscription: "From little Cecily with her fondest love." Jack has said he knows no one of that name, so now he says she is his aunt. Algernon asks why an aunt calls herself little Cecily and calls her nephew her uncle. Jack answers, "Some aunts are tall, some aunts are not tall." The scene conveys one fact, that Jack leads a double life, and that is the least of what happens in it. Algernon wants a confession and is holding the case as leverage; Jack wants his property and wants not to be examined. Then the contest becomes a trade. "Well, produce my cigarette case first," says Jack. Algernon hands it over: "Now produce your explanation, and pray make it improbable."

Lines with no attempt in them tend to be interchangeable between speakers, and two characters could swap them without anything changing. Some of the best talk in literature does no visible work, though, and an audit of every line for ambition can sand the

texture off a page. If you find a scene by letting two people talk, the audit belongs to revision.

Practice. Work through one page of your own dialogue, about twenty lines, in thirty minutes. In the margin beside each line, write a transitive verb and its target: *deflects her*, *bargains for the case*, *tests whether he'll lie*. Inert verbs such as *says*, *tells*, or *explains* don't count. Mark any line you cannot find a verb for, and any run of three lines carrying the same one. Then revise the marked page, cutting the lines you could not verb or giving them an attempt, until at least two lines are cut or changed.

Related practices: 44. Define Conflict as Incompatible Intention; 62. Write the Unsaid Conversation; 63. Differentiate Minds Before Accents.

PRACTICE 62

Write the Unsaid Conversation

Let subtext carry what speakers cannot or will not say.

Charles W. Chesnutt's story "The Wife of His Youth" (*The Atlantic Monthly*, July 1898) begins with Mr. Ryder, head of a club of light-skinned Black people in a Northern town, planning a ball at which he will propose to Mrs. Dixon. Chesnutt spends the whole opening section on the ball and the proposal, so you know what Ryder has at stake before anything touches it. That afternoon, as he rehearses a toast on his porch, a small, very dark old woman comes through the gate. She is looking for her husband, Sam Taylor, who ran away to escape being sold. She has searched for him, and carried his daguerreotype, for twenty-five years.

Ryder, with "an air of kindly patronage," questions her. Her husband, he says, "may be dead long ago." She may have passed him "a hundred times during the twenty-five years" without knowing him. He asks to see the picture: "It might help me to remember whether I have seen the original." He looks "long and intently," hands it back, and says he knows of no man in town by that name. The picture is a task that lets him keep acting while the real matter sits in the pauses. When she has gone he stands "for a long time before the mirror of his dressing-case, gazing thoughtfully at the reflection of his own face."

Nothing says "I am your husband." At the ball he puts the question to a room instead. Asked to answer the toast to "The Ladies," he tells the guests her story and asks them to "suppose" a man who, though "absolutely safe from recognition or discovery," learns that the wife he left behind is seeking him. The narrator says his voice

"seemed rather in the nature of a personal appeal," and his look rested on Mrs. Dixon. She answers, in tears: "He should have acknowledged her." Only then does Ryder lead out the old woman and say it plainly: "this is the woman, and I am the man, whose story I have told you."

Harold Pinter described the same thing from the writer's side in a 1962 address to the National Student Drama Festival in Bristol, later published as "Writing for the Theatre." There are two silences, he said, one when no word is spoken and one when a torrent of language is being used. The speech we hear is "an indication of that which we don't hear," a "necessary avoidance." Yet a character can say what he means, Pinter added, and when that moment comes it cannot be taken back. Ryder reaches it at the ball. Nora reaches it in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, a play that builds a marriage out of evasions. Early on she eats a macaroon or two and denies it when her husband asks whether she has been nibbling sweets, and the macaroons carry a marriage in which a wife hides a small pleasure from a man who calls her his "little squirrel." In the last act she sits him down and observes that in eight years they have never had a serious conversation. After three acts of indirection the play turns to plain speech.

Subtext is the gap between what a speaker says and what the speaker is trying to do, with the reader aware of both. The gap is legible only when the reader knows what is at stake (Chesnutt's opening section makes sure you do), when the speakers have a reason not to say it, whether fear of refusal, pride, etiquette, or an imbalance of power, and when the surface talk gives them something concrete to hold, like the daguerreotype and the toast.

A draft loses it when a character announces the feeling ("I'm angry because you left me."). It loses it as surely when people mumble

and deflect for no reason the reader can feel, so that the evasive talk has nothing underneath, and the reader can't tell evasion from emptiness. The unsaid seems to work because a conclusion reached on your own is easier to credit than a statement handed over, and reconstructing it draws the reader into the scene.

Practice. Choose a scene where two characters circle something. If the scene is farce or a comedy of manners, where blunt statement can be the pleasure, choose another: subtext forced onto such a scene may only sound affected. On a separate sheet, write the single sentence each character is privately trying not to say. Then, in forty minutes, write the scene, about a page, with those sentences and their paraphrases forbidden, and give each speaker a physical task or object to hold: packing, a form, a pot on the stove. Afterward, give the page to a reader who hasn't seen your sheet and ask what each character wants. If the reader names something close to your forbidden sentence, the subtext works. If the reader says "nothing," you have hidden too much, and the repair is one fact earlier in the story rather than one more line here.

Related practices: 32. Apply Pressure Before Explaining Character; 61. Make Dialogue Do Something; 64. Do Not Stage a Conversation for the Reader's Convenience.

PRACTICE 63

Differentiate Minds Before Accents

Distinct voices differ in syntax, vocabulary, rhythm, assumptions, and desire—not accent alone.

"Heads, heads—take care of your heads!" shouts a stranger in a coach-yard at Mr. Pickwick's party, in the second chapter of *The Pickwick Papers*. Then he explains the danger. "Terrible place—dangerous work—other day—five children—mother—tall lady, eating sandwiches—forgot the arch—crash—knock—children look round—mother's head off." Dickens marks no dialect here and spells nothing phonetically, and you can tell the man by grammar alone. His explanation has no subordinate clauses and no "because." He lays the facts beside one another like cards. Mr. Pickwick, answering, speaks in complete, composed sentences ("I am ruminating on the strange mutability of human affairs").

The stranger is Jingle, and his grammar proves to be a tool. Later he works the same clipped manner on a spinster aunt, saying "lovely creature—sacrificed at the shrine—heartless avarice" and then arriving at the point: Mr. Tupman, he says, only wants her money. The broken syntax lets him pass from lament to slander without a joining clause that she could question.

Jingle has no accent at all. What separates him from Pickwick is how a mind connects things, whether it subordinates or stacks, finishes sentences or abandons them, along with what it takes for granted and where it steers a conversation. Our reasoning for putting these first is that readers infer a mind from those things,

and that the inference holds across a whole scene, where a spelling tic is noticed once and then fades.

Accent isn't ruled out. Bernard Shaw, in a stage direction in *Pygmalion*, spells out a flower girl's speech for a few lines and then apologizes that "this desperate attempt to represent her dialect without a phonetic alphabet must be abandoned as unintelligible outside London," in a play whose hero is a phonetician. Spelling lets the reader hear a place and makes the reader decode word by word. It is also bound up with who is allowed to be heard on the page. Zora Neale Hurston studied anthropology at Barnard under Franz Boas and brought that training to the vernacular she wrote. Her account of Cudjo Lewis, completed in 1931, was published only in 2018, as *Barracoon*, and dialect was a sticking point: in the fall of 1931 she wrote to her patron, Charlotte Osgood Mason, that Viking "again asks for the Life of Kossula, but in language rather than dialect."

A writer who knows a speech community and has a reason can render it with respect, and accent alone can still turn a person into a type. A workable course is to build the mind first and then add the smallest touch of sound the character needs (a word order, a few chosen words) before reaching for spelling.

Practice. Choose two characters in conflict and write a four-line speech sheet for each: average sentence length; whether they ask or state; one thing they never say; one thing they assume everyone knows. Then write twelve lines of dialogue between them, with no names, no tags, and no catchphrases, and keep the whole exercise to forty-five minutes. Give the page to a reader, or leave it for a day and read it cold, and label each line A or B. Chance alone would give about six right; ten or more out of twelve is a fair sign the minds are distinct. Revise the misses by altering

the syntax or the assumption, not by adding a tic. If the misses cluster on one character, that character is probably still talking like you.

Related practices: 31. Give Desire Competition; 55. Find Voice in Attention; 61. Make Dialogue Do Something.

PRACTICE 64

Do Not Stage a Conversation for the Reader's Convenience

Do not make characters explain what everyone in the scene already knows.

Characters tell each other what they already know so that the reader can catch up. *The Turkey City Lexicon*, compiled by Lewis Shiner and Bruce Sterling and first circulated in 1988, calls it "As You Know, Bob" and a "pernicious form of info-dump through dialogue" and records another name for it, "maid and butler dialogue." Readers often feel it at once, because the characters seem to exist only as pipes for the author. Our reasoning is that people read fiction on the understanding that no one is being addressed over the characters' heads, and a speech aimed past the characters can break that for a moment.

The rule doesn't forbid background. It asks that the information be new to someone in the scene, or that the telling itself be an act. In the first scene of Gogol's *The Inspector-General* (the translation is Thomas Seltzer's), the Governor tells the Judge that the attendants have turned the courthouse entrance hall into "a poultry yard," and the Judge knows it already, and the audience learns the state of the town, but the Governor is managing a subordinate, and each fact is a reproach. When the Governor mentions the "little peccadilloes" in the inspector's letter, the Judge volunteers, "I tell everyone plainly that I take bribes," and defends it by kind: "White greyhound puppies." "Bribes are bribes," the Governor replies, "whether puppies or anything else." A lawyer reciting the record,

a teacher reviewing a lesson, and a mother reminding a child of the rules are legitimate too, because the repetition does social work.

A simple grid finds the problem. Give each character a column and each fact the reader needs a row, and in each cell write K if the character knows it at this point in the scene, N if not. A row with K in every column is information nobody needs to tell anyone.

Practice. Take one scene in which characters explain something and build the grid. For each fact marked K by all speakers, choose one treatment: cut it, move it into action or an object, or give its telling a purpose by deciding what the teller wants from it and what the hearer wants to prevent. Rewrite the scene so that at least one fact is withheld until the final lines and at least one comes out in the wrong order, as someone's mistake or evasion; the grid and the rewrite together take forty-five minutes. Then read the old version and the new one aloud and compare them.

Related practices: 37. Use Point of View as an Information System; 62. Write the Unsaid Conversation; 66. Make Exposition Change Something.

PRACTICE 65

Dramatize the Necessary Experience

Dramatize what the reader must experience; summarize what the reader must traverse.

A draft that has taken "Show, don't tell" as law turns every event into a scene. The day a protagonist changes her mind then gets the same attention as the three weeks she waited for a phone call, and a reader is likely to be exhausted by the middle and unable to tell what mattered. The opposite failure exists too: summarizing the scene that holds the whole question, because it is hard to write.

Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych* makes the choice in both directions. It begins in a scene. A court official, Peter Ivanovich, goes to the dead man's house for the funeral service, and when he sits with the widow on a low pouffe, its springs push back each time he rises to free her shawl from the table, and he sits down again, his emotions cooled by the struggle. The widow, we gradually see, has drawn him aside to learn whether she can squeeze more money out of the government.

Chapter II opens: "Ivan Ilych's life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible." The next few pages carry him from law school to marriage to the post of prosecutor in summary, the tailor, the medallion on the watch-chain, an affair, all of it done, Tolstoy writes, "with clean hands, in clean linen, with French phrases." A life lived without a moment of real attention is told in a manner that gives it none, and the reader is carried through it at what feels like the speed at which Ivan Ilych

lived it. Then Tolstoy slows down. In the chapters of the illness we are in the room when the servant Gerasim holds the sick man's legs up and the pain eases, and we stay for the talk that follows.

In "Time Passes," the middle section of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, the choice runs the other way. Summary takes Mrs. Ramsay's death, and the close attention goes to the empty house: light on a wall, wind in the rooms, a caretaker's slow labor.

What the reader must feel the weight of depends on what the Work is for. A memoir of three years spent caring for a parent might hold most of those years in summary, a paragraph a season, and one night in full. A play usually has no narrator to condense time, so the gap between acts does the summarizing, and the playwright still chooses what to leave between the scenes.

Practice. On one page, list the twelve to twenty moments of a story, chapter, or essay you are working on, one line each, and mark each S (scene), T (traverse, in summary), E (explain), or O (omit). Give S to no more than a third of them, a rough ceiling for this exercise, chosen by asking where the reader must feel a decision being made, not where the events are most dramatic. Then rewrite one T moment as a scene and one S moment as three sentences of summary. The map and both rewrites take sixty minutes; you end with that one-page map and two rewrites, and for each rewrite you keep whichever version gives the reader more for the attention it costs.

Related practices: 42. Enter at the Pressure Point; 49. Pace Anticipation, Event, and Reflection; 66. Make Exposition Change Something.

PRACTICE 66

Make Exposition Change Something

Exposition earns its place when it changes understanding, pressure, or expectation.

In the second scene of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Miranda has just watched a ship break up in a storm. Her father says he has arranged things so that no one aboard is hurt, and that now she must know more. She answers that he has often begun to tell her who she is and stopped, "Concluding 'Stay: not yet.'" Prospero says: "The hour's now come." What follows covers twelve years: a duke who gave his government to his brother, the brother's treachery, a midnight coup and a voyage in a rotten, unrigged boat. Shakespeare won't let it lie still. Prospero keeps stopping to check whether his daughter is listening: "Dost thou attend me?" "Thou attend'st not." "I pray thee, mark me." "Dost thou hear?" Miranda answers that his tale would cure deafness.

Then the passage turns. Miranda asks why her father raised the storm. His reply is that fortune has brought his enemies to the island, that his prospects now depend on "a most auspicious star," and that if he does not court it now his fortunes will ever after droop. He says "Here cease more questions," and Miranda, at his word, sleeps. Once Ariel has reported on the storm, Prospero asks the spirit what time of day it is, hears that it is past midday, and says that the time between now and six must be spent "most preciously." Miranda and the audience now know what the storm

was for, a clock is running, and the audience is looking for a confrontation with the people the storm delivered.

Scene and summary carry the reader through events. Exposition stops to explain, and it earns the stop when the background answers a live dramatic question, something the reader is currently afraid of, hoping for, or puzzled by, and leaves that question changed. Prospero's account of the past is long, it is exposition by any definition, and it is probably one of the livelier stretches of the play.

Plenty of exposition is information delivered because it exists: the prologue of history, the chapter of the world's rules before anyone needs them, the paragraph of encyclopedia inside a scene. It answers questions the reader has not asked, so it reads as delay, and some of it is written to reassure the author that the reader has everything. Prospero's speech is information too, and long, and it arrives at the moment the audience most wants it.

You can put the test to a single paragraph of your own. What does the reader believe or fear before it, and what after? If nothing differs, the paragraph can wait or go. An essay about a bridge failure may need the history of the steel specification, but readers will accept it only once they need to ask why the steel cracked, so the history goes right after that question.

Moby-Dick pushes against all of this. In chapter 32, "Cetology," Melville halts the voyage to classify the whales as folios, octavos, and duodecimos. He tells the reader the matter is "almost indispensable" to understanding what follows, calls the whole undertaking the classification of "the constituents of a chaos," and ends by declaring the system left unfinished, like a cathedral with the crane still standing on the tower. A reader may skim the

chapter or treasure it, and the book risks both. Where it works, it may be because the whale becomes a creature that resists being held in any system. That is one reading, and the chapter remains a gamble.

Practice. Take a draft with background in it, fiction or nonfiction, and fifty minutes. Highlight every passage that explains something not happening right now. In the margin beside each, write the live question it answers, in the reader's words: *Why does she distrust him? Why is this road closed?* If you cannot write one, move the passage to a separate file (Practice 13). If you can, move the passage to just after the question is raised and before the answer matters, and add one sentence showing what the information changes for a character: a new fear, a decision, a deadline. Then count the passages that could name no live question.

Related practices: 34. Activate the Past; 64. Do Not Stage a Conversation for the Reader's Convenience; 65. Dramatize the Necessary Experience.

PRACTICE 67

Write for the Medium

In drama and screenwriting, write what can be performed, heard, or seen.

Scripts often read as if they were novels. A character is "haunted by a decision she made at nineteen." A screenplay's action line says she "feels the weight of all those years." Neither can be filmed or acted, and the actor, designer, and director are left to invent what the writer felt. Inner life belongs in a script once it finds a performable form, and soliloquy, voice-over, and direct address exist for exactly this.

On January 11, 1924, four days before the BBC's planned evening of radio entertainment, the director Nigel Playfair told Richard Hughes, a twenty-three-year-old playwright, that broadcasting wanted "stuff specially written for it," and Hughes offered to write a play overnight. His account, published in *The Atlantic* in 1957, shows what he asked of the medium. The ear has no help from the eye, so the story would happen in the dark, and the characters would keep saying they could not see. Playfair supplied the first line, "The lights have gone out!" Hughes set the play in a coal mine and made the people lost in it visitors, because a cast of miners would be hard to tell apart by voice alone. *A Comedy of Danger* was broadcast on January 15 and is widely believed to be the first play written for radio.

The stage keeps the picture and pins it down: the audience occupies one fixed point of view and hears everything in real time, so a playwright who needs an offstage event must get it onstage through a sound, a report, or a reaction.

Screenplay format follows from the same fact. A scene opens with a heading in capitals giving interior or exterior, the place, and the time of day. Action lines describe what the camera could capture and are usually written in the present tense. Dialogue sits under a character cue. Feature scripts are expected in what the rules call "standard industry format"; the Nicholl Fellowships, for instance, ask for 12-point Courier and a length of 80 to 125 pages. These conventions exist because the page has to be read quickly by people who will have to build what it says. (Practice 94 asks you to learn conventions before breaking them.)

Bernard Shaw wrote stage directions that break all this and succeed anyway. When the flower girl first appears in *Pygmalion*, Shaw tells us that her hair needs washing "rather badly," that she wears a shoddy black coat, and that she needs "the services of a dentist." Some of that is performable, in costume and makeup. That she is "no doubt as clean as she can afford to be" is a remark to a reader and not an instruction to a designer. The printed play carries a preface and a prose sequel as well, so it was plainly addressed to readers as well as audiences, and Shaw knew he was writing for two channels at once.

Practice. Take one narrative beat, a character discovering that someone has lied to her, and write it three times in forty-five minutes, each under 200 words. First as prose, with whatever interiority you like. Then as stage: one continuous space, no cuts, only what an audience can see and hear from a seat. Then as screen: single shots, what a camera can isolate, including one close-up. After each version write two lines, what this form made

impossible and what it made possible. Those six lines of notes are what the exercise is for.

Related practices: 61. Make Dialogue Do Something; 94. Learn the Form Before Breaking It; 99. Extend Judgment Without Surrendering It.

PRACTICE 68

Hear Meaning Before Explaining It

In poetry, sound, line, image, syntax, and silence all make meaning.

In a poem, meaning lives in the act of saying as well as in the words: stress, length, repetition, the place where the breath stops, what the sentence does grammatically. Sound can mean harshness, hesitation, drag, a stammer, so it needn't be pretty, and the dictionary sense stays in play. A draft poem is often a paraphrase with line breaks, a statement chopped at arbitrary points. Revision then tends to swap words for better words, and the reader is left with sense and no event. (Practice 57 treats the mouth as an editing tool.)

Emily Dickinson's editors tidied her poems when they first printed them after her death. "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" appeared in 1896, in the third series of *Poems*, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd, under a title the editor supplied, "Dying," with most of the dashes turned into commas and semicolons and several of the words altered. Its last stanza there reads: "With blue, uncertain, stumbling buzz, / Between the light and me; / And then the windows failed, and then / I could not see to see." Ralph Franklin's edition, based on the manuscripts, restores her capitals and dashes, and the same lines become "With Blue—uncertain stumbling Buzz— / Between the light—and me—". The dictionary meaning has not changed.

The two texts sound different, though. In Franklin's the line stumbles. The dash after "Blue" is a small stop inside it, so that "uncertain stumbling Buzz" arrives as one halting phrase, and to our ear the sentence acts out the fly's flight. The poem's last line, "I could not see to see," which the 1896 text closed with a period, is left open by a dash, as if the sight did not so much end as fail to arrive.

Other features of the poem owe more to arrangement than to vocabulary. The stanzas alternate longer lines of eight syllables with shorter lines of six, so that each stanza keeps drawing a short breath after a longer one. In the third stanza of the manuscript-based text, a line break cuts the legal word "Assignable" loose from the sentence that governs it, as the speaker's self is being divided like property. At the stanza's end, "There interposed a Fly" swerves into a new construction in mid-thought, so that the sentence is itself interposed upon. And "stumbling Buzz" seems to stumble in the mouth, because the cluster of consonants in the middle of "stumbling" asks the tongue to do it. These are our readings. Read the poem aloud and see whether you hear them.

Walt Whitman's "A Noiseless Patient Spider," in the 1881–82 version, lets syntax do the work. In the first stanza the spider "launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself" and the tripled word pays out the thread. The second stanza addresses the soul in a single sentence with no main verb. "And you O my soul where you stand," it begins, and goes on through a chain of participles, "musing, venturing, throwing, seeking," to the closing phrase, "Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul." The sentence is never completed, and the poem ends before anyone knows whether anything catches.

Not every poem is made to be heard first. Free verse often depends on line breaks that an eye sees and an ear can only approximate. Poems for performance take their music from a tradition: Langston Hughes's "The Weary Blues" (1925) comes out of the blues, in which sound and text cannot be pulled apart. It begins "Droning a drowsy syncopated tune," and to our ear the repeated d and the dragging stresses already sound like the tune. The danger is sound as ornament, a pleasing pattern laid over a statement that could have been made in prose.

Practice. Take eight to twelve lines of your own, a poem or a prose passage, read them aloud, and mark every place where you stumble, rush, or run out of breath. Then revise for sound only, in twenty-five minutes, without changing a fact, an image, or the order of ideas. You may reorder within a sentence, swap a word for a synonym with a different vowel or weight, change a line break or a punctuation mark, and add or remove one repetition. Do it twice, once to make the passage faster and once to make it heavier. Read both versions aloud and note each change that also altered the meaning.

Related practices: 56. Let Syntax Think; 57. Use the Mouth as an Editing Tool; 70. Increase Pressure Through Compression.

PRACTICE 69

Use Constraint to Remove the Obvious

Constraint can generate invention by removing easy choices.

Georges Perec's *La Disparition* (1969), a novel of more than three hundred pages, contains no letter e. Perec belonged to Oulipo, the Workshop of Potential Literature that Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais founded in 1960 to explore writing under structural constraints; he had joined in 1967. The plot concerns people who vanish one after another, and the missing letter is the clue to the mystery. Gilbert Adair's English translation, *A Void* (1994), also avoids the letter, which in English meant doing without the article "the." Everything that has to be said, including the characters' names and every transition, must go round the gap.

Perec's rule is the extreme case of what any constraint does. Faced with all possible words, a writer tends to reach for the first word, the first image, the first sentence shape, and those tend to be choices made before. A constraint makes some of them unavailable, so the writer has to go looking, and the search often turns up what the habitual route would never have produced. The Practice below tests that reasoning on your own page.

William Wordsworth opened the sonnets in his 1807 *Poems, in Two Volumes* with a defense of the form, and the defense is itself a sonnet. Nuns, hermits, students, weavers, and bees, he says, are content in their enclosures: "In truth, the prison, unto which we doom / Ourselves, no prison is." He confesses that it was a pastime

“to be bound / Within the Sonnet’s scanty plot of ground,” in the hope of giving some solace to readers who “have felt the weight of too much liberty.” A chosen form carries decisions made before you begin, and those decisions free attention for what is yours to decide.

External constraints work by the same logic: a word count, a deadline, a commissioning brief, a fixed room and cast. Oulipo fixes its rules before writing, but a constraint can also be sprung mid-draft, forbidding adjectives for one page to see what the sentences do without them, and you may use one to get unstuck and then drop it.

Constraints fail when they lend the piece a novelty the material does not need, and a severe rule can turn the Work into a puzzle and put feeling out of reach. Perec’s rule fit its book, since the absence it imposed was the story. Aim a constraint at a habit the Work actually has, and drop it if what it forces is merely odd.

Practice. Take a passage of your own, about 150 words, in any genre, and name one habit you notice in it: reliance on adjectives, sentences that all begin with the subject, the verb “to be,” a certain kind of ending. Write a rule that forbids exactly that, severe enough that at least a third of your first instincts become impossible, and rewrite the passage under it in thirty minutes. Underline three choices you would never have made unprompted. Then lift the rule, return to the original passage, and carry at least one of the three back into it, leaving the rule behind.

Related practices: 17. Let the Material Choose Its Container; 70. Increase Pressure Through Compression; 94. Learn the Form Before Breaking It.

PRACTICE 70

Increase Pressure Through Compression

Compression increases the work carried by each word, image, beat, or scene.

Slack is common in early drafts: words, images, and beats are present but not working, so that the reader's attention is spent carrying them.

In the spring of 1980 Raymond Carver gave his editor, Gordon Lish, then at Knopf, a manuscript of seventeen stories. The Library of America's account of the text records that Lish edited the manuscript in two rounds and that the overall word count fell by 55 percent. One story, "A Small, Good Thing," went from thirty-seven pages to twelve and became "The Bath." Reading the edited version, Carver wrote an anguished letter at eight in the morning of July 8, asking Lish to stop production of the book. He acknowledged in it that Lish had made many of the stories much better. On July 10 he wrote again, saying he was thrilled with the book yet feared "making them too thin." Production went ahead, and the book appeared as *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981), was praised, and was credited with popularizing a minimalist style. In 2009 the Library of America published Carver's original manuscript, under the title *Beginners*, so that readers could compare.

The edited stories do a great deal with little. They also belong to someone who did not choose the cuts, and the comparison can come out either way. Carver's fear names the opposite hazard,

thinning mistaken for compression. Compression keeps what is necessary and makes each remaining element carry more. Thinning removes the necessary along with the surplus, and the reader senses the gap without being able to fill it. Brevity by itself earns nothing either; some writers draft lean while others draft long and cut.

Which one you get comes down to the reader's own labor. When something is left out and the reader can reconstruct it, the reconstruction gives the sentence force, probably because the reader has made it part of their own experience. When the reader cannot reconstruct it, the effect is confusion or coldness.

Lydia Davis has written pieces of a single sentence, and the title story of her collection *Samuel Johnson Is Indignant* is one. The title carries the subject and the verb, and the body of the story is the clause that completes it, a grievance about how few trees Scotland has.

Bashō's frog poem, which Practice 10 reads for what it notices, is three phrases of five, seven, and five sounds. Lafcadio Hearn, writing in 1898, rendered it "Old pond—frogs jumping in—sound of water." Japanese nouns are not normally marked for number, so translators must decide how many frogs jump, and the question is a measure of how much the grammar leaves to the reader. A cutting word, *ya*, after "pond" separates the still thing from the event, and the reader supplies the silence on either side of the splash.

Practice. Take a passage of about 300 words and ninety minutes. Before cutting, write one sentence naming the effect it should have on the reader: what they should feel, know, or expect afterward. Save the original under a new name. Cut in three

passes, first removing sentences that repeat something already given, then modifiers the reader can infer, then combining what remains. After each pass, read the result aloud to someone, or to yourself the next day, and check whether the effect holds. When it begins to slip, stop and restore the last cut. Put the two versions side by side and list what was removed and what now carries it.

Related practices: 60. Remove Competitive Flourishes; 69. Use Constraint to Remove the Obvious; 84. Cut the Good That Harms the Whole.

Part 8 — Nonfiction, research, and truth

Every factual sentence you publish asks the reader to take something on trust. Take three invented ones. The dam was finished in 1931. The senator changed her vote after that meeting. Most patients improve. The reader cannot visit the archive or telephone the senator. She can only decide whether to believe you, and she is likely to decide partly by feel, by the texture of the sourcing, the proportion of the doubt, and the way the writer treats opponents and the people in the pages. Nonfiction is a long run of such decisions.

The practices here lean toward the essay, the reported book, the history and the biography, but they apply wherever a text makes claims about the world or about people who exist, which includes the memoir, the novel set in a real city in a real decade, and the poem that names a living sister.

Read in order, the Part follows a project from gathering to publication. It can also be entered by problem. A pile of notes that has outrun your understanding needs 71, on how you know a thing, and 72, on how much checking it needs. For a thesis that has become suspiciously easy there are 73 and 74, on the claims you are eager to believe and the people who disagree with you. A draft that reads better than the material deserves is the subject of 75 and 76, on how arrangement can quietly assert things the record does not. A manuscript about to go to an editor wants 77 on quotation and 78 on the grammar of doubt; one in which anyone

might recognize themselves wants 79 and 80, and those two are best read before the draft is finished.

Some writers research for a year before drafting a sentence and risk arriving at the page already committed to a reading. Others draft first, find out what they need to look up, and risk building on guesses. Neither is more rigorous, so long as every claim is checked before it leaves your hands.

An AI system can summarize a document you hand it, suggest where to look, propose objections and draft interview questions. It can also produce citations to papers no one wrote, quotations no one spoke, and biographical details that fit a plausible pattern. The principle that runs through this book, that the author remains responsible for the published Work, becomes in this Part a rule without exceptions. Any claim, citation, quotation or biographical detail that comes from an AI tool is a lead, usable only once you have confirmed it in a source outside the tool. The chapters take up AI tools only where a tool changes their own problem: how to rank claims for checking (72), agreement that flatters you (73), invented quotations (77), and private details pasted into a service (80).

Defamation, privacy and copyright law differ by country, by state and by form, and a book of practices cannot tell you what a court would do. Where the risk of publication is serious, get a lawyer who knows your jurisdiction. That lawyer will not answer the ethical questions in the last two chapters, either.

PRACTICE 71

Label the Kind of Knowing

Separate observation, testimony, inference, memory, and speculation.

The ordinary paragraph of nonfiction tends to run in one even voice. Here is an invented one: the mill closed in 1994, Main Street emptied, people stopped trusting the council, the closing broke something in the town that was never repaired, as I remember the foreman saying, and it never will be. Read slowly, that sentence holds six kinds of claim, from a document to a prediction. The grammar gives them all the same footing, and the reader, who cannot see the footing, tends to assume it is firm.

Partway through his account of Egypt, Herodotus stops to tell the reader how he has been working. Everything so far, he says, has been “my own autopsy and judgment and inquiry,” in A. D. Godley’s 1920 translation. From here he will record what the Egyptians told him, “adding something of what I myself have seen.” The next sentence begins *The priests told me*, and the priests go on to say that Min, the first king, dammed the Nile and founded Memphis in the dry ground.

Few writers change gears so openly. People call labeling clutter, and it is, if you do it with brackets and footnotes. Done in the verbs, it is just prose that says how it knows.

Observation means you were there and saw or heard it. Testimony comes from someone else who was there, or says they were. Inference is what you concluded from other things, memory is yours or a source’s retrieved after time, and speculation is what

you propose when you do not know. A document is testimony that kept its shape; because it can be checked against other records, the exercise below gives it a letter of its own. None of these outranks the others by rule. A payroll ledger can outweigh my glance at a factory gate, and a woman's memory of her own wedding can outweigh my inference about her marriage.

Nor does a label certify anything. A writer can say "I saw" and be wrong. The label tells the reader which check applies, not that the check was passed (that work belongs to Practice 72), and the check differs because each kind of knowing fails in its own way. Observation fails by angle: a witness sees one corner of events, as Orwell admitted in the last pages of *Homage to Catalonia* (Practice 73 takes up what that admission does and does not fix). Testimony fails through position and motive, who was placed to know and who gains by the telling. Inference fails at its weakest link, usually the one the writer took without noticing.

Memory fails most deceptively. Jennifer Talarico and David Rubin's 2003 study had fifty-four Duke students write down how they first heard about the September 11 attacks, along with a memory of an ordinary recent event, and tested them again one, six or thirty-two weeks later. Consistency declined over time, and it did not differ between the two kinds of memory. For the ordinary events, the students' ratings of vividness, recollection and belief in their accuracy fell as well. For the September 11 memories they did not. The authors concluded that such memories are special only in how accurate they feel.

Not every line should carry a label. A memoir is memory from the first page to the last, and stamping "I remember" on every sentence would bury the book. Label where your account conflicts with another person's or with a record, or where a detail is

carrying part of an argument (see Practice 40 on the memoirist's several selves).

Practice. Take one page of your draft, about five hundred words, and mark each factual claim in the margin: S for seen by me, T for told (and by whom), D for document, I for inferred, M for remembered, a question mark for none of these. Count the marks. Then rewrite the two claims whose grammar most overstates their footing, so that the verb carries the label. The page takes thirty to forty minutes, and it ends marked, with two sentences that now say how you know.

Related practices: 40. Separate the Selves of Memoir; 72. Match Evidence to Consequence; 76. Resist False Neatness; 78. State Uncertainty Precisely.

PRACTICE 72

Match Evidence to Consequence

Match the strength of the evidence to the importance and uncertainty of the claim.

Practice. Choose one chapter or essay of about three thousand words and list every checkable factual claim. Mark each H, M or L for the harm if it were wrong. For every H, write what verification would require (which document, which second source, whom to ask), then do it, and mark the claim verified, qualified or cut, spending ninety minutes on the H claims alone. You end up with a ledger and at least one sentence in the draft that changed. Each H claim you could not verify is a place where the draft has been asking readers to take your word.

Before any checking, ask two questions about each claim. What happens if this is wrong, and to whom? And how thin is what I actually have? For a decade, organizations urged clinicians to encourage postmenopausal women to take hormone replacement therapy, on the belief that it substantially reduced the risk of heart disease. Looking back in 2008, the authors behind the GRADE system for rating evidence pointed out that the belief had rested on observational studies with inconsistent results, which under their scheme count as very low quality. Randomized trials later found that the therapy fails to reduce cardiovascular risk and may even increase it.

Illustrative claims, like the weather in an anecdote or the name of a street, can rest on a secondhand source if you label them as such

(Practice 71). Load-bearing claims, such as a statistic that anchors an essay or a date that organizes a narrative, need a primary source or two independent ones. Claims that could injure a person (an accusation, a diagnosis, a financial or legal assertion) need documents, independent corroboration and the person's chance to respond. A claim's tier depends on the weight it carries in your book, and the decorative statistic on which three later paragraphs quietly build has already been promoted without your noticing. When the top tier cannot be reached because the records are sealed or the only witness is dead, the claim is cut or stated as exactly what it is (Practice 78). It does not get inflated to fit the paragraph.

Verification is labor, labor is finite, and errors do not cost everyone the same, so the checks go where the damage would land. A language model can deliver the trivial claim and the ruinous one in the same calm register. Its tone tells you nothing about which tier a claim belongs in.

Related practices: 71. Label the Kind of Knowing; 73. Challenge the Convenient Source; 77. Preserve Quotation Integrity; 78. State Uncertainty Precisely; 79. Treat Real People as Participants in Consequence.

PRACTICE 73

Challenge the Convenient Source

Corroborate most aggressively what you are eager to believe.

Charles Darwin kept a rule he called golden. Whenever a published fact, or a new observation or thought, came across him that was opposed to his general results, he made a memorandum of it without fail and at once. Such facts and thoughts, he had found, were far more apt to escape the memory than favorable ones. He credited the habit with a result. Very few objections were raised against his views that he had not at least noticed and tried to answer.

The rule defends against forgetting more than against dishonesty, since the mind discards the awkward finding without any decision to do so, and the awkward finding is the one that would have cost the argument something.

The convenient source announces itself with a small glow on finding it. It is the quotation that arrives already phrased as the writer's thesis, the study whose abstract says what she hoped, the interviewee who volunteers exactly the thing. Scrutiny is effort, and nobody feels the need to spend effort on a gift, so eagerness tends to mark the spot where scrutiny is weakest. Search can make it worse. The question typed is usually built from the belief held, and the first source to hand turns out to agree. Some flattering facts are true, and nobody is asking you to distrust whatever you like. What changes is the order, so that effort follows eagerness

instead of trailing it, and the more you want a claim to be so, the more checking it gets before it does any work in your argument.

Orwell shows what the nearest alternative, disclosure, can and cannot do. At the end of *Homage to Catalonia* he told readers to beware of his partisanship, his mistakes of fact and the distortion caused by having seen "only one corner of events," and to beware of the same things in any other book on the Spanish war. That tells the reader where to discount, but a warning cannot supply what the writer did not go and look for. Disclosure is what remains when you have run out of ways to find the missing corner, and it should not replace the attempt.

The tools can feed the eagerness. Mrinank Sharma and colleagues studied five AI assistants in 2023 and found sycophancy in all of them across four free-form text-generation tasks, with answers shaped to match the views the user had expressed. They traced part of the cause to human preference judgments, in which a response that matched a user's views was more likely to be preferred, and in which a convincingly written sycophantic answer sometimes beat a correct one. If you tell a model what you believe, expect it to lean your way, and treat its agreement as no evidence of anything. Ask the question without your answer in it, and ask for the best case against.

Darwin's rule asks for one memorandum at a time. A writer who crusades endlessly against his own thesis may never finish, and a search that looks only for refutation is a bias of its own. Contrary evidence, once found, does not need equal space in the book. It needs to be weighed, which is Practice 74's business.

Practice. Write your preferred conclusion in a single sentence, and under it list three findings that, if true, would make it wrong

or smaller. Spend one hour looking for them in places where people hold the opposite view or have a stake against yours, checking first the sentence you were happiest to find. Record the result as a half-page memo: what I looked for, what I found, what survived, what changed in the draft. From now on, date every contrary finding on the day you meet it.

Related practices: 14. Let Curiosity Precede Certainty; 72. Match Evidence to Consequence; 74. Strengthen the Opposition Before Answering It.

PRACTICE 74

Strengthen the Opposition Before Answering It

Represent opposing arguments in terms their strongest relevant advocates would recognize.

Most nonfiction handles the other side in a few stock sentences. “Critics claim.” “Some argue.” “Skeptics say.” They gesture at a position while describing its worst version, in language its holders would never use, and they come easily because the writer’s own side supplies the summary of the other side. A reader who holds the other view meets your account of it first, and a caricature can tell her the rest of the book cannot be trusted.

John Stuart Mill described the failure exactly. In *On Liberty* he says that whoever knows only his own side of the case “knows little of that.” It is not enough, he adds, to hear opposing arguments from your own teachers, “presented as they state them”; you must hear them from people who actually believe them and “do their very utmost for them.” A real opponent is not needed to begin. If opponents of all important truths do not exist, Mill says, it is “indispensable to imagine them.” The imagined opponent is a start, and the real advocate’s own text is the correction.

The test is recognition. Would the strongest relevant advocates of the other view read your account and say yes, that is what we hold, and for these reasons? Relevant means those who have actually made the argument, with evidence, as opposed to the loudest or the most convenient, and it is where false balance is avoided and also where abuse hides, so check that you are not

using relevance to dismiss the inconvenient (Practice 73). Strongest and balanced are different things. Open polemic is a legitimate form, since its reader knows the contract, and you may give the other view little space and keep your conclusion, provided your answer addresses the argument that exists. A claim that has been tested and has failed can still have its best advocate represented accurately, what they say and why it persuades, without any pretense that the question is open.

Practice. Write the opposing case in three hundred words, as one of its advocates would put it. Then find three passages in which a real advocate states it, in their own books or essays, not in summaries by their critics or by you, and compare. Mark everything in your version they would not recognize, and every strong argument of theirs that you left out. Rewrite until nothing remains in either category. If you can, put the result ahead of your answer in the draft. Over two to three hours you end up with a statement an advocate could sign, and three source passages.

Related practices: 19. Know Whether You Are Testing or Arguing; 36. Give Opposition a Worldview; 73. Challenge the Convenient Source.

PRACTICE 75

Shape Facts Without Distorting Them

Narrative structure may shape facts, but it must not falsify their relationships.

"After the inspector's visit in March, the plant closed in June." If the closing was decided the previous autumn, both clauses are true and the sentence is false. A reader takes adjacency for relationship, assuming that this happened, then that did, and the order means something. The result is a causal splice, in which compression, ordering, omission or juxtaposition suggests a relationship the record does not support.

The editor William Shawn penciled two words on the galley proofs of *The New Yorker*'s serialization of *In Cold Blood*, beside a passage describing what one person did while alone, before being killed: "How know?" Ben Yagoda, who found the proofs in the magazine's archive while researching his history of it, reports that there was in fact no way to know, and that the passage stayed.

The series had opened with an editor's note saying that all quotations came from official records or from conversations transcribed verbatim between the author and the principals. The book's subtitle was *A True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences*. Yagoda later read the fact-checker's file, held at the University of Delaware, and found that the checking had concentrated on dates, distances and the spelling of names. The scenes, the dialogue and the interior states appear to have been left to the author, in the magazine's idiom. Yagoda adds that

Capote himself acknowledged before his death that the book's final scene, a graveyard conversation, was invented. None of this removes *In Cold Blood* from the shelf of landmarks. It leaves a narrower question about what a reader is entitled to assume when sentence follows sentence.

Structure may choose among facts, order them, compress time and open in the middle. It may not falsify their relationships. That does not mean telling events in the order they occurred, and it does not prohibit art. John McPhee, quoted in Norman Sims's introduction to *The Literary Journalists*, says that arranging and presenting involve a great deal of artistry. His limit is firm: "But you don't make it up." Elsewhere in that introduction he rules out invented dialogue and composite characters, since a character built from three real people is, in his view, a fictional character, and he rules out getting inside people's heads to think for them.

Those positions are not universal. Yagoda notes that in earlier decades *The New Yorker* itself ran work by A. J. Liebling and Joseph Mitchell that used composite characters, Colonel Stingo and Mr. Flood, so the disagreement is real and lives inside one magazine. Underneath it sits a useful test, which is disclosure. The Society of Professional Journalists' code says never to deliberately distort facts or context, and to label re-enactments clearly. A composite named as a composite in a note makes a different promise from one passed off as a person, and a compressed sequence flagged as compressed ("over the next three weeks, she met him four times") is a different act from the same sentences left to imply a single evening.

The splice works because readers infer. Narrative teaches them to expect that what comes next matters to what came before (Practice 24 treats the craft side of this). Fiction can exploit that

freely. In nonfiction every use of it is a small assertion about the world, and you answer for the assertion, not only for the individual facts.

No one can render a messy year without compressing it, though, and compression is not deceit. Some causes really are tangled, and a writer who refuses every causal sentence for fear of error produces a list. Say what is known, and make the inference visible as an inference: "The records do not say whether the inspector's visit mattered."

Practice. Take a thousand words of your narrative and underline every word or break that asserts or implies time or cause: then, so, after, soon, by the time, because, and any paragraph break between two events. In the margin, for each, write the source of the relationship (document, witness, your own inference) and its status. Where only adjacency exists, rewrite the transition to say only what is known. After an hour, the annotated passage and the list of changed transitions show which of your claims about time and cause rest on a record and which rest on adjacency alone.

Related practices: 24. Build Causes, Not Just Calendars; 71. Label the Kind of Knowing; 76. Resist False Neatness.

PRACTICE 76

Resist False Neatness

Do not improve reality into false neatness.

In January 2006 a website called *The Smoking Gun* published an investigation of James Frey's best-selling memoir *A Million Little Pieces*, a book Oprah Winfrey had chosen for her book club. The site had set out only to find a mug shot. By its account, police records from Granville, Ohio, for the arrest the book describes showed a drunk-driving arrest after failed sobriety tests. The book, as the site summarized it, described a far graver case, with a plea offer of three years and a jail term of months. On Winfrey's program later that month Frey conceded that he had been jailed for several hours rather than the 87 days the book gave, and the publisher acknowledged that the book had not been fact-checked.

Those inflations could be checked against police records. Most false neatness is smaller and leaves no record to contradict it. A writer supplies a motive for someone who never explained herself, or assembles one conversation from three, or moves a realization that came years later to the scene where it would have been tidy, or ties up an ending because the record happens to stop at a good moment. Each change makes the story better and the account worse, and in each the writer is likely to feel that it is only what the scene needs.

Reality is often ambiguous, contradictory, incomplete or unresolved, and a writer who presents a fictionalized reality as fact has broken the contract that nonfiction makes with the reader. Craft makes that easy to forget. Fiction teaches that scenes turn, setups pay off and endings resolve the work's central

movement, and those instincts are right there; in nonfiction they have to be pointed at selection and arrangement and kept away from what happened.

Herodotus, in Book 7 (A. D. Godley's translation), reports a story told in Greece that Xerxes sent a herald to Argos, says he cannot tell with exactness whether it is true, and declares nothing true except what the Argives themselves say. His business, he says, is to set down what is told him, and "to believe it is none at all of my business." Then he adds that "there is another tale current," according to which the Argives had themselves invited the Persian into Greece. He leaves the two stories standing, and the reader goes away without a verdict and with an exact picture of the state of the evidence.

It is possible to overcorrect. Real events sometimes rhyme, and some coincidences are real. A writer who is afraid of neatness can manufacture mess to look honest, which is just as false, so report the symmetry that is there. Unresolved does not mean shapeless either. An ending can still land on a decision, an image or the open question itself, and the book that ends on what is known can still end. A note that tells the reader what has been compressed, merged or renamed is a different act from silence.

Ambiguity does not excuse vagueness. "Nobody knows why she left" is neater to write and no more informative than a sentence that says what her sister believed, what the letters suggest, and where the record goes quiet.

Practice. Pick a passage in your draft that states a motive, cause or outcome with more certainty than the evidence supports, and write the paragraph twice. In the first version, keep the neat sentence. In the second, replace it with the evidence you actually

have: who said what, what the document shows, where the record stops. Read both aloud. Keep the second if it is true, and note whether anything in the passage depended on the neat version; if the passage collapses without it, it was built on conjecture. In thirty minutes you have two versions and a decision.

Related practices: 50. Resolve the Governing Movement; 71. Label the Kind of Knowing; 75. Shape Facts Without Distorting Them; 78. State Uncertainty Precisely.

PRACTICE 77

Preserve Quotation Integrity

Quote faithfully and preserve context and provenance.

Misquotations often come by relay rather than by forgery. Each writer takes the line from the one before, and nobody goes back to the page.

In the sixth book of Rousseau's *Confessions*, a young man who wants bread but is too embarrassed to walk into a baker's shop recalls the expedient of "une grande princesse." Told that the peasants had no bread, she is supposed to have answered: *Qu'ils mangent de la brioche.* Rousseau does not name her. Accounts differ on the year he wrote the passage, 1765 or about 1767, but either way Marie Antoinette, born in 1755, was then a child in Vienna who had not yet seen France. The line travels today under her name, and in English under the word cake. Somewhere along the relay it was detached from its source, handed to the person it best suits, and translated into something else.

Faithful quotation keeps the words exact, with every alteration marked by an ellipsis or a bracket. It preserves the context: what came before and after, who was speaking to whom, and for what purpose. The attribution has to be right, including which version you read. And there has to be a path back, so that a reader, or you in a year, can retrieve the original.

None of that requires every quotation to be verbatim to the syllable. Thucydides says plainly what he did with the speeches in his history. They were hard to carry word for word in memory, so his habit was to make the speakers say what the occasion in his

opinion demanded, “adhering as closely as possible to the general sense.” The method is defensible because it is declared, and the same reconstruction presented as transcript would not be. Today’s equivalent is the note: reconstructed from my notes, translated by me, lightly edited for length. Speech often does not read well verbatim, and oral-history and interview work routinely trims it for readability, which is acceptable when the trimming is disclosed and the meaning is untouched. When only the content matters, paraphrase is often better than a quotation. Some provenance cannot be recovered at all, a conversation twenty years old, for instance, and then you drop the quotation marks and say “as I remember it” (Practice 71).

A quotation is a claim about a past utterance, and the reader cannot check it. Provenance makes the claim checkable in principle and keeps the writer honest in practice, because a year from now you will not remember whether a line came from the book, from an article that quoted the book, or from a screenshot. The Society of Professional Journalists’ code says to identify sources clearly and to provide access to source material when it is relevant and appropriate. A written record of where each quotation came from lets you answer a challenge years later.

AI-assisted research has already failed here in documented ways. In 2025 an academic, Christopher Rudge, found that a report Deloitte produced for the Australian Department of Employment and Workplace Relations contained references that did not exist and, according to reporting by the *Australian Financial Review* and *The Register*, a fabricated quotation attributed to a Federal Court judgment. The corrected version, dated 26 September 2025 and posted on 3 October, deleted or fixed the faulty references and disclosed in its methodology that a generative AI tool chain (Azure OpenAI GPT-4o) had been used for one part of the technical

review. Deloitte agreed to repay the final installment of its fee. Rudge observed that where the corrected version dropped a fake reference, it sometimes put five, six, seven or eight in its place, which, he said, suggested that the original claim "wasn't based on any one particular evidentiary source." A reference attached after a claim was written proves nothing about where the claim came from. Deloitte did not say the tool caused the errors, and nothing here claims that it did.

Whatever the cause, every quotation, citation and biographical detail that comes from an AI tool must be checked against the original text before it enters a manuscript. If you cannot find the original, the quotation does not go in.

Practice. Build a provenance record for every quotation in one chapter. For each, note the exact words; the speaker or author; when, where and to whom they were said or written; the medium; the version you actually read (edition and page, or URL and date accessed); whether you saw the original or someone's quotation of it; and every alteration you made. Then check each against the original and date the check. A quotation you cannot trace is paraphrased, qualified or cut. A chapter takes ninety minutes. A spreadsheet will do for the record, and so will any research tool that ties a note to its source.

Related practices: 71. Label the Kind of Knowing; 72. Match Evidence to Consequence; 75. Shape Facts Without Distorting Them.

PRACTICE 78

State Uncertainty Precisely

State uncertainty precisely rather than disguising it as authority.

In March 1951 an American National Intelligence Estimate concluded that an attack on Yugoslavia that year should be considered "a serious possibility." Shortly after, the chairman of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff asked Sherman Kent, of the Board of National Estimates that had worked on it, what odds the phrase had meant. Kent said his own estimate was about sixty-five to thirty-five in favor of an attack. The chairman was somewhat jolted, because he and his colleagues had read the words to mean odds considerably lower. Kent then asked the members of his own board what they had had in mind when they agreed on the wording. Their answers ran from about twenty percent to about eighty.

Years later Kent wrote the episode up in an essay the CIA has since released, arguing for consistent, unambiguous use of a few key expressions. Left unmodified, he wrote, "reportedly" carries "no evaluative weight whatsoever," and analysts handle reports whose credibility runs from almost certain truth to almost certain nonsense. The writer who reaches for such a word intends honesty, and the reader gets fog, because it does not say what is unknown, why, or what would settle it.

Precision often means fewer hedges, each with content, beginning with which kind of uncertainty you have. It may be that no one knows, because the decision was never made or no record exists. If the sources conflict, you name them; if you are offering an

estimate, you give its basis. “Reportedly” is followed by who reported it and how well placed they were. Readers often act on your uncertainty, and if it is blurred they act on a guess about what you meant, which the Yugoslavia episode shows can scatter widely. Define a word once, early, and keep to it.

Kent himself later judged his first table, eleven phrases each with attached odds, to be unjustifiably sharp given the inexactness of the data, and cut it to five gradations. A figure with no basis misleads in its own way, so if you have none, do not supply one.

Practice. Highlight every hedge in one chapter: may, might, perhaps, reportedly, apparently, seems, some say, it is thought, likely, possibly, approximately, disputed. For each, decide what kind of uncertainty it expresses, and rewrite it as a sentence that says what is unknown, why (no record, sources conflict, not checked, unknowable), and what would settle it. Where the honest answer is that the hedge was a habit, delete it. After an hour you have a before-and-after list of the hedges you changed, with the number deleted written at the top.

Related practices: 14. Let Curiosity Precede Certainty; 71. Label the Kind of Knowing; 72. Match Evidence to Consequence; 76. Resist False Neatness.

PRACTICE 79

Treat Real People as Participants in Consequence

Real people are subjects with rights and consequences, not merely material.

The effects of publication on real people count as part of the Work, weighed during the writing and not discovered afterward. That gives nobody a veto over an honest account of their conduct, and it does not require kindness.

The trap is treating people as material. It is a natural stance, since everything in a life is raw material for the book, and it is easy to feel that a person turned into a character cannot be harmed by a sentence. The person the character was drawn from can be, in reputation, employment, family relations, safety, privacy and the way they will be remembered. These costs tend to fall unevenly. The writer holds the pen, the timing and the adjectives, and the subject cannot revise.

In 1944 Anne Frank began revising her diary for possible publication, and she gave the people in it new names. The family who shared the hiding place, the Van Pels, became the Van Daan. The dentist Fritz Pfeffer, with whom she often quarreled, became Albert Dussel. The Anne Frank Fonds says she did this to preserve the anonymity of the people living with her. When her father prepared the first edition after the war, he kept those two pseudonyms, and he left out some passages, among them a piece in which she wrote harshly about his marriage to her mother.

The relationship between writer and subject is where consequences gather. In 1987 the author Joe McGinniss settled, for $325,000, a $15 million suit by Jeffrey MacDonald, a physician convicted in 1979 of killing his pregnant wife and two daughters. MacDonald had cooperated with McGinniss on *Fatal Vision*. He said McGinniss presented himself as a friend who believed in his innocence while holding the opposite belief. A jury trial of the suit had ended in a mistrial in August; the settlement carried no admission of liability, and McGinniss's lawyer called the book vindicated. A hung jury and a settlement with no admission leave open who was right. Even so, a subject convicted of the gravest crime could take the writer's conduct during the work to a jury, which heard weeks of testimony about it.

Consequence also reaches people who are not named but are identifiable: the sister, the employer, the child.

Some consequences are the point. Accountability writing exists to damage reputations that deserve it, and the Society of Professional Journalists' code distinguishes between private people, who have a greater right to control information about themselves, and public figures and others who seek power, influence or attention. Over-protection has its own cost, since a memoir in which every person has been blurred into harmlessness says little about a life. Ask whether the harm is justified by the truth of the claim (Practice 72), by its importance, and by the person's power relative to yours; some hurt will pass that test.

Practice. List every real person in one chapter of your manuscript who could be identified, by name or by detail, including those who appear only in passing. For each, write what they could lose if the passage were read by their employer, family, neighbors or the authorities. Mark who is exposed that you have not named. Then

decide, passage by passage: keep, change details (and disclose that you did), seek the person's response, or cut. That is ninety minutes for a chapter; for a book, repeat chapter by chapter. Each chapter yields a one-page map of who bears the risk of publication in it, with a decision beside each name.

Related practices: 40. Separate the Selves of Memoir; 72. Match Evidence to Consequence; 80. Increase Care With Vulnerability; 96. Accept the Reader's Authority Over Interpretation.

PRACTICE 80

Increase Care With Vulnerability

The greater the subject's vulnerability and the possible harm, the greater the writer's duty of care.

In an invented case, a clinician masks the eye region in a patient's photograph and considers the patient anonymous. The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors says that is inadequate protection of anonymity. Its recommendations state that patients have a right to privacy that should not be violated without informed consent, that consent for publication requires that an identifiable patient be shown the manuscript, and that nonessential identifying details should be omitted. Whether someone can be recognized depends on what readers already know about them, which the author cannot see. The patient can, and that is why the standard puts the manuscript in the patient's hands.

A uniform standard is the usual way to go wrong. The same casual permission serves for a former senator and for a nine-year-old, or the same ceremony of consent for both, and whichever you pick will be wrong for someone. Another error is the assumption that because the story is yours, the people in it come with it.

The American Anthropological Association's 2012 principles name harm to dignity and to bodily and material well-being among the most serious harms, especially when research involves vulnerable populations. They say that the duty to do no harm can outweigh the goal of new knowledge and can lead a researcher to

discontinue a project. A field that exists to produce knowledge has written into its code that the project itself may have to stop.

The principles also treat consent as something that continues. A memoirist interviews an aunt about a family illness in March, and the aunt's yes seems to cover that conversation. Once the passage exists, in the words you chose, she is entitled to see it and to say no again. Journalism's trauma guidance, such as the Dart Center's advice to show survivors the sections that concern them, works the same way.

Vulnerability has components, and each can be asked about. How large is the gap in power between you and the subject, and how dependent is the person on you, as when access was given in trust? Is capacity diminished by age, illness, trauma or language? Can the person respond at all, or are they absent, incarcerated, dead, or without a platform? How irreversible is the exposure: safety, immigration status, medical information, a child's identity? Care rises with each, and in practice that means more steps. Consent should be informed and should continue over time; the anthropologists describe it as a dynamic process that goes on past any signature. Show the person the passages that concern them, and omit inessential identifying details. Change details and say that you have; the anthropologists' code allows pseudonyms and generalization, and the medical editors allow deidentification so long as it does not distort the meaning. Sometimes the step is to wait.

The duty probably rises because of how publishing normally corrects itself. The subject objects, corrects or replies, and that loop is what catches the writer's errors and excesses. The less able the subject is to answer, the less the loop works, and the more of

the answering must happen before publication, performed by the writer.

Consent is not always available, and not always decisive. The subject may be dead, incapable or hostile, and the Society of Professional Journalists asks for heightened sensitivity with juveniles, victims of sex crimes and people unable to give consent. A memoir about a parent with dementia entangles your story with a person who cannot agree, and no rule resolves it; writing the decision down, as the Practice below asks, at least makes it visible.

Ceremony can stand in for care. A signed release is not a substitute for judgment, and consent obtained from someone in no position to refuse is not consent. The anthropologists' code says to avoid research where consent may not be truly voluntary or informed, and the memoirist's version of that case is the relative who depends on you for care and cannot easily say no to you. These codes were written for clinicians, researchers and reporters, who usually work inside an institution that can review the decision. A memoirist often has no such body, so the questions in the Practice below have to do that work.

Care has a limit on the other side too. Erasing vulnerable people from the record is a harm of its own, and treating them as unable to speak removes the agency you are trying to protect.

Even drafting is part of the duty. Identifying details about a patient, a child or someone in danger are disclosed to any hosted tool you paste them into (Chapter 6).

Practice. Before publication, write a vulnerability and harm review. Answer in sentences: Who in this Work is least able to respond or to consent? What identifying details are inessential, and can they go? What would be irreversible if I am wrong about

this passage? Who else is exposed by implication, such as children or relatives? What would I do if I could not ask them? Then record the changes: omit, alter and disclose, show the passage, delay. A short Work takes an hour. For a book, do one such review for each chapter that has a real person in it, an hour apiece, and stop when each of those chapters has its page. You end up with a dated page, or one per chapter, that you could show an editor.

Related practices: 72. Match Evidence to Consequence; 79. Treat Real People as Participants in Consequence; 96. Accept the Reader's Authority Over Interpretation.

Part 9 — Revision, editing, and feedback

A manuscript exists, and that is the whole situation this part addresses. Before the draft the trouble was absence. Now there is too much to look at, at too many scales, and every kind of judgment is available at once. A misplaced comma, a missing chapter, a character who never wanted anything, a reader's raised eyebrow and a stranger's confident advice all arrive in the same afternoon, all sounding equally urgent.

The practices deal with sequence, what to decide first so your effort lands on work that will survive, and with how you learn what the manuscript is actually doing, as opposed to what you remember intending. They also ask who gets to decide. Your own earlier self has a claim, and so do the readers who report their experience, the editors who work at different layers, and any tool, human or automated, that offers an opinion.

Chapter 7 argues that revision is a decision process in which the author weighs feedback as evidence. This part turns that argument into acts, such as a structural pass that touches no sentences, a cuts file, or a problem statement with no remedy in it. None of the exercises requires a particular way of drafting. A planner meets revision as a comparison between the plan and the pages that resulted, and a discovery writer often meets it as the first moment the true structure becomes visible, which is why Practice 28 and Practice 82 are close neighbors.

The examples come mostly from fiction, the essay, and reported nonfiction, with poetry where it bears on the point. Some of the best-known stories about revision shift when checked against the record, and where the record is thin or contested, the chapters say so.

Read in order, the part follows the life of a revision. For a specific trouble: a passage that keeps being rewritten and keeps failing goes to 86 and then 85; three readers who have said three different things, to 87 and 88; bold revision that feels unsafe because the old version might be lost, to 89; help about to be hired or accepted, of an unclear kind, to 90.

PRACTICE 81

Discover First, Decide Later

Draft to discover possibilities; revise to choose among them.

Drafting and revising ask different questions. Drafting asks what else is here, and rewards range: the odd detail, the alternative ending, the paragraph that may belong to a different book. Revision asks which of these the Work needs, and rewards a willingness to refuse good material. A choice among versions that exist is made on evidence, because you can see what each one does, while a line judged the moment it is written has nothing to be measured against. If the second question arrives during the first, the possibilities die before they can be compared. If the first never gives way to the second, you end with a pile.

Hemingway told *The Paris Review* in 1958 that he rewrote each day up to the point where he had stopped, went over the whole when it was finished, and was grateful for the further chances that a typist's clean copy and the proofs provided. Revision sat inside his drafting, and rereading yesterday's pages was how he got back into the work. What needs separating, then, is attention, whatever the calendar. Rereading to regain momentum counts as generating. The judging starts with rereading to condemn, and the first shouldn't slide into the second without your noticing.

Nor is every decision barred from the draft. A writer may decide on page eighty to change the narrator, provided it is recognized as a decision and made on purpose, instead of the editorial voice leaking into composition. Planners discover too; Practice 23 shows where.

Practice. Take one passage that will not settle, the end of a scene or the opening of a section. In a first session of twenty-five minutes, write three versions that differ in a real way, with a different point of entry, a different order, or a different emphasis, and record no preferences. The next day, in a second session of the same length, read all three and write one sentence on what each does for the reader that the others do not. Choose one, and write one sentence saying why. Put the other two in a cuts file, a separate document where removed passages are kept (Practice 84), and begin revising only the survivor. If you can't write a different sentence for each version, the three were one version in different clothes, and the draft still needs a real alternative.

Related practices: 4. Give Yourself Something to Fix; 23. Every Writer Discovers Somewhere; 84. Cut the Good That Harms the Whole; 92. Create Distance Before Diagnosis.

PRACTICE 82

Revise From the Outside In

Revise in descending scale: purpose, structure, sections or scenes, paragraphs, sentences, then words.

Benjamin Franklin dated his improvement as a writer to a quarrel conducted in letters. As a young apprentice printer he had argued with a friend, John Collins, until his father found the papers and read them. Franklin spelled and pointed correctly, the father observed, as the printing house had taught him, but fell far short "in elegance of expression, in method and in perspicuity." The remedy Franklin described in 1771 came in a sequence. He took papers from the *Spectator*, wrote a short hint of the sentiment in each sentence, set the hints aside for days, then wrote the papers out again and compared them with the originals. In a second drill he jumbled the hints on purpose and tried to restore the best order before forming any full sentences, "to teach me method in the arrangement of thoughts." Words got a drill of their own, because he found he "wanted a stock of words." He was practicing on another writer's finished essays, not revising a manuscript, so the purpose was fixed. He still put arrangement before sentences, which is the order this chapter recommends for revision.

The case for that order in revision is ours, and it rests on dependency. Each scale rests on the one above it. When the purpose changes, so does the structure, and the new structure moves or removes scenes, each of which takes its sentences with it when it goes. Effort spent lower down is less likely to be undone by a decision not yet made when the work runs from the top. Writers often start where control feels easiest anyway, since a

sentence can be fixed in a minute and a structure can't. Line work produces visible progress, and it can also attach a writer to passages whose place in the Work hasn't been settled. Two weeks of line work on a chapter that later turns out to belong in a different book is a real cost, and it makes the next structural decision harder to take honestly.

Chapter 7 puts the principle in a line, revise from the largest unresolved decision downward, and here it becomes one pass at the top scales in which you touch no sentence. To revise structure you have to see it, and few writers can hold a long manuscript of their own in view all at once. The usual instrument is the reverse outline (Practice 28), a list of what each section or scene does, written from the pages rather than from the plan. In fiction, ask what changes between the start and the end of the unit. In nonfiction, ask what the reader now knows, or has been asked to accept, that they did not know before. A unit that cannot be given a function is a candidate for cutting, merging, or relocation, and two units with the same function are a candidate for fusion. A function the whole requires and nothing supplies is a gap. Gaps show up only at this scale, and a copyedit reads straight past them.

A discovery writer often sees the true outline for the first time in this pass. A planner can set the pages beside the plan and decide which of the two is wrong.

Revision can also run upward. A voice found at the level of the sentence can reveal what a piece is actually about, and then the purpose has to be rewritten. Hemingway's habit of rereading and rewriting each day up to where he had stopped is line-level work that doubles as orientation, and a writer who works that way still has a use for this practice at the end of a draft. A poem of fourteen lines has no separate structural scale at all, because there the

sentence is the structure, and a short essay may pass through all six scales in one sitting. The order is a default for manuscripts large enough that early decisions carry a cost a long way downstream. Ask whether the work you're doing could be undone by something decided later. If it could, decide the later thing first.

Practice. Give ninety minutes to one chapter, story, or essay. Before beginning, write one paragraph on what the piece is for. Then list every unit with a one-line function, and mark each unit keep, move, merge, cut, or missing. Do not edit a sentence; if a typo bothers you, copy it to a list for later. Finish with the annotated list and, under it, a short to-do in order, with the largest decision first.

Related practices: 28. Outline What You Actually Wrote; 83. Do Not Polish the Unsettled; 93. Work at One Scale at a Time.

PRACTICE 83

Do Not Polish the Unsettled

Do not polish passages whose function is still unsettled.

A memoirist, an invented composite, spends two weeks on the opening paragraph of a chapter about her father's workshop. The rhythm is exact, and the smell of cut cedar arrives in the second sentence. When she finally shows the chapter to a friend, the friend points out that the workshop never comes up again and that the chapter is really about her sister. The paragraph is beautiful, and she can't make herself cut it. Those two weeks made the right decision more expensive without improving the chapter.

Polish is the most expensive thing to spend on a passage whose job hasn't been decided, and the cost rarely shows up where it was spent. A polished sentence seems to carry weight an unpolished one doesn't. It turns into evidence of competence, something the writer wants to have written, and it starts to resist the very judgments that would have moved it. Finished prose makes changing the structure beneath it look like a bigger loss, so the writer starts defending a paragraph by arguing that the chapter shouldn't change, and honest diagnosis fails there, because the argument is no longer about the Work. A rough sentence is easy to cut, which is the best reason to leave it rough.

Polish on a settled passage is part of the craft. Hemingway told *The Paris Review* that he rewrote the ending of *A Farewell to Arms*, the last page, thirty-nine times before he was satisfied, and that the problem was getting the words right. A 2012 edition carries an introduction by his grandson Sean Hemingway, who told NPR he had found forty-seven alternative endings among the papers,

which he said pretty much bears out the statement, depending on what counts as an ending, since some are fragments. The numbers differ, and neither should be treated as exact. The function of that page was never in doubt. It had to close the book, and the open question was which words did it.

Any passage whose function you can't state in a single sentence ("this exists so that the reader learns X, or feels Y, or can no longer believe Z") is unsettled, however good it sounds. Mark it and forbid line editing there. You may move, merge, cut, and annotate. You may not swap in a better adjective, adjust a rhythm, or reread the passage for pleasure.

Some passages, the fair objection runs, have to be sung before their function can be known. A poet may need a line's sound to learn what the poem wants, and an essay's voice may have to be tried at full strength before anyone can judge whether it fits the subject. That polish is exploratory, a test and not a finish, and should be treated as disposable. A passage polished to find out whether it works can be lost without harm; one polished because polishing it feels good is probably being protected.

Practice. Choose one chapter or section, and for every paragraph finish the sentence "This is here so that the reader ___." Mark with a visible tag, in your own notation, every paragraph for which no honest one-line answer exists. Over the next week, make no sentence-level edit inside a tagged passage. At the end of the week, either write the function down, and polish if you like, or cut.

Related practices: 60. Remove Competitive Flourishes; 82. Revise From the Outside In; 84. Cut the Good That Harms the Whole; 93. Work at One Scale at a Time.

PRACTICE 84

Cut the Good That Harms the Whole

Cut what is good when it prevents the whole from becoming better.

The hardest cut is the one nobody argues for, a passage that is accurate, vivid, maybe the best writing in the manuscript, and wrong for the whole. In nonfiction the darling can be a hard-won fact or an interview that cost weeks, and the effort can become part of the attachment. Arthur Quiller-Couch gave the temptation its famous formulation, "Murder your darlings," and aimed it at ornament specifically, writing performed for its own admiration (Practice 60 gives the context and the misquotation).

Asked of a passage on its own, "is this good?" is a question a good passage usually passes. The useful question is "is the Work better because this stays?" Judged against the whole, a good passage can fail by being the loudest thing in the room, by delaying a payoff, by making a minor character more interesting than the story can afford, or by repeating what the book has already said better. Every passage claims some of the reader's attention, and a manuscript can claim only so much, so a beautiful passage in a minor position displaces whatever should have had that attention. It may also teach the reader what the book is about, and teach it wrongly.

None of this makes cutting virtuous in itself or a shorter manuscript a better one; some writers' first drafts are thin, and their revisions add.

Hemingway left a record of a cut and the reason he gave for it. In *A Moveable Feast*, published after his death in 1964, he says that in "Out of Season" he omitted "the real end of it," which was that the old man hanged himself. His reason was a theory that "you could omit anything if you knew that you omitted," because the omitted part would strengthen the story and make readers feel "something more than they understood." He gives no sign that the passage was weak. Because the theory depends on knowing what was omitted, the writer still holds what was cut, and it goes on shaping what stays, which is the case for the cuts file in the exercise below. Scholars point out that the hanging may never have been drafted, and the book is a memoir of events long past, so it reconstructs a decision and does not record one made at the time. A theory of omission cannot tell you whether your cut worked. The two-day test can.

The authority to cut belongs to the author, and cuts the author cannot endorse are not yet revision. Gordon Lish's heavy cuts to Raymond Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* went ahead although Carver had written asking him to stop production; Practice 70 tells that case in full.

Some passages look unnecessary and carry a load nobody has noticed, such as a digressive scene that makes a later turn credible, or a piece of context a nonfiction argument needs without saying so. That is why the exercise keeps a way back.

Practice. Move one beloved, unnecessary passage out of the manuscript and into a private cuts file, with a date and a line on what it was for. Read the piece aloud without it. After two days, write down what, specifically, is missing. If the answer is a named thing the Work needs, restore the passage, or the part of it that supplies the thing. If the only answer is that the passage was good,

leave it where it is. Either way, write the answer in the cuts file under the date, beside the passage.

Related practices: 13. Gather More Than You Use; 83. Do Not Polish the Unsettled; 89. Preserve History Without Negotiating With It.

PRACTICE 85

Trace Repetition to Its Source

Repeated local problems usually indicate a structural cause.

An editor's letter, imagined for the purpose, notes the same marginal comment eleven times in a three-hundred-page manuscript: "Remind us why she is doing this." The author fixes the eleven places, with a line of motive here and a flashback there, and the next reader leaves the same comment in eleven different places. The cause sat upstream. The character's want was never established with enough force in the first fifty pages, so every later scene had to borrow its motive from a sentence of explanation.

Each instance looks like a separate defect and can be fixed on its own, with some success. A local repair tends to absorb the symptom without touching the source, and the problem often comes back wherever the manuscript next leans on the missing foundation. Structure sets what the reader knows and when. If an early section fails to supply something later sections depend on, every later section either papers over the gap or leaves it open, and the papering tends to look the same each time, which is why recurrence is diagnostic. Suspect first a structure that keeps creating the same demand, and a habit of yours second. Repeated exposition, as one hypothesis, often points to stakes that were never made clear.

Some repetition is designed. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the title character, told of his wife's death, repeats "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" and the repeated word enacts the drag of days; the test is whether the second appearance does something the first did not. And sometimes a repeated problem really is a

habit, a verbal tic or a favorite gesture, to be treated with a search through the manuscript. Repair one thing upstream and see how much of the recurrence disappears. If most of it goes, the cause was structural. If none does, it was habit.

Practice. Take one chapter or section and read it with a single question: where does the same kind of repair appear more than once? Mark each instance, and group them. For each group, write one sentence on what the reader would have to already know or believe for these instances to be unnecessary. Choose the group with the clearest upstream cause, make a single change at that point, and reread to see how many of the local instances have disappeared. Ninety minutes, all told.

Related practices: 28. Outline What You Actually Wrote; 82. Revise From the Outside In; 86. Diagnose Before Rewriting.

PRACTICE 86

Diagnose Before Rewriting

Diagnose the problem before rewriting the prose.

A diagnosis names where the trouble is, what a reader would experience there, and what is not yet known. It doesn't name a solution. "The reader does not believe the refusal" is a diagnosis. "Add a flashback to the refusal" is a repair, and it forecloses the others, an earlier choice, a different refusal, a cut. In an argument, "The reader accepts the claim in section two and rejects it in section four" is a diagnosis, while "add three more examples" is already a decision about the cause. Going to the remedy first feels like progress, and the first plausible remedy is often the one that preserves the most existing text.

One effect has many possible causes, and a repair fits only one. A reader's disbelief at a refusal might come from missing setup, an earlier inconsistency, a pace so fast the stakes were never absorbed, or a character denied enough interior, and each requires a different change. Rewriting without choosing among them is a gamble that may work by accident, and an accidental success teaches the wrong cause.

Many writers know a plainer form of the same defect. A writer senses that a scene is wrong and rewrites it line by line, until the sentences are better and the scene is no more alive; the sentences were often not the problem. Speed is a likely reason, since rewriting can be done immediately and diagnosis has to be thought about. Chapter 7 gives a four-part revision task, made up of the observed problem, its effect, the intended change, and the

evidence that would show improvement, and this practice is the step before the third part.

Jane Austen began what she called Chapter 10 of the second volume of *Persuasion* on July 8, 1816, and dated the end of Chapter 11 July 18. Then she replaced both. The canceled chapters survive in manuscript at the British Library, as far as is known the only surviving holograph pages of a novel she planned and completed for publication. In them Anne and Captain Wentworth come together through Admiral Croft's blundering intervention, a rumor of Anne's engagement to her cousin, and a denial. Her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh, drawing on family recollections, wrote in his *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (title page dated 1870) that the novel had been brought to an end in July with the reconciliation of the hero and heroine in a scene at Admiral Croft's lodgings, but that the performance did not satisfy her. She "thought it tame and flat." She canceled the condemned chapter, he says, and wrote two others, entirely different, in its stead, and Cassandra Austen's memorandum puts the new writing between July 18 and August 6. The printed novel reaches the reconciliation by another route, Wentworth's declaration in a letter. If the family account is accurate, a judgment about effect led to a change in the event itself.

Sometimes an experiment reaches a diagnosis that thought can't. A discovery writer may not know why a scene is flat until a different version of it has been drafted. A rewrite done as a test carries a hypothesis (if the scene starts a page later, does the tension return?) and is judged by whether the hypothesis held. A fix has no hypothesis to check.

Practice. In twenty minutes, write a problem statement on a single page for one troubled passage. It has three sentences: where

the trouble occurs, what a reader experiences there in observable terms, and what is not yet known about why. Do not use the words should, add, cut, or tighten. Leave it for a day. Then, in twenty more minutes, write down two different possible causes before proposing any change, and decide what you would look at to tell them apart.

Related practices: 25. Diagnose the Missing Pressure; 85. Trace Repetition to Its Source; 87. Treat Feedback as Reader Data.

PRACTICE 87

Treat Feedback as Reader Data

Feedback reports a reader's experience; it does not dictate the remedy.

"Why was it so dark?" sounds like a question about lighting. Liz Lerman, the choreographer who devised the Critical Response Process in 1990, describes the process in a summary that includes this example, and the summary says the question is not neutral, because an opinion is folded inside it. "What ideas guided your choices about lighting?" is neutral. The first question tells the artist what the responder believes, and the second leaves room for the artist to learn what the work did.

A note usually carries two different things, and the job is to pull them apart. A reader who was bored on page forty, or did not believe she would leave, or could not tell which brother was speaking, is reporting an experience. Reports like that are data about the manuscript, and the reader is the instrument that produces them. A reader who says to cut the second chapter, or to make the husband the villain, or to add a map, is proposing a remedy, which is a hypothesis about cause offered by someone who may be seeing the effect from the outside.

Neil Gaiman put the asymmetry briefly in a list of rules for writing fiction published in *The Guardian* in 2010. When people say something is wrong or does not work for them, he wrote, they are almost always right, and when they say exactly what is wrong and how to fix it, they are almost always wrong. It is one writer's rule of thumb.

Failing to separate the two goes wrong in opposite directions. Obedience implements every proposed remedy until the manuscript becomes a committee's. Defense answers a report of confusion with an explanation of what the writer meant, so the data is thrown out because it arrived packaged with a bad suggestion. Lerman's published notes handle this by letting the artist say whether suggestions are welcome, and by encouraging responders to work back from a suggestion to the opinion underneath it and then to a neutral question. In that sequence the suggestion becomes a clue to the report behind it.

Stephen King offers a counting rule, and also complicates it. If everyone who reads the manuscript names the same problem, he says in *On Writing*, there is a problem and the writer had better do something about it. If opinions split, so that some readers love the ending and others hate it, it is a wash and the tie goes to the writer. He also cautions against showing a draft too early, which opens the door before the writer knows what the story is, though he accepts that readers are worth consulting, and that a handful of people the writer knows and respects can tell a good deal. The rule is useful, and it has a limit the next practice takes up.

In his *New Yorker* essay "Draft No. 4," McPhee describes Eleanor Gould, who marked up galley proofs at the magazine for decades. Her suggestions were not always graceful, and nothing on them was binding. A writer could ignore a comment, or fix the fix according to the sound in his own head, and her purpose, in her own account, was to help a writer achieve an intent in the clearest way. She reported a problem, sometimes proposed a fix, and left the decision with the owner. An experienced editor can often name causes as well as effects, and such remedies may deserve more weight, though still not obedience.

A tool's feedback goes through the same sorting. A language model can produce a response that reads like a considerate reader's, with named strengths and gentle concerns. Whether a given comment matches how a reader would experience the page can't be assumed, but it can be checked by splitting the comment into report and remedy, then seeing whether human readers report the same thing at the same place. A writer may use such responses as a source of hypotheses or skip them entirely, and the sorting works either way.

Practice. Take one page of feedback, from a person or a tool, and rewrite each comment in three parts: where, who reported it, and what they experienced. Strike every remedy from the main list and keep it in a second column labeled clues. Then tally the locations that more than one comment points toward, all within twenty minutes. Sort any comment shaped like Lerman's "Why was it so dark?" the same way, with the report in the main list and the opinion folded inside it under clues.

Related practices: 86. Diagnose Before Rewriting; 88. Investigate Conflicting Expectations; 96. Accept the Reader's Authority Over Interpretation.

PRACTICE 88

Investigate Conflicting Expectations

When readers disagree, identify the different promises they thought the Work made.

Stephen King's counting rule in *On Writing* treats a split among readers, with some loving the ending and others hating it, as a wash, with the tie going to the writer. That holds when the disagreement is one of taste, when readers agree about what the book is trying to do and differ about whether they enjoyed it. It fails when the split is about the promise. If one reader hated the ending because they thought the book was a mystery, and another loved it because they thought it was a family story, the tie belongs with the opening chapters, which apparently told both stories.

A Work makes promises, and readers hold it to the ones they believe it made. A title, a cover, an opening paragraph or a genre signal sets up an expectation about what will be delivered. A reader who expected a practical manual and got a meditation may well report disappointment, while a reader who expected a meditation may report delight in the same pages. The cause lies upstream of both readers, in the signals the manuscript sent, and those are what to find before deciding whom to believe.

Neil Gaiman, in his 2010 *Guardian* list of rules for fiction, suggests showing a draft to friends whose opinion you respect and who like the kind of thing the piece is. Readers chosen that way roughly match the intended promise, so their disagreements are more likely to concern execution. It is good advice for one stage,

because at some point the Work will meet readers nobody selected.

The mechanism is probably promise and payoff (Practice 48). The first pages and the surface of the Work establish what the reader will track, wait for, and judge, and if two readers tracked different things, the manuscript gave them different things to track. Some disagreements are not about promises at all, and a diagnosis that finds no textual cause is allowed to conclude that the difference is one of taste. Nor does the Work owe every expectation a reader brings. A reader who wanted a different book may be reporting something real about the market and nothing real about the manuscript.

Practice. Take two readers' conflicting responses to the same passage or the same book, and give them thirty minutes. For each, find the earliest place in the text, title, or packaging that could have created the expectation behind the response, and write it down as a quotation or a location. Then decide among three options: alter the promise, alter the payoff, or leave both and accept the cost.

Related practices: 18. Treat Genre as a Conversation; 48. Connect Promises to Payoffs; 87. Treat Feedback as Reader Data.

PRACTICE 89

Preserve History Without Negotiating With It

Preserve earlier versions, but revise the current manuscript decisively.

A working file in which every deleted option survives in brackets, alternates and commentary, "[or: she turns away]," "[earlier version of this paragraph below]," each kept because deletion felt irreversible, no longer shows the current state of the Work. A file like that is hard to read, so it is hard to revise. The opposite failure is revising timidly because there is no safety net. Keeping what was without letting it govern what is can sound like two instructions in conflict.

A checkpoint resolves both. Before a bold revision, make an identifiable copy of the manuscript, with a date and a one-line note on what you're about to try, and after that revise the live file without keeping the dead alternatives inline. A dated folder, a commit in a version-control system, or a saved version in whatever writing application you use can all do the job; the discipline of separating the record from the draft matters more than the technology. Part of the reason is probably psychological. A change feels safer when it can be reversed, and you can revise more boldly once you've stopped calculating whether to undo it.

Fitzgerald's galleys for the novel then titled *Trimalchio* show what goes missing without one. Princeton's archive holds the autograph manuscript and the corrected galleys; according to its curators, the typescripts that stood between them do not survive, and what

happened between those two states cannot be reconstructed from the archive. That is the gap a dated checkpoint closes. The scholar Matthew Bruccoli, quoted in Princeton's account, argued that Fitzgerald regarded galleys as a special kind of typescript or trial edition in which to rewrite whole scenes as necessary.

A cuts file, the separate document where removed passages are kept (Practice 84), is a legitimate resource, and earlier versions may contain a sentence worth restoring, or evidence of when a decision was made. More versions are not always better, though. A writer who keeps forty numbered copies and compares them compulsively may be negotiating with the past instead of deciding.

Deleting a passage from the current manuscript does not delete it from the history. If a file will go to a reader, an editor, or a collaborator, earlier text can travel with it, in tracked changes, comments, saved versions, or file metadata, depending on the software. Before sending, export a clean copy and look at what is actually in it. This matters most for anything you've deliberately removed for the sake of privacy, or on behalf of a real person.

Some collaborative or translated work legitimately carries live alternatives. An editor's tracked changes are meant to sit inline until the author resolves each one, and a translator may carry two renderings of a line until a decision is possible. Those alternatives are pending rather than dead, and nothing pending should remain when the manuscript is declared current. To tell a live alternative from a dead one, ask whether anyone is going to choose between them.

Practice. Create a named checkpoint of the manuscript, with a date and a note. Then spend thirty minutes revising one section

decisively, deleting dead alternatives and leaving no brackets and no commentary in the text. Wait a day, compare the section against the checkpoint, and confirm that what was removed is what you meant to remove.

Related practices: 81. Discover First, Decide Later; 84. Cut the Good That Harms the Whole.

PRACTICE 90

Name the Editorial Layer

Revision changes meaning and effect; copyediting corrects expression; proofreading verifies production.

In 1860 Lydia Maria Child, editing Harriet Jacobs's manuscript of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, wrote to Jacobs that she was "transposing sentences and pages," and advised cutting the final chapter, on John Brown: "It does not naturally come into your story, and the M. S. is already too long. Nothing can be so appropriate to end with, as the death of your grandmother." To a friend, Jean Fagan Yellin's biography *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* reports, Child said she had "abridged, and struck out superfluous words sometimes, but I don't think I altered fifty words in the whole volume."

Both accounts are true, because they describe different layers. Almost nothing changed at the level of the word, and a good deal at the level of the book, as her printed introduction said: "At her request, I have revised her manuscript; but such changes as I have made have been mainly for purposes of condensation and orderly arrangement." Before Yellin's research in the 1970s and 1980s, the accepted academic opinion, voiced by historians such as John Blassingame, was that the book was fiction, or really Child's. William L. Andrews writes that the correspondence, published in Yellin's 1987 edition, shows Child's role as editor "no more than she acknowledged." Because Child had stated her layer in the introduction, the claim could be checked against the letters.

A writer who asks for a proofread expects someone to find the structural problem. A manuscript still missing its middle goes to a

copy editor, who produces a flawless version of an unfinished draft. At the final stage a proofreader proposes a different ending, and nobody can decide whether to accept it. Or the requested changes arrive as a single list in which an error of fact, a suggestion about character, and a preference about commas have the same tone and the same apparent weight.

No single set of definitions is essential, but the Editorial Freelancers Association's working definitions are a useful reference for how far each layer reaches into the Work. Developmental editing deals with content, organization, and genre, and may provide an overall critique or a revision letter outlining big-picture issues. Line editing works at the sentence or paragraph level and focuses on the language and style of the text. Copyediting corrects spelling, grammar, usage, and punctuation, checks cross-references, and builds the style sheet that keeps a manuscript consistent. Proofreading, usually among the last stages, checks the publisher's proof for typographical and formatting errors and confirms that earlier changes were made correctly. The EFA lists research and fact-checking as a separate service, which nonfiction manuscripts can lack altogether.

Each layer assumes the one before it has been settled. A copyedit applied to a chapter that will be cut is wasted work, and a developmental suggestion at proof stage is expensive and disruptive. A line edit before the structure is settled falls under Practice 83, since it polishes what may not survive. The layers also differ in the authority an author normally grants them. A copyeditor's correction to a date is often accepted without debate, while a developmental editor's proposal about structure is advice, to be weighed against purpose. Child's advice to cut the John Brown chapter was advice of that second kind, and Jacobs took it; the printed book has no such chapter.

In practice the layers blur, and some writers must perform several of them alone. Claire Kehrwald Cook's *Line by Line*, subtitled *How to Edit Your Own Writing*, is addressed to writers who do their own sentence-level editing; no one else may be coming. A line editor may notice a structural problem, and should say so. A short article may compress developmental, line, and copy work into a single pass, and a fact-check can alter a paragraph's argument. The EFA itself notes that line editing may be combined with developmental editing or with copyediting. The maxim asks for labeling and doesn't forbid overlap, and once the change is labeled, you can decide what to do about it.

Software sold as an editor may work at one layer or at several without saying which. A suggestion that looks like a copyedit may alter meaning, and a suggested citation may not exist, as Practice 99 recounts. For any automated suggestion, ask which layer it claims to occupy, and read the change before accepting it.

Practice. Take any list of requested changes, from an editor, a reader, or a tool. Label each one revision, line, copyedit, proofread, or fact-check, and mark whether it changes meaning. Then sort by layer and deal with the highest first. Anything that arrives at the wrong layer, such as a structural request at proof stage, goes back with a question: decide now, or defer? A list of about a dozen requests takes thirty minutes, and the result is one list in layer order.

Related practices: 82. Revise From the Outside In; 83. Do Not Polish the Unsettled; 87. Treat Feedback as Reader Data.

Part 10 — Completion and the writing life

Most of this book is about making. This part is about the far edge of the making, where a Work stops, meets other people, and has to be followed by a life. Attention can improve a sentence. It cannot improve a decision to stop, a stranger's first reading, a refusal in the mail, or a winter in which no writing happens, and those call for judgment about things the page cannot report.

Practices 91 to 93 judge the draft: when it is finished, when to read it, and at what scale. Writers who cannot stop and writers who stop too soon often seem to have the same trouble. A draft just finished can feel luminous or worthless, and neither kind of writer has a standard for completion other than that mood, and the mood is unreliable in both directions. If you cannot stop revising, try 91, which gives criteria for finished, and 100, which asks what the delay is protecting. If you have just typed the last line of a draft and have no idea what you made, try 92. If an evening of revising leaves you unable to say whether the pages improved, try 93.

Two questions of form tend to surface late. Practice 94 asks whether a convention is being broken with knowledge, for a form that feels stiff or strangely loose, and 95 whether a reader's difficulty belongs to the Work or to the author's oversight, for pages a reader gets lost in.

Chapter 8 argued that publication is an authored transition with consequences, and Practices 96 and 97 look at that crossing from

inside. Publication takes away exclusive authority over what the Work means, which is the subject of 96 and the place to go when a book is already in readers' hands. A refusal arrives with very little information attached and invites a verdict anyway; a letter that begins "unfortunately," calls for 97.

The last three follow the writer across the years. A writing life is a series of seasons, some generous and some nearly empty, and Practice 98 designs for the hard ones in advance, because nobody designs well on the worst day. Practice 99 asks how help, whether from editors, collaborators, software or AI, can enter that life without taking over its decisions, and 100 asks whether what stands between the Work and its readers is craft or fear.

Several writers in these pages had work refused, heavily edited, or written around other obligations before it was admired. They are here because their records show specific decisions made under specific constraints. Those records do not show that persistence is rewarded, and nothing here suggests that finishing leads to publication, that publication leads to readers, or that readers lead to income. Where a chapter touches money it says so plainly, because a practice that rests on an unstated hope of payment tends to collapse when the hope does.

PRACTICE 91

Finish According to Purpose

A work is finished not when nothing can change, but when further changes no longer serve its governing purpose.

If a writer's only completion rules are "when I can't stand it anymore" and "when it's due," the writer will eventually stop, and will have learned nothing about whether the Work was ready, because neither rule measures the Work. One of them is fatigue and the other is the calendar.

Paul Valéry, in a 1933 essay on his poem "Le Cimetière marin," wrote that to lovers of disquiet and perfection a work is never finished, a word that means nothing to them, but abandoned. The abandonment, he went on, whether it hands the work to the flames or to the public, and whether it comes from weariness or from an obligation to deliver, feels to such people like an accident. The line is usually quoted without its first half, and quoted alone it becomes a consolation in which nobody finishes and everybody quits. Valéry was describing one temperament. On our reading, his weariness and his obligation to deliver are the same two things that end a work when nothing else governs the ending.

A third condition is available. The Work is finished when further changes no longer serve what it is for. Flawlessness can't be the test, because no manuscript gets there, and a Work can always be made different, as Chapter 7 has already said. A purpose, once stated, generates tests. "Could it be better?" always gets a yes. "Does the reader now understand why the sister left?" and "Can every figure in chapter three be traced to a source I could

produce?" can actually be answered, and once they are, whatever changes remain are preferences.

Hemingway's many rewrites of the last page of *A Farewell to Arms* (Practice 83 gives his own account) are often told as a story about perfectionism. As a case of finishing it is a narrow one. The ending's function was not in doubt, and the open question was one page and one criterion, the right words. He put the effort where the standard was unmet and stopped when he judged it met. Whether he judged correctly is for readers to decide.

When a film or television script reaches production it is issued as a production draft, and later changes travel on colored pages, in a common order of blue first, then pink, yellow, green and goldenrod and on through further colors, so that everyone on the set can see which version is current. The writer's sense of readiness doesn't usually set that date; the schedule, the budget and the people waiting for pages do. Such a script isn't frozen. It is in a named state with a procedure for change, which is a fair description of what finished can mean for any text, and sometimes the calendar really is part of the purpose. An analysis of an election that arrives after the vote has failed at the one thing it was for.

Practice. Write a finish sheet in about half an hour. Purposes move, and if the Work changed in the drafting, criteria written at the start will finish a book that no longer exists, so restate the purpose first (Chapter 2). Discovery writers often can't state criteria until a draft shows what the Work is, and for them the sheet belongs after the first retrospective look at structure, not before. It has three headings. *Must be true* lists conditions tied to the purpose and the reader's promise, each one checkable. *May remain unresolved* lists the ambiguities and imperfections you have

decided to accept, with a reason beside each. *Belongs elsewhere* collects ideas for a later edition or another Work. Date the sheet. When revision starts to feel endless, consult it rather than your mood. An editor or collaborator can check the Work against it too.

Related practices: 5. Finish Enough to Learn From Endings; 82. Revise From the Outside In; 100. Release What Fear Is Holding.

PRACTICE 92

Create Distance Before Diagnosis

Leave time between drafting and diagnosis when circumstances allow.

Stephen King advises putting a finished novel draft in a desk drawer for at least six weeks before rereading it. He gives the figure as his own minimum and says the length is up to the writer. His reason is that rereading too soon can't be trusted.

In the hours after a draft ends, each sentence tends to come back to its writer with its history attached: what was meant, what was cut, what the scene was supposed to feel like. The eventual reader gets none of that. Rereading a fresh draft, the writer may hear intention and text at once, be unable to separate them, and fill the gaps without noticing. The diagnosis made then is confident and vivid and concerns the wrong object, a memory of writing rather than a page.

For the length of one reading the writer needs to be someone who has only the page. Time gets there by displacement, as other work and other concerns push the memory of composing down far enough that the sentences begin to say only what they say. That account is ours, not King's. Distance makes diagnosis possible and supplies no insight of its own, and writers differ in how long it takes.

Some circumstances don't allow much. A reporter filing to an edition may have hours, and a writer feeding a weekly or monthly

serial may have a printer waiting. Hemingway's morning rereading (Practice 81) shows the principle at a smaller scale, yesterday's pages met after a night away from them. The interval can be a night, a walk or a change of room. Where even that is out of reach, the manuscript's appearance can change instead: print it, set it in another typeface, read it aloud (Practice 57). None of these equals time, but each moves the text out of its familiar frame, and each is free.

Practice. On the day a draft ends, set a reopening date proportionate to the Work and to the life you actually have: overnight for a short piece, a week or two for an essay or story, longer for a book, with King's six weeks as one writer's stated minimum for a novel. Before closing the file, write half a page predicting what a stranger will find strong and what weak. Spend the interval on something else. On the day, read the whole text once with a pen used only to mark where your attention drops, and then lay the marks beside the prediction. Where they disagree is the first real information the draft has given you.

Related practices: 28. Outline What You Actually Wrote; 57. Use the Mouth as an Editing Tool; 81. Discover First, Decide Later.

PRACTICE 93

Work at One Scale at a Time

Work on one scale of the manuscript at a time.

A writer sits down to a chapter and everything is open at once: whether the chapter should exist, the order of its sections, the strength of a paragraph, the rhythm of a sentence, the spelling of a name. A section moves, its first line is reworked, the premise is doubted, a comma is fixed. At the end of the evening the pages are different, and the writer can't say whether they're better, because no single question was ever asked.

The editors who prepared technical reports at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory gave this problem a formal answer. They defined nine types of editorial work, among them substantive, language, mechanical style, format and policy, and combined the types into five cumulative levels, in a document whose second edition appeared in 1980 under the title *The Levels of Edit*. A manuscript was assigned a level, so that editors, authors and managers could agree which work was to be done on it. The report's authors say the concept improved communication among those three groups about the specific work each manuscript needed, and that it served as a tool for estimating and monitoring cost.

Revising alone, a writer has the same problem with nobody to disagree with, and the likely cause is that no one has decided which question the session is asking. At the scale of purpose the question is whether the chapter earns its place. Down at the sentence, it shrinks to whether this sentence sounds right after the one before it. Ask both at once and the vivid small problem tends to win, because it is easy to see and satisfying to fix, while the

large one stays vague. A sentence labored over in the first hour also tends to resist the verdict, reached in the third, that its paragraph should go.

Practice 82 recommends an order for revision across the whole manuscript, from purpose downward. The unit here is smaller, the sitting. Whatever the order, a session is easier to run, and its results easier to judge, when it has one declared scale. You can still notice other things; you just don't act on them. The scales don't stay apart, either. A repeated local problem often has a structural cause, and a session at one scale will turn up evidence for another, so write the evidence down and let the response wait for its own session.

Hemingway, whose morning rereading Practice 81 describes, is a working counterexample. For a writer who drafts forward from yesterday's pages, mixing scales is a feature, and the maxim is meant for the stages where evaluation, not momentum, is the task.

Practice. Take the next three revision sessions. Before each, write a line at the top of the working document naming the scale, the question and what is out of scope: "Structure. Does each section earn its place? Not wording." In a short poem the line break, the sentence and the architecture are often one decision and the scales don't separate cleanly, so there the useful declaration isn't "sentences today" but a specific question, such as whether the turn arrives where it should. Keep a parking list beside the line, and whenever something at another scale catches your eye, add it and keep going. At the end of the session, sort the list by scale and assign each item to a later session. Afterward look at what changed in the manuscript, which should all belong to one scale, and at how long the parking list grew, which measures how often your attention strayed. If the parking list is longer than the list of

changes, the manuscript is asking a question at a different scale, and the list shows which.

Related practices: 82. Revise From the Outside In; 83. Do Not Polish the Unsettled; 85. Trace Repetition to Its Source.

PRACTICE 94

Learn the Form Before Breaking It

Learn the conventions of a form before breaking them on purpose.

A convention broken by a writer who doesn't know it exists produces a deviation the reader can't tell from an accident, while a writer who never deviates, out of caution, tends to produce competent copies. This practice asks for knowledge of the form and says nothing about who may break it. To learn a form is to understand what its conventions do for the reader, what they cost, and what the Work would lose by dropping them. That may not take years of apprenticeship in sonnets, and the break can be small, a scene with no visible conflict, a memoir without a controlling thesis, a play whose last act is a silence.

In May 1924 Virginia Woolf read a paper to a Cambridge society, later printed as "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (the essay Practice 12 quotes), in which she compared a literary convention to a social one. A hostess, she said, mentions the weather to an unknown guest because generations of hostesses have established it as a subject in which everyone believes, and so bridges the gulf between strangers. A writer needs the same bridge to an unknown reader, and must begin from something the reader recognizes. It is an odd thing for a champion of new fiction to say, and it is the strongest argument against breaking rules carelessly. A convention is an offered hand, and refusing it communicates something only to a person who knows a hand was offered.

In the same paper she argued that the tools of the Edwardian novelists Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy were wrong for her generation, and compared asking them to teach you to write a novel with asking a bootmaker to teach you to make a watch. Yet she also called their books of great value and even necessity, since there are seasons when boots matter more than watches. She had examined their tools closely enough to say exactly what they were for. Her own record runs in that order. Her first two novels, *The Voyage Out* (1915) and *Night and Day* (1919), are often described as conventional in form and narration, and *Jacob's Room* (1922) as her departure from them.

T. S. Eliot, in the *New Statesman* in March 1917, gave the clearest technical statement of the mechanism. Free verse, he argued, is not free; the ghost of some simple meter should lurk behind the arras even in the freest verse, and freedom is truly freedom only against the background of an artificial limitation. He concluded that the supposed division between conservative verse and free verse does not exist, because there is only good verse, bad verse, and chaos. We read the claim as one about the ear. A line that departs from a pattern carries information only if the reader has heard the pattern, and where nobody has, the departure is just a line.

Invention doesn't always follow knowledge, though. We think a writer can stumble on a form through ignorance of the rule, with a result that may be good, and that conventions can be gates. A writer from outside a dominant tradition may need to learn two sets, the one readers expect and the one the Work comes from, and nobody should pretend the first is neutral. In some media there is no stable rulebook to learn, and learning means reading and watching widely and noticing what audiences expect. The order can even be inverted, so that the convention is broken in a draft to

see what happens and the rule learned from the result. The knowledge has to be present when the choice is published, not when it is first attempted.

Practice. Make a convention card for one deviation you are making or considering. It has four lines: what the convention does for the reader; what the Work loses by keeping it; what the Work gains by breaking it; what on the page will tell a reader the break is deliberate. Then write a conventional version of the passage in about 150 words and set it next to your own version. Ask one reader to read both and say which reads as intended, and why. If they can't tell the break was chosen, the fault may lie in the signal rather than the idea. The whole exercise takes forty minutes, plus the reader's.

Related practices: 17. Let the Material Choose Its Container; 18. Treat Genre as a Conversation; 69. Use Constraint to Remove the Obvious.

PRACTICE 95

Preserve Difficulty, Remove Needless Confusion

Protect the reader from needless confusion, not from difficulty.

"124 was spiteful." Toni Morrison opens *Beloved* with a number and an adjective applied to a house, and a reader who knows nothing yet is already inside the house's temper. In her foreword she says she wanted no lobby into the house and no introduction into the novel. She wanted readers thrown into an unfamiliar world without preparation, as the book's characters had been taken from place to place without it. The opening is disorienting by design. It seems to us not confusing, because the first sentence is short and concrete and the reader can say exactly what they do not yet understand: what would make a house spiteful, and why a house has only a number.

Difficulty is a demand on attention, patience, background or tolerance for uncertainty that the Work chooses because its subject requires it, such as a long sentence that holds an unresolved thought, a structure that withholds the reason for its first scene, or an argument that needs three terms held at once. It can be what the Work is for. Needless confusion is an obstacle that exists because something the writer knows is not on the page, or is on the page where the reader can't use it, and it is almost always an oversight.

Steven Pinker calls a frequent cause the curse of knowledge. It doesn't occur to the writer that readers can't see steps that seem too obvious to mention. Pinker raised it about academic prose,

and we extend it to fiction, where a novelist who knows exactly why a character flinches at a name, and never shows the reader, has the same problem.

From inside, the two can't be told apart. Withheld information has a place where it will be paid out, whether in a plan or in a revision that finds the payoff, and missing information has none. To the person who already has the answer they feel identical, because that person silently supplies it (Practice 92 describes the same effect at the scale of the manuscript). So the test has to be empirical, run by a reader who is not the writer. Can they say what they do not know?

The test is bounded by the promise the Work made (Practice 16). What bewilders a general reader may be ordinary to a specialist, and a text can be perfectly navigable and still wrong for its audience. Some forms keep an irreducible ambiguity, a poem or an ending that settles nothing, and should. A Work can also fail by being made too easy, so that the thing that made it demanding is gone.

Practice. Take two consecutive pages of a current Work, read them as a stranger would, and mark every place where a first-time reader might pause. Sort the marks into two kinds. "Owed" means the text signals that an answer is coming, or that it is deliberately declined. "Unsupplied" means the answer exists only in your head. For each unsupplied mark, give the information, move it earlier, or add the signal that makes it owed. That part takes about forty minutes. Then give the pages, for whatever time it takes, to someone who has not seen the Work and ask them to mark where they said "wait." Where their marks meet yours, you have found

needless confusion. Marks on passages you meant to be hard, which read the way you intended, are difficulty doing its job.

Related practices: 16. Define the Reader's Change; 53. Make Complexity Followable; 66. Make Exposition Change Something.

PRACTICE 96

Accept the Reader's Authority Over Interpretation

Publication transfers control of interpretation to readers.

Practice. Keep an interpretations ledger for one Work, in about an hour plus the time the readers take. Ask a reader who has not discussed the Work with you what it is about, and write down the answer without correcting it. Ask a second if you can. Then list three readings the Work supports that you did not intend, and mark each as supported by a pattern of choices in the text, merely compatible with the text, or unsupported by it. Beside each, decide whether to welcome it, revise to open or close it, or leave it. Beside any reading you would rather not have, write the line of the text that produced it. The result is a short list with a decision beside every line, and perhaps one revision.

In a foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, J. R. R. Tolkien took up a persistent assumption, that the book was an allegory of its century. He answered that he cordially disliked allegory and preferred history, true or feigned, because history can be applied to the thought and experience of readers in many ways. Allegory, he says, lies in "the purposed domination of the author," and applicability in "the freedom of the reader." Denying that he intended any allegory, he keeps the right to say what he meant and gives up the right to say what the book may be applied to.

An author can instead play proprietor of meaning, correcting readers in public and treating each unintended reading as a theft,

or abdicate on the grounds that readers decide and so nothing the book does is the author's concern. Control of interpretation moves to readers, and responsibility for the text stays with the author. A published text is a fixed set of words meeting readers whose histories the author doesn't share, and the author's knowledge doesn't travel with the book unless it is on the page.

That authority stops where the text does, so a reading that requires ignoring what is on the page is not an interpretation the Work supports. It also stops at fact. In nonfiction a reader may disagree with an argument, but can't make a false claim true by reading it generously, and a writer who has misquoted someone can't say the text means otherwise (Practice 77). Nor does it remove the author's duty to respond. If many readers find harm the author didn't intend, a stereotype for instance, "that is not what I meant" is not an answer. The remedy is often a revision in a later edition (Chapter 8), not a rebuttal.

Related practices: 16. Define the Reader's Change; 87. Treat Feedback as Reader Data; 88. Investigate Conflicting Expectations.

PRACTICE 97

Interpret Rejection Narrowly

Rejection is evidence about fit, timing, and reception—not a final verdict on quality.

In November 1797 the Reverend George Austen wrote to the London publisher Thomas Cadell, offering a manuscript novel "comprised in three Vols. about the length of Miss Burney's Evelina" and saying he would send it if Cadell was interested. Cadell returned the letter with a curt note across the top: declined by return of post. The manuscript had not been sent. Cadell had not read it. The reply answered an offer, and about the book itself, then called *First Impressions*, it said nothing. That book would reach print in January 1813 as *Pride and Prejudice*, after Austen had revised it heavily in 1811 and 1812. The museum at Chawton notes that the first draft is believed to have been written as a series of letters. The text refused in 1797 and the text printed in 1813 were not the same object.

An answer like Cadell's is easy to read as a verdict on the person or on the Work's worth. It is just as easy to conclude that every refusal is the publisher's blunder and that those turned away are all Austens. Both read too much into the evidence. Strictly, a refusal establishes that a particular reader or institution declined a particular Work at a particular time, under conditions the writer can't see, such as a list already full of a similar book, a budget for the year, or the taste of whoever opened the envelope. It can speak to fit, timing or reception, usually only one of them, and often faintly.

A form refusal says almost nothing about the Work; it is a message about the sender's process. A personal note, even a line, suggests someone read at least some of it. A specific critique, offered with reasons, is feedback and should be handled as such (Practice 87). The strongest evidence a rejection process produces is a pattern, the same reservation from several independent readers, and it concerns the Work. Sort each response into its grade and let it move your estimate by that much and no more. That is our reasoning, not a law of publishing.

Proust's first volume, *Swann's Way*, was turned down by several publishers in 1912 and early 1913, among them the Nouvelle Revue Française (NRF), where André Gide, who later took much of the blame, was among those who looked at it. Accounts differ on how closely he read it. In his own first draft of the apology, Gide says he had only one of the notebooks, opened it with a distracted hand, and stopped at the cup of camomile on page 62 and a sentence about a forehead and vertebrae on page 64. His colleague Jean Schlumberger later said that nobody at the house had read the manuscript beyond dipping into a few paragraphs whose writing looked discouraging. Proust paid for Grasset to publish it in 1913, and in January 1914 Gide wrote to him that the refusal of the book would remain the NRF's gravest mistake and one of the sharpest regrets and remorses of his life.

A judgment made on partial reading was reversed by the man who made it. That does not make refusals generally mistaken, and the comfort of "they rejected Proust too" should be handled with care. Austen and Proust are known to us because their cases turned. For most writers a refusal stays a refusal, and some declined manuscripts were not ready.

Submitting spends time and money. Each query takes preparation and then a wait, some venues charge fees, and the wait forecloses other uses of the same months. Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* appeared in 1811 on commission, which meant that she carried the financial risk, and its title page said only "By a Lady." That route had costs of its own, and it shows that waiting and giving up are not the only choices.

Practice. Before the first submission, spend thirty minutes setting up a rejection ledger. For every response, in about five minutes, record what happened in plain terms (who, when, what they said or did not say); what it supports, if anything (fit, timing, reception, a craft concern, with the reader's stated reason where one exists); and what it does not support. Then write a revision trigger in advance, while you are calm. For example: three readers who give reasons and name the same problem send me back to revise; form refusals alone send me to change the list of places I submit to, not the manuscript. Read the whole ledger again after the tenth entry, when a pattern, if there is one, has had room to show.

Related practices: 87. Treat Feedback as Reader Data; 88. Investigate Conflicting Expectations; 98. Build a Practice for Every Season.

PRACTICE 98

Build a Practice for Every Season

Build a practice that can survive success, failure, deadlines, and ordinary life.

A writer builds a schedule in a generous year. Then a child is born, a parent falls ill, a job changes, a book sells and brings invitations, a deadline arrives, or a long low stretch sets in, and the schedule fails and takes the writer's sense of being a writer along with it. The usual response is to blame character. More often it is probably a design flaw, a schedule that fit one set of conditions and no others, taken for the practice when it was a practice for one season.

Haruki Murakami's well-known routine, from his 2004 interview with *The Paris Review*, is up at four, five or six hours of work, a run or a swim in the afternoon, bed at nine, every day without variation. He introduces it as what he does "when I'm in writing mode for a novel." It is a mode, entered for a book, and he describes the repetition as a kind of self-mesmerism and treats it as demanding work. In the same interview, describing how he came to write, he talked about running a jazz club, making the cocktails and the sandwiches, and starting his first book at the kitchen table after midnight. It took ten months.

Toni Morrison told the same magazine in 1993 that she began writing before dawn out of necessity, when her children were small and needed her around five in the morning. After she left Random House she kept the early hours by choice, having found

herself clearer-headed in the morning. (Practice 1 gives the other half of her account, the sustained bursts when something was urgently there.)

Define three modes before you need them. *Full* is the arrangement under which you do your deepest generative work, and for many writers it may be rare; some Works need an immersion that no Reduced mode supplies, and a book may need a season of Full to exist at all. *Reduced* is what remains possible when Full is not, a smaller unit in a smaller space, twenty minutes at lunch or a single scene card, chosen because it moves the Work by an amount you can see. *Maintenance* is the smallest act that keeps the Work present in your mind without asking anything more of your life, such as rereading the last page or leaving a note about where you would pick up. In some seasons maintenance is nothing at all, and nothing here promises that something can always be done. A Work can wait, provided it is safe, findable, and left where you will know how to resume.

Money decides many seasons. The Authors Guild's 2023 survey of 5,699 published authors in the United States, a voluntary survey and not a random sample, reported for 2022 a median book income of $2,000 among all respondents, about a third of whom considered themselves full-time authors, and $10,000 among the full-time authors. Median income from all author-related work was $5,000 and $20,000. Those figures say nothing certain about any one writer, they will change, and the current ones for your market are worth looking up. They do support a plain planning rule. A practice that depends on writing paying for itself is fragile, and a writer who also holds other work is in the ordinary case and has failed at nothing.

Success, with its requests on your time and a new audience arriving before the next book is ready, is a change in conditions like any other. Decide in advance what stays protected.

Practice. Write the three modes on one page, each with an amount of time, a place, a minimum output, and the circumstances that move you into it. Then run one week deliberately in Reduced mode and record what you did. Look at what survived, and at what you had assumed was necessary and was not.

Related practices: 1. Make Beginning Ordinary; 2. Shrink the Doorway; 6. Protect the Conditions.

PRACTICE 99

Extend Judgment Without Surrendering It

Use tools, editors, and collaborators to extend judgment, not replace it.

Whatever a helper hands over is a proposal, whether it is a research assistant's summary, an editor's cut, a software suggestion or a collaborator's scene, and that holds for any helper, human or not. A helper can supply what the writer lacks, a reader without the memory of composing, a source the writer hasn't read, speed, or a cut the writer couldn't bring themselves to make. The Work's purpose and the promise it made to its readers stay with the writer, and they are the standard any suggestion has to meet. That reasoning is ours. A writer who hands over the decision hands the standard to someone who doesn't hold it.

In the autumn of 1921, on three months' sick leave from his job at a bank, T. S. Eliot worked on *The Waste Land* at Margate and then at Lausanne. The draft he showed Ezra Pound came back marked up, with large parts cut. The poem appeared in 1922 under Eliot's name; he wrote the dedication to Pound, *il miglior fabbro*, the better craftsman, by hand in Pound's copy, and it was first printed in 1925. In 1946 he wrote that he would wish the blue penciling to be preserved as "irrefutable evidence of Pound's critical genius." Asked in 1959 whether the cuts had changed the poem's intellectual structure, Eliot said no. He thought the longer version had been just as structureless, only in a more futile way. Pound

saw what Eliot had missed, and Eliot decided what stood and credited the help.

Raymond Carver's case shows how murky the line can be. After Gordon Lish's heavy edits to *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, Carver wrote a letter asking Lish to stop production and, two days later, another that was thrilled yet uneasy (Practice 70 tells it). Critics still disagree about whether his judgment was extended or replaced, and the record can't settle that for anyone outside.

Software and AI make the question a daily one. In *Mata v. Avianca*, decided in the Southern District of New York on June 22, 2023, lawyers filed a brief citing court decisions that a general-purpose chatbot had produced and that did not exist. When the court asked for copies, they supplied documents that purported to be the decisions. The court's own findings add that one lawyer had asked the chatbot whether the cases were real, and that it had said yes. The judge found subjective bad faith and fined the lawyers and their firm $5,000, jointly. The output entered a document the signers were accountable for without anyone checking it against a source, and the lawyers stood by it when challenged. Eliot tested Pound's cuts against the standard he carried, and that is the step the filing skipped. Claims, quotations, citations and biographical details produced by AI are unverified until checked against an original (Practice 77).

None of this makes help suspect. One writer may use none and write well, and another may use a great deal and write well; the question is where the deciding happens. Chapter 6 set out the inspection questions for any tool, what it receives, retains and changes. This practice is about the allocation of decisions, which

kinds of choice a writer is willing to have assisted and on what condition the help will be accepted.

Declining help is a legitimate choice, and a writer who declines for a stated reason, such as a voice kept unmixed or a wish to answer for every sentence, has made a decision. Accepting help carries the mirror risk, since a suggestion taken because it came from someone senior, or from a tool that sounds sure, hasn't been judged. Some editors may see a book more clearly than its author can, though, and when a writer can't evaluate a suggestion, deference with a stated reason is also a decision.

Practice. Draw a decision map for your current Work. List ten decisions, from large (what the book is for, whether a character lives) to small (a title, a paragraph's wording, a citation, a publication date). Sort each into one of three columns: open to assistance from any source; assisted, then verified or accepted by me, with how I will check; mine alone. For each item in the third column write one sentence of reason. Keep the map beside the manuscript, and notice the first time you break it. The map takes forty-five minutes. Eliot's second column would have read: cuts from Pound, accepted by me, credited in the dedication. Write yours in that form.

Related practices: 73. Challenge the Convenient Source; 77. Preserve Quotation Integrity; 87. Treat Feedback as Reader Data.

PRACTICE 100

Release What Fear Is Holding

Release the work when further delay protects fear more than craft.

Practice. Spend twenty minutes making two lists. The first is Requirements: everything remaining that is craft, ethical or legal, each with an observable test and an estimate of the time it will take. The second is Delay: tasks and reasons that have no test. Compare their lengths. If the first list has an end, put a date on it and name the exact artifact that will be released, checked in the form readers will receive it. If the second list is the longer, say so plainly, and choose the smallest release that is still real.

Fear often goes unrecognized as fear, because it shows up as care, one more pass, a few facts to confirm, a better moment to send. Craft work is real, so there is always a task that justifies waiting.

Not all delay is fear, and nothing here tells anyone to stop being afraid. Some delay is craft; Horace advised keeping a poem nine years. Some is ethical, since the people portrayed in a memoir may need to be consulted (Practices 79 and 80), and some is legal, or a matter of safety. Some is simply honest, because the book has a hole in the middle. The two lists separate those reasons from the one condition this practice is about, in which delay protects the writer from exposure more than it protects the Work.

In 1855 Walt Whitman wrote *Leaves of Grass*, took part in its printing at a Brooklyn shop, and issued it himself, in an edition of 795 copies. He left his name off the title page; outside the poems themselves it appears only in the copyright notice. He sent a copy

to Ralph Waldo Emerson, and when Emerson replied with a letter of praise, Whitman handed it to a newspaper without asking. Nothing here claims to know what he felt. Admirable or not in its details, the record shows a release as a series of dated acts that did not wait for a state of readiness.

Our guess at why fear persists is that before release a Work holds every possible reader at once, including the ideal ones, and a finished manuscript in a drawer can seem to have only admirers. Release collapses that crowd into the actual readers, who are fewer, slower and stranger. Delay preserves the imagined audience and forgoes the real information.

Related practices: 8. Stop Treating Resistance as Prophecy; 91. Finish According to Purpose; 96. Accept the Reader's Authority Over Interpretation.

Closing — The Inkagai Way

Writing begins before there are any words, once something gets heavy enough to deserve your attention: a question, an image, an injustice, a truth.

Purpose alone doesn't make a Work, though. The reason has to get into your practice, and the practice has to be protected while it can still turn into something else. Tools and collaborators should widen your judgment without quietly standing in for it. When a Work is finished, it should leave something durable behind instead of vanishing into the feed.

This is The Inkagai Way:

> **Write from purpose. Protect the unfinished. Shape the whole work. Revise with intent. Publish with control. Build a body of work that endures.**

The philosophy is demanding because it won't let authorship come apart from responsibility. You can't hand the meaning of the Work to a template, the truth of a claim to fluent language, the ethics of disclosure to a permission setting, or your relationship with readers to an algorithm.

About method it is forgiving. It doesn't require writing every day, an outline or discovery-writing, commercial publishing or a public brand. You can use AI or reject it, and you don't have to pick one permanent purpose for your writing life.

You do need a practice that can serve the Work you have chosen to make. It may be quiet, and it may happen before anyone knows the title, with months of research and little visible text. It may

mean abandoning a structure, asking for help, or deciding that publication isn't yet the right consequence.

Progress is not only more words or more attention. It also means less uncertainty where you have to decide something and a closer fit between purpose and form.

The Work only you can write isn't guaranteed to be easy, successful, acclaimed, or understood. Being unique doesn't excuse it from craft, and privacy doesn't remove accountability. Publishing guarantees no attention, and the practice doesn't end when you finish.

The next step doesn't have to be dramatic. Name the reason this Work matters. Represent one relationship you are carrying only in memory. Identify one decision a tool has been making by default. Preview the exact artifact you intend to make public.

Then go back to the page.

The Eight Principles at a Glance

1. Begin with purpose

Stay connected to why the Work matters. Purpose helps you choose, and it doesn't have to be perfectly certain to do that.

2. Protect the unfinished

Give drafts privacy and room to change, uncertainty included. Decide on purpose when to share or process them.

3. Discover freely; structure deliberately

Use discovery to create knowledge and structure to make decisions. Plotter, discovery-writer, and hybrid practices are different arrangements of the two. None is more legitimate than the others.

4. Treat the Work as a connected whole

Manuscript, ideas, entities, sources, revisions, editions, and reader promises belong to one authored system.

5. Keep the author sovereign

Tools assist; the author decides. Context, judgment, acceptance, attribution, privacy, and publication stay in the author's hands.

6. Revise with intent and evidence

Revise to answer a need you can name, with some way to tell whether the Work got better.

7. Publish with control and consequence

Release exactly the artifact you intended, with the rights, identity, format, audience, and distribution conditions known.

8. Build a body of work, not a content feed

Let each Work leave behind knowledge, assets, systems, rights, reader relationships, and capability for the next.

The 100 Practices at a Glance

Part 1 — Practice and attention

1. **Make Beginning Ordinary.** Write often enough that beginning becomes ordinary.
2. **Shrink the Doorway.** Make each session small enough to start and substantial enough to matter.
3. **Build a Practice That Does Not Need Inspiration.** Inspiration is welcome; routine is dependable.
4. **Give Yourself Something to Fix.** A poor page is raw material; an unwritten page is not.
5. **Finish Enough to Learn From Endings.** Finish enough work to learn what endings teach.
6. **Protect the Conditions.** Protect the conditions that let you write.
7. **Read for Cause.** Read widely for range and closely for cause.
8. **Stop Treating Resistance as Prophecy.** Treat resistance as part of the process, not as a verdict on the work.
9. **Let Confidence Follow Evidence.** Confidence usually follows evidence of practice.
10. **Notice What the World Has Stopped Seeing.** Pay attention: what others overlook is often where the work begins.

Part 2 — Material, purpose, and form

11. **Save the Fragment Before Explaining It.** Capture fragments before demanding that they explain themselves.

12. **Trade Generality for Particularity.** Specificity makes invented worlds credible and factual worlds intelligible.
13. **Gather More Than You Use.** Gather generously; select ruthlessly.
14. **Let Curiosity Precede Certainty.** Write from curiosity until the work earns certainty.
15. **Find the Subject Beneath the Topic.** Distinguish the topic from the subject: what a work depicts is not always what it is about.
16. **Define the Reader's Change.** Know what experience, understanding, or change you are promising the reader.
17. **Let the Material Choose Its Container.** Choose the form the material needs, not the form with the most prestige.
18. **Treat Genre as a Conversation.** Genre creates expectations; use, bend, or break them knowingly.
19. **Know Whether You Are Testing or Arguing.** A premise tests a possibility; a thesis defends a claim.
20. **Let Theme Happen Through Consequence.** Theme is enacted through patterns of choice and consequence, not announced as a lesson.

Part 3 — Planning and structure

21. **Plan Until You Can Move.** Outline until you can move; draft until you discover what the outline missed.
22. **Treat the Outline as a Hypothesis.** Treat every plan as a hypothesis, not a contract.
23. **Every Writer Discovers Somewhere.** Discovery writers find structure through drafting; planners test structure through drafting.

24. **Build Causes, Not Just Calendars.** Organize by causality when causality matters, not by chronology alone.
25. **Diagnose the Missing Pressure.** When stuck, look for an unanswered question, an absent desire, or a weak consequence.
26. **Write Out of Order Without Losing the Whole.** Write out of order when useful, but track dependencies.
27. **Leave a Marker and Keep Moving.** Use placeholders to preserve momentum.
28. **Outline What You Actually Wrote.** Reverse-outline the draft to see the work you actually made.
29. **Arrange Pressure, Information, and Change.** Structure is the arrangement of pressure, information, and change across time.
30. **Make Each Part Affect Another.** Each part should create necessity for what follows or alter the meaning of what came before.

Part 4 — Character, narrator, and point of view

31. **Give Desire Competition.** Character begins with desire and deepens through competing desires.
32. **Apply Pressure Before Explaining Character.** Pressure reveals priorities.
33. **Make Contradiction Coherent.** Contradiction becomes depth only when it arises from coherent motives.
34. **Activate the Past.** Backstory matters when it changes present choice, perception, or stakes.
35. **Let Supporting Characters Exist Offstage.** Give every major character a private logic and a life beyond the protagonist's needs.

36. **Give Opposition a Worldview.** Antagonism should be persuasive from within its own logic.
37. **Use Point of View as an Information System.** Point of view controls access, emphasis, blindness, and suspense.
38. **Control the Camera's Distance.** Change narrative distance deliberately.
39. **Remember That Narrators Select.** A narrator is never transparent; selection itself creates meaning.
40. **Separate the Selves of Memoir.** In memoir, distinguish the experiencing self, the remembering self, and the narrating self.

Part 5 — Scene and narrative movement

41. **Make the Situation Different by the End.** A scene begins with an unstable condition and ends with a changed one.
42. **Enter at the Pressure Point.** Enter where the pressure begins; leave once the consequence lands.
43. **Give the Scene More Than One Job.** Every scene should earn its place through action, revelation, transformation, or resonance.
44. **Define Conflict as Incompatible Intention.** Conflict is incompatible intention under constraint.
45. **Let Coincidence Create Trouble.** Coincidence may begin trouble; it should rarely solve it.
46. **Escalate the Cost, Not Only the Noise.** Escalation increases cost, uncertainty, complexity, or irreversibility.
47. **Make Turns Change the Field.** A true turn changes a goal, a fact, a relationship, a balance of power, or the field of possibility.

48. **Connect Promises to Payoffs.** Setup creates expectation; payoff rewards, complicates, or overturns it.
49. **Pace Anticipation, Event, and Reflection.** Pacing is the management of anticipation, event, and reflection.
50. **Resolve the Governing Movement.** An ending should resolve the work's central movement, even when it leaves questions open.

Part 6 — Language, voice, and style

51. **Choose the Word That Knows What It Means.** Prefer the exact word to the impressive word.
52. **Put Weight on Nouns and Verbs.** Let strong nouns and verbs carry the sentence, then add texture deliberately.
53. **Make Complexity Followable.** Clarity does not simplify thought; it makes complexity followable.
54. **Recognize Style as Repetition.** Style is the pattern formed by repeated choices.
55. **Find Voice in Attention.** Voice comes from recurring habits of attention, judgment, rhythm, and omission.
56. **Let Syntax Think.** Sentence length and syntax regulate energy, emphasis, and thought.
57. **Use the Mouth as an Editing Tool.** Read prose aloud; the ear detects false emphasis, monotony, and strain.
58. **Give Abstraction a Body.** Concrete detail gives abstraction somewhere to stand.
59. **Make Metaphor Discover.** Metaphor should discover a relationship, not display cleverness.

50. **Remove Competitive Flourishes.** Cut any flourish that competes with the sentence's real work.

Part 7 — Dialogue, exposition, poetry, and dramatic form

51. **Make Dialogue Do Something.** Dialogue is action conducted through language.
52. **Write the Unsaid Conversation.** Let subtext carry what speakers cannot or will not say.
53. **Differentiate Minds Before Accents.** Distinct voices differ in syntax, vocabulary, rhythm, assumptions, and desire—not accent alone.
54. **Do Not Stage a Conversation for the Reader's Convenience.** Do not make characters explain what everyone in the scene already knows.
55. **Dramatize the Necessary Experience.** Dramatize what the reader must experience; summarize what the reader must traverse.
56. **Make Exposition Change Something.** Exposition earns its place when it changes understanding, pressure, or expectation.
57. **Write for the Medium.** In drama and screenwriting, write what can be performed, heard, or seen.
58. **Hear Meaning Before Explaining It.** In poetry, sound, line, image, syntax, and silence all make meaning.
59. **Use Constraint to Remove the Obvious.** Constraint can generate invention by removing easy choices.
70. **Increase Pressure Through Compression.** Compression increases the work carried by each word, image, beat, or scene.

Part 8 — Nonfiction, research, and truth

71. **Label the Kind of Knowing.** Separate observation, testimony, inference, memory, and speculation.
72. **Match Evidence to Consequence.** Match the strength of the evidence to the importance and uncertainty of the claim.
73. **Challenge the Convenient Source.** Corroborate most aggressively what you are eager to believe.
74. **Strengthen the Opposition Before Answering It.** Represent opposing arguments in terms their strongest relevant advocates would recognize.
75. **Shape Facts Without Distorting Them.** Narrative structure may shape facts, but it must not falsify their relationships.
76. **Resist False Neatness.** Do not improve reality into false neatness.
77. **Preserve Quotation Integrity.** Quote faithfully and preserve context and provenance.
78. **State Uncertainty Precisely.** State uncertainty precisely rather than disguising it as authority.
79. **Treat Real People as Participants in Consequence.** Real people are subjects with rights and consequences, not merely material.
80. **Increase Care With Vulnerability.** The greater the subject's vulnerability and the possible harm, the greater the writer's duty of care.

Part 9 — Revision, editing, and feedback

81. **Discover First, Decide Later.** Draft to discover possibilities; revise to choose among them.

32. **Revise From the Outside In.** Revise in descending scale: purpose, structure, sections or scenes, paragraphs, sentences, then words.
33. **Do Not Polish the Unsettled.** Do not polish passages whose function is still unsettled.
34. **Cut the Good That Harms the Whole.** Cut what is good when it prevents the whole from becoming better.
35. **Trace Repetition to Its Source.** Repeated local problems usually indicate a structural cause.
36. **Diagnose Before Rewriting.** Diagnose the problem before rewriting the prose.
37. **Treat Feedback as Reader Data.** Feedback reports a reader's experience; it does not dictate the remedy.
38. **Investigate Conflicting Expectations.** When readers disagree, identify the different promises they thought the Work made.
39. **Preserve History Without Negotiating With It.** Preserve earlier versions, but revise the current manuscript decisively.
90. **Name the Editorial Layer.** Revision changes meaning and effect; copyediting corrects expression; proofreading verifies production.

Part 10 — Completion and the writing life

91. **Finish According to Purpose.** A work is finished not when nothing can change, but when further changes no longer serve its governing purpose.
92. **Create Distance Before Diagnosis.** Leave time between drafting and diagnosis when circumstances allow.
93. **Work at One Scale at a Time.** Work on one scale of the manuscript at a time.

94. **Learn the Form Before Breaking It.** Learn the conventions of a form before breaking them on purpose.
95. **Preserve Difficulty, Remove Needless Confusion.** Protect the reader from needless confusion, not from difficulty.
96. **Accept the Reader's Authority Over Interpretation.** Publication transfers control of interpretation to readers.
97. **Interpret Rejection Narrowly.** Rejection is evidence about fit, timing, and reception—not a final verdict on quality.
98. **Build a Practice for Every Season.** Build a practice that can survive success, failure, deadlines, and ordinary life.
99. **Extend Judgment Without Surrendering It.** Use tools, editors, and collaborators to extend judgment, not replace it.
100. **Release What Fear Is Holding.** Release the work when further delay protects fear more than craft.

Craft Sources

The practices draw on published craft books, essays, interviews, letters and works of literature. Each practice names the writers it discusses and says plainly where an idea is theirs and where it is ours. Lamott's *Bird by Bird* and King's *On Writing* also informed Chapter 4, which presents their methods as influential examples, not universal instructions. None of the writers named in this book is affiliated with or implied to endorse Inkagai or The Inkagai Way.

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About Inkagai

Inkagai is the creative operating system for serious authors.

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The name combines ink, `kaku / 書く` —the Japanese verb to write— and the conceptual resonance of ikigai: purpose, meaning, and the reason someone feels called to continue the work.

Inkagai does not prescribe a single writing process. Plotters can plan deeply. Discovery writers can begin with the page. Hybrid writers can move continuously between prose and structure. The product is intended to adapt to the author and the Work rather than requiring authors to conform to one workflow.

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