

Why Write?

I have written for many reasons: to feed my family and myself, to get ahead, to exercise power, to call attention to myself, to be published, to understand, to entertain, to make something that is my own, to find out what I have to say, and, above all, from need. . . . I can't explain it, but I must do it.

—Donald Murray¹

When I was thirteen years old, I would wake up in the middle of the night with voices in my head. Already you're thinking: the author of this book is crazy! But wait a minute—. I would wake up in my twin bed, in the soupy darkness that results when your parents cover your window with red curtains made from upholstery fabric, and I would hear words in a foreign language. I don't remember now what those words were, only that they seemed complicated, multisyllabic, and beautiful—the way that words can sound delicate, muscular, or crisp before we have any idea what they mean. For a while, I would lie there under the heavy cotton quilt, rolling its little knots and tassels of yarn between my fingers, trying to memorize the strange words. In the fall, I could hear the foghorn sounding its voice several miles off, down on the Guemes Channel, competing for my attention. Or maybe a slit of streetlight came in where the heavy curtains met—enough light to make out the face of the Six Million Dollar Man or the tartan-decked forms of the Bay City Rollers, pulled from Tiger Beat fan magazine and arranged so carefully (I'm a Virgo) on my bedroom wall. Pretty soon I was thinking about band class, about Mr. Strickland throwing erasers at the boys in the trumpet section and he meant it, too, and the next thing you know it's morning and time for the big decision about trying to wear blue eye shadow or not. Where did those words go?

I started to keep a notebook under my bed. Then when I woke up and heard the words, I could roll over, scrawl them down phonetically in the darkness, and trap them until the light of day. It surprised me to discover that those beautiful foreign words were in my own tongue—English. I looked them up in the Big Dictionary at school. Eulogistic. Unutterable. Infinitesimal. Tintinnabulation. Cinnabar. Assuage. Enigma. What those words meant, I had never thought about before.

But I wanted to. I felt as if my life might move beyond the boy band on the wall, beyond the eye shadow, the foghorn, the very tired band teacher, beyond thick red curtains—if I had the words to imagine it.

Now that I look back, I see it wasn't crazy at all.

Language That Is Our Own

Creative writers are sometimes stereotyped as sad and solitary figures, but writing is an expression of hope and connection. We need to communicate—to announce we're here, we exist, we matter. We wouldn't try to express ourselves if we felt hopeless about the possibility of connection. Even writing in private, just for ourselves, we hope to mean and understand something. No matter what subjects you choose to explore as you push your cursor across the field of the page, understand: as a new writer, you're not signing up to suffer or to isolate yourself. You're joining a community of people who write because we hope our words can add up to something that will surprise us, change us, *move* us and our readers.

The urge to write is a close relative to the urge a sculptor has to dig her hands in clay, the urge of a painter to stretch a canvas and move paint around, the urge of a composer to arrange silences between notes. We experience the urge to write for all sorts of different reasons and at different stages in life. Some of us are storytellers from the moment we can talk—we want to invent narratives before we can grip a yellow pencil. Some begin to write the first time we fall in love. New Mexico poet Jimmy Santiago Baca discovered writing poetry as an adult, in a maximum-security prison, as an alternative to violence. Emily Carr wrote in her journals to understand what she was trying to paint in the forests of British Columbia. Neurologist Oliver Sacks began writing at age fourteen: “My journals are not written for others, nor do I usually look at them myself, but they are a special, indispensable form of talking to myself.”² My friend Paul started writing poems in his sixties, after his wife Susan died of cancer. Paul was a professor of philosophy, the author of many scholarly essays about medical ethics. But he felt he needed to say and discover something in his grief; although he'd never written a poem before, poetry was the shape his impressions had to make.

In Raymond Carver's story “A Small, Good Thing,” a character named Ann experiences shock and grief over her young son. In a hospital, she shakes her head and tries to speak meaningfully with her husband and their doctor:

“No, no,” she said. “I can't leave him here, no.” She heard herself say that and thought how unfair it was that the only words that came out were the sort of words used on TV shows where people were stunned by violent or sudden deaths. She wanted her words to be her own.³

How rare it is, and yet how necessary it sometimes feels, to have the ability to use authentic language that is our own. Words surround and interrupt us almost con-

stantly, usually written with the intent to sell, manipulate, or distract us. We learn to tune them out—and when we *do* listen, it's with a healthy dose of skepticism. What we say, write, and even think tends to adopt the qualities of this bombarding, synthetic language. But when something *really matters* to us, we want to get outside the superficiality and sameness of that language, using words to dig someplace deep, explicit, and true. Although it is not “therapy,” creative writing is (in Richard Hugo’s words) “a slow, accumulative way of accepting one’s life as valid.”²⁴

Chaos and Control

Creative writing, also called “imaginative writing,” differs in purpose from other written communication. It exists to construct experiences for the reader—experiences we taste, touch, see, hear, and smell with our imagination. Other texts are designed to impart information clearly—and we are informed, but not emotionally *moved*. When we finish reading informative texts, their ideas may linger (we “get the gist” of them), but *the experience and expression* dissolves. We’re used to seeing language function simply to convey information, and, as a result, we read by skimming. This relationship with language changes for the creative writer: we learn to read with great attention to the experience of language, and we learn to write with this same level of attention.

This difference between skimming and reading is part of the reason that, as readers, we can savor a favorite story over and over again and our enjoyment and understanding increase. All texts—office memos, résumés, bank statements, tweets, and the like—can be read repeatedly and analyzed for meanings beyond the surface. But creative writing is unique because it’s composed with this purpose and experience in mind—not just for the reader, but also for the writer. The practice of imaginative writing is not about having an idea or point and effectively communicating it to your reader. Instead, creative writing begins with a scene, an image, a memory, a moment, a character, or even a sound or rhythm—and, as the words come, they trigger us to move and play, to discover what we didn’t know we could mean. Rarely—so rarely!—do we know exactly what our story will reveal and then simply write it down. I’ve written scores of poems and for sure, *for sure*, the worst ones said what I meant when I first sat down to write them. The best grabbed me by the throat and shook me hard. They made me laugh out loud or nod my head and cry. They took me someplace I did not anticipate. We feel this sense of strangeness and transportation as we make creative writing, so that our readers will feel it too.

People who keep writing do it because we’re open to this sensation of exploration, even though exploration carries risk and can make us uncomfortable. The practice of imaginative writing is a kind of courtship between the disorder of possibility and the order of language. As with any interesting courtship, there’s some tension. The effort to express precisely and beautifully what might be said is, for a few authors, a kind of agony: the sentiment “I hate writing, but I love having written” has been

attributed to authors as diverse as Robert Louis Stevenson, Dorothy Parker, Frank Norris, and George R.R. Martin.⁵

For many others, though, the experience of writing is a sweet dance, a shifting balance between chaos and control—we begin to write in one direction and then language leads us off into new possibilities and surprises. Chilean poet Pablo Neruda expresses how sensual the experience of writing is for him:

I run after certain words... They are so beautiful that I want to fit them all into my poem... I catch them in mid-flight, as they buzz past, I trap them, clean them, peel them, I set myself in front of the dish, they have a crystalline texture to me, vibrant, ivory, vegetable, oily, like fruit, like algae, like agates, like olives... And then I stir them, I shake them, I drink them, I gulp them down, I mash them, I garnish them, I let them go... I leave them in my poem like stalactites, like slivers of polished wood, like coals, pickings from a shipwreck, gifts from the waves... Everything exists in the word... An idea goes through a complete change because one word shifted its place, or because another settled down like a spoiled little thing inside a phrase that was not expecting her but obeys her...⁶

“An idea goes through a complete change because one word shifted its place” Neruda points out. Can such openness to possibilities, can this delicious samba between what you intend and what the work itself seems to want, be taught? And even if it *can* be taught, why work to learn these moves unless you want to become a professional creative writer?

To Write as if We Matter

Poet Denise Levertov points out that when it comes to talent and genius, “You cannot will it to happen. But you can place yourself in a relationship to your art to be able to receive it if it should happen; this relationship is ‘faithful attention.’”⁷ *Write Moves* is a guide to help you cultivate a “faithful attention” to writing. Your work on the skills necessary for creative writing can lead to all sorts of side benefits. You’ll become a better reader, able to perceive meaningful nuances and understand how writers create them. Like an architect who takes pleasure in visiting a beautifully designed house, for the rest of your life, you will walk through poems, essays, and stories, able to feel more keenly their effects because you understand the principles of design they adhere to carefully—or defy boldly. Your fluency with grammar and expression will grow; these abilities can be useful in all sorts of academic, corporate, and “real life” circumstances.

But those are the worthy side benefits. The power to define the world, *to define yourself in it*, is the essential benefit of any serious expedition into the practice and craft of creative writing. Gloria Anzaldúa answered the question “Why write?” this way:

By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease my appetites and hunger. I write to record what others erase

when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you. To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy.⁸

Whatever your own particular reason may be for writing now, and whether or not you're experiencing that special "urge" to write, consider this invitation: creative writing is an opportunity to discover how language defines and changes our understanding of the world and who we are in it. Don't worry that you need to live an uncommonly eventful life in order to write. Don't worry that you need to be born a genius. You need only hope that you can discover something about the experience of being alive by writing it in your own words.

Fiction writer Janet Burroway points out that all imaginative writing is in some sense autobiographical—no matter how inventive the story, all writing is drawn from our experience and our identity. We wear so many masks for our expected roles in this life, and so much of our time is spent in the classroom, on the job, watching television, surfing the Internet, updating our profiles, doing what we think we need to do to stay safe or to distract us from our feelings. What an opportunity—what a relief—to write as if we matter.

Suggested Reading from Our Anthology

Dorothy Allison, from *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*

Sherwood Anderson, "Death in the Woods"

Samuel Green, "Some Reasons Why I Became a Poet"

Your Moves

1. Write about a memory of telling stories or singing songs in your childhood. When you think back on it now, what significance did these stories or songs have for you?
2. Write about one of the best things you ever read and how reading it made you feel. How did it make you feel this way? This reading need not come from a published book—it could be a text from a friend, a note your mom tucked into your lunch, a letter from a love or from grandpa.
3. Write about one of the best things you ever wrote—and one of the worst. How did writing each make you feel? Is it a "best thing" because it got a good grade, because it pushed you to write at a new level or in a new way, because it was read with respect, because you felt relief after "getting it out"? And was the "worst" related to a grade, your sense of commitment to the project, your discomfort with the audience, or something else? There are no wrong answers here—just listen to the experiences you've had with writing, the things you already know.

4. Read the “suggested readings” for this chapter (in the anthology) then create your own poem, personal essay, or story about why you write—or about why you don’t.
5. Write about why you’re reading this book or taking this class now. Why do you want or need to write? What are your reasons and what are your fears? What are your personal risks in trying to write, and what would a really good outcome be for you?
6. Make a list of a dozen “small noticings” in this moment: twelve tangible things you perceive with your five senses (the wind tossing a tree outside your window, a voice in the hallway, the steaming coffee in your favorite chipped mug). How many of these were you unconscious of until you searched for the materials nearby to describe?