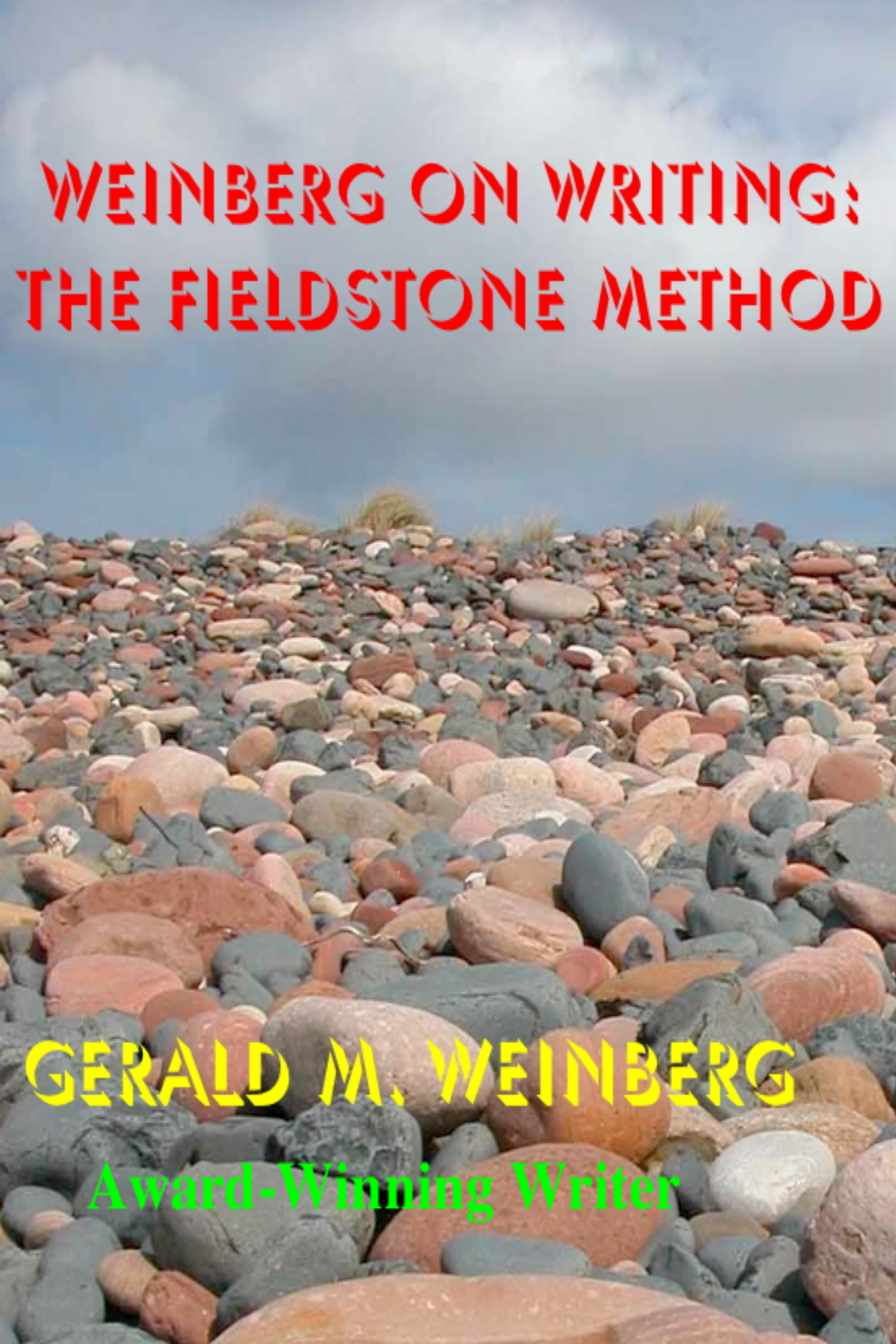
WEINBERG ON WRITING: THE FIELDSTONE METHOD



GERALD M. WEINBERG

Award-Winning Writer

Weinberg on Writing

Gerald M. Weinberg

Contents

Weinberg on Writing: The Fieldstone Method **1**
Chapter 1. The Most Important Writing Lesson . . . 2
First Exercise: 7
Second Exercise: 12
Chapter 2. The Fieldstone Method in Brief 13
Learning to Care About What You Have to Write 15
What You Learned In School Doesn't Work . . 16
The Fieldstone Method Does Work 18
Looking at Walls 20
Chapter 3 Banishing Writer's Block 21
The Structure of Creation versus the Structure of Presentation 22
Writer's Block and the Goldilocks Questions . . 23
Observing Your Writing Activities 28
Chapter 4. Prospecting: Gathering Explained 30
Writing versus Writing Down 31
Why I Am Not Quite as Rich and Famous as Scott Adams 31
The Energy Principle 32
Learning by Copying 35
Are There Enough Stones for Me? 36
But My Stones Are Not That Significant! 37
The Most Important Book for All Writers . . . 38

Gathering During Interactions 40
Gathering Exercise 43
Excuses Exercise 44
Chapter 5. Recycling Stones from Literature 45
Gathering from Books 46
Gathering Exercise: Nonfiction 48
A Fringe Benefit of Fieldstone Gathering 48
Gathering Exercise: Required Reading 51
Gathering from Fiction 51
Gathering Exercise: Fiction 53
Chapter 6 Stealing Stones Safely 54
When Is It Plagiarism? 54
Stealing Words 56
Gathering Exercise: Words 57
Gathering Exercise: Laundering Words 58
Stealing Phrases 59
Gathering Exercise: Phrases 59
Stealing Sentences 60
Gathering Exercise: Sentences 60
Becoming a Professional Thief 61
Gathering Exercise: Conversation 62
Gathering Exercise: Conferences 63
Gathering Exercise: Any Time 64
Gathering Exercise: In Nature 64
Chapter 7. Tools to Assist Your Gathering 66
My Computer 67
Notecards and Pens 68
Highlighters and Sticky Notes 68
Typing Skill 69
Other Technological Aids 71
The Internet 71
Keeping the References 73

Gathering Exercise: Internet Resources 75
Typing Exercise: Any Time 76
Gathering Exercise: Highlighting 76
Chapter 8. Gathering Fieldstones from Memory . . . 77
Memory 78
Triggers 80
Gathering Exercise: Looking for Energy 82
Test Your Memory 84
Stimulate Your Memory 84
Gathering Exercise: Discovering What Triggers Your Memory 86
Gathering Exercise: Combining Triggers 88
Chapter 9. Discarding Stones That Don't Fit 90
Carrying the Raft 91
Getting Off On the Wrong Foot 93
Exercise: Some New Starts 94
Rules and Habits 96
The Perfection Rule 97
Maybe I'll Discard Something Important 99
Exercise: Practice with Your For-Later-Use Bin 100
Chapter 10. Criteria for Discarding Stones 102
Sound Tests 103
Exercise: Read Aloud (in a group) 103
Vision Tests 105
Touch Tests 105
Taste Tests 106
The Life Test 106
Weinberg's Target 107
Quality is Personal 109
Exercise: Developing Your Own Quality Criteria 109
Problems with Meaning 113
Exercise: Do You Mean? 113

Playing With Your Words 116
Exercise: Word Play 116
Chapter 11. Decimating Your Work 119
The Abecedarian 120
Exercise: Less Is More (Dani's Decimation) . . 121
Applying Dani's Decimation 122
Cotton Candy Bricklaying 128
Exercise: Decimating Fiction and Other Literary Forms 130
Chapter 12. Beginning to Get Organized 133
Practice, Practice, Practice 134
Gather First, Gather Last 135
Use an Organizing Principle 135
Use Organizing Tools 137
Exercise: Card Sorting 142
Exercise: Anchor Stones 143
Chapter 13. Outlining with Fieldstone Solitaire . . . 145
Make Every Stone Action-Oriented 147
Work Inside-Out or Outside-In 149
Pull Out the Wrong Rocks 151
Be Patient 152
Exercise: Pulling Stones 152
Chapter 14. Organizing Your Work Space 154
Assignment: Writing Journal. 155
Assignment: Feelings About Taking Care of Yourself. 155
Creating Your Environment 157
Assignment: Your Writing Environment. 158
Writing to Music 159
Exercise: Writing to Music 159
Where Am I in the Organizing Process? 160
Chapter 15. Keep Moving Until You Have Enough . 162

Where I Am Right Now in the Organizing Process 164
When You Get Stuck, Center, Enter, and Turn . 164
Exercise: Recentering Breaks 165
Enter 166
Turn 168
Exercise: Blah Blah 168
An Example of the Center-Enter-Turn Process . 169
Exercise: Center, Enter, Turn 169
Where Am I Now in the Organizing Process? . 171
Chapter 16. Putting Your Subconscious to Work . . . 172
Look for What's Missing 173
Exercise: What's Missing? 174
Use Quotes 176
Sweet Are the Uses of Solitaire 178
Use the Power of Combination 181
Exercise: Cut Ups 182
Variations 183
Fantasize 184
Chapter 17. ShapingStones to Fit 186
Making Your Writing Memorable 187
Making It Simple and Specific 189
Writing for Rapport 191
Exercise: Writing for Rapport 192
Shaping Quotes 194
Exercise: Varying Styles for Varying Effects . . 197
Where Am I Now in the Organizing? 197
Chapter 18. Filling the Cracks 200
Sorting and Associating Stones 202
Exercise: Transitions 203
Mortaring Techniques 204
Organizing Based on the Underlying Ideas . . . 208
Where Am I Now in the Organizing? 209

Chapter 19. Knowing When to Stop 210
The Bingo-Card Effect 211
The Need to Be Perfect 214
The Need to Be Loved 216
How do I Know When I'm Done? 218
The Last Few Stones 219
How It Turns Out 221
Chapter 20. What Happens After You Finish? 223
Getting Published 224
Agents 226
Life After Publishing—The Matthew Effect . . . 228
It's Not All Sweetness and Light 232
Postscript added for eBook edition 234
References 237
Fundamentals 238
Craft 240
Tools 241
Exercises 243
Emotional Issues 244
Nonfiction 246
Fiction 247
Publishing 248
The Writing Life 250
Index 251

Weinberg on Writing: The Fieldstone Method

by

Gerald M. Weinberg

PUBLISHED BY:

Weinberg & Weinberg

Weinberg on Writing: The Fieldstone Method

Chapter 1. The Most Important Writing Lesson

Figure 1. You can build anything you wish, in any style you wish, as long as you never attempt to write what you don't care about. Two builders, same materials, same neighborhood, two different mailboxes. (Photos by Earl Everett)

"I have never let my schooling interfere with my education."
— Mark Twain

This book will not repeat what they tried to teach you in English classes. That didn't work for me, and it may not work for you. In fact, I wouldn't be a successful writer today if I hadn't cheated my way through college English.

I had always loved writing, but I had to struggle to preserve the romance as I endured English classes through high school. Whenever possible, I cut classes. I looked forward to college, where I could choose my own classes, but I soon discovered that all freshmen were required to take English. I passed an exam that qualified me for something called "Advanced English Composition." On further investigation—writers should always pursue further investigation—I learned that this meant six intense weeks to cover the regular English Composition, while at the same time taking a full English course in "advanced" topics.

That sounded like a lot of extra work to me, and much less opportunity to cut class, so I opted for the regular "dummies" class, thinking it would be easy. On the first day, we assembled on the second floor of Andrews Hall, only to discover that our section was actually two sections, with two different instructors. We stood in the hall while the instructors counted us off, one-two, one-two, to divide the class. I was a one.

The instructors were both men, but there the resemblance ended. One was skinny, immaculate, clean-shaven with hard eyes and bony cheeks. And no smile. The other was rotund, clothed in wrinkles, with a white walrus mustache covering plump, rosy cheeks. He smiled as if he'd just taken a nip before class. I had no doubt as to which one was for me, but unfortunately, Bill Gaffney, the Walrus, was taking the twos.

So, of course, I had to cheat.

I just moved with the twos. It was one of that handful of truly life-changing moments—but unrecognized until two weeks later.

The structure of the course produced groans, moans, and endless whining from the students. Each week, each student had to complete a writing assignment, and the high schools had apparently done their job well. Everyone hated writing. Everyone but me. Until the first week's assignment—write a short description of some process.

It's ironic, looking back, that the next fifty years of my life were occupied writing descriptions of processes, something I that loved, did well, and earned me a fortune. But that warm September day in Lincoln, Nebraska, I thought it was the most boring possible writing assignment. I knew I couldn't do boring assignments, so after some thought, I challenged myself. I chose to write a humorous essay about treating poisonous snake bites.

It was quite a challenge. Even today, some fifty books and four hundred articles later, I don't have the skill to make people laugh at poisonous snake bites. Back then, though, I was a teenager. I believed I could write anything.

I turned in the essay. Bill Gaffney turned it back with a C-plus, probably a rather generous grade. Looking at that red-marked paper, I knew that the whole semester—the whole year—was going to be more of that old English B.S. How depressing.

I don't remember what the next assignment was. All I remember was that I couldn't stand reading it, let alone writing it. It was due first thing Monday morning, and late Sunday night all I had done was make myself angrier and angrier over the

stupidity of writing something that held no interest for me. But I had to write something, anything, to turn in.

I put a sheet of paper in my Olivetti portable and started venting my anger on the poor blameless machine. Two hours later, all my bile had been transformed into ink on paper, detailing every reason why I wasn't going to do the assignment. Or any other assignment like it. I handed it in the next morning, convinced I was going to be thrown out of school in my second week.

On Wednesday, the graded papers were handed back, but I didn't get one. Instead, Gaffney handed me a note in red ink saying to come to his office after class. I was right. My brief college career was over.

His corner office was a mess, more rumpled than his tweed jacket, more tangled than his walrus mustache. Books piled everywhere. Reprints on every horizontal surface except the ceiling. Pipe smoke odor permeating everything. He motioned me to clear a space on one of the two wooden chairs, then shut the door on the passing student throng. He returned to his desk and picked up what I recognized as my message. It had red marks all over.

I took a deep breath, probably my last as a matriculated student. Before handing me the paper, Bill Gaffney packed his pipe, lit it with a Zippo, and blew out a huge cloud of pungent smoke. "I didn't want to say this in front of the class …" He puffed out another Vesuvian billow. " … but in all the years I've been teaching freshman English composition …" Another gargantuan puff. " … this is the best paper I've ever received."

He handed me the paper. I forgot to close my hand, and the pages fluttered to the floor. He continued speaking to my bent back. "Your argument has totally convinced me, so from now

on, you'll just ignore the assignments I give to the rest of the class. You'll still have to turn in a paper every week, but you'll choose whatever topic, whatever style, and whatever length you wish."

Never attempt to write what you don't care about.

Previously, school had tried to teach me a different rule:

Write what you know about.

I've violated that rule countless times in my career. In fact, I start most of my writing projects because I don't know about something. For me, writing about a subject is one of the best ways to learn about it. And, of course, if I don't care about it, why would I want to learn about it?

———————————————————

First Exercise:

What would you *really* like to write?

For many would-be writers, this is the hardest exercise of all. They've never in their lives allowed themselves to think about what they wanted. So, put aside everything your teachers told you, your parents told you, your boss told you, your spouse told you, or I told you. Dream your dream.

Would you like to write about how to play pinball? What it feels like to canoe a Class Five rapids? Your grandmother's knitting? What's wrong with the design of some computer system? Peace in Ireland? What you'd like your children to

know about you? Something to amuse your grandchildren? How you get in touch with God? I can't tell you. This is where you have to find out for yourself.

Can it be more than one thing? Certainly.

Are you allowed to get it "wrong"? Absolutely.

Can you change your mind later? Definitely.

But right now, let your heart tell you what you would you like to write. Then write it down—just the title, or titles. Any more than that is optional.

————————————————————

Don't be disappointed if you can't identify what you really want to write. Quite likely, you'll find many answers, but none will be the final answer. I knew when I was eight years old, but I didn't know I knew until about forty years later.

Early in my life, I was identified by school authorities as a "smart" kid. As a result of tests given when I was six or seven, I was first put ahead two full grades. When that didn't work—I was a troublemaker even among older kids—I was put in a room by myself and given special assignments, from writing to grading other students' IQ tests. I liked the writing, but not the isolation. The only time I interacted with other kids was before and after school, and at recess. Most of the interactions involved me taking a beating, either verbal or physical.

I was familiar with abusive interactions from my mother, whenever my father was away and I performed some task less than perfectly—which was most of the time. Whenever the vilification overwhelmed me, I would either try to kill myself or hide out in our back yard, under the lilac bushes with my dog. Up to that point in my life, Pango was the only creature who never persecuted me.

I remember sitting in the bushes when I was eight years old, trying to reason my way out of my misery. I believed I was "smart," because that's what everyone told me, but it didn't make sense. If I was truly smart, I should be able to figure out how to be happy, not wretched. Apparently, I didn't know how to use "smart" to create "happy."

I vowed, then, to learn how to use my smarts to become happy.

One of the things I learned rather quickly was that the people abusing me weren't very happy either. I decided to surround myself with happy people, but soon learned most smart people were also tortured by their smarts. To reduce the number of potential torturers, I resolved to teach other people what I was learning. That was the mission I carried into freshman English composition, where Bill Gaffney taught me one way to accomplish it.

One way for smart people to be happy is to express themselves, to put out in the world the vast melange of thoughts and feelings whirling in their heads. For me, that wasn't easy to do verbally—my voice was squeaky and my mind always ran ahead of my mouth. As for singing, I was told quite early by the music teacher to move my mouth but never to make a sound in the chorus. I might have been a painter, but my hand and eye didn't seem equal to the task. I dreamed of becoming a dancer or an athlete, but my klutzy body wouldn't cooperate.

Writing seemed my only road to happiness, but the road was barricaded by every English class I'd ever taken—until Bill Gaffney. Every teacher, every student, every book, seemed to say that writing was miserable hard work. The books were particularly discouraging. I don't know how many times I read this quote of Gene Fowler's: "Writing is easy. All you

do is stare at a blank sheet of paper until drops of blood form on your forehead."

Well, maybe that was true for Gene Fowler, or maybe it's a myth authors repeat to discourage competition. In any case, no blood came out of my forehead that semester, or the next, in Bill Gaffney's class.

After earning a Physics Masters Degree at Berkeley, I took a job with IBM in San Francisco, moved around a bit ("I've Been Moved," we said the letters stood for), and wound up in the Federal Systems Division in Our Nation's Capital. I was a specialist in the largest computers, taught courses, and wrote my first book—teaming up with Herb Leeds because we were both scared we didn't know how to write a book. But we had fun, and neither of us saw blood.

The biggest part of my job was writing proposals for computer systems—again no blood because I truly believed in the good these systems would do. But then came Project Mercury—the first American in space. I went to Norfolk, Virginia with IBM's bidding team, and was given the job of writing the proposal for the computer systems. Imagine my surprise when I mopped my brow and found blood.

I was stymied until I figured out what was wrong. As I wrote about the system NASA had asked the bidders to propose, I realized the architecture was all wrong. Simply put, it wouldn't work. I tried for a day to jiggle the approach, but finally realized that no amount of patchwork would help. It simply couldn't work. Now the blood was streaming out of my forehead.

Not knowing what to do, I turned to my strength—writing. Instead of writing the required proposal, I spun out my most careful argument about why the proposed approach could not

work. This job was easy—no blood at all. Not even sweat. When I finished, I handed it to Jim Turnock, my boss, who read it and was convinced. "Okay," he said, "now write a proposal that will work."

I think I said, "Oh."

The alternate proposal was again a no-blood, no-sweat, no-tears job. Of course it required hard thinking, and careful attention to detail, but those are not bloody tasks, just another fun part of the job of describing what I believed in, what I wanted to have happen.

Jim made a few editorial corrections, then turned in both my essays to NASA. Then, just as it had with my "stupid-assignment" paper, the worry began. Sure enough, a week after the deadline, Jim received a call from NASA. We had been singled out from 109 other bidders and told to return to Norfolk for a conference—obviously to be chastised for being unresponsive. We knew it was just IBM they were angry with because they didn't invite the other members of our team—ATT for communications, Bendix for radars, Burns and Roe for construction, and ATT for project management. All the way down, I sweated blood while Jim rehearsed how he was going to beg NASA for another chance.

But NASA had only one question: "Would IBM be willing to team with any other partners for the construction, communications, and radar parts of the job?"

"Why would we do that?" Jim asked.

"Because you're the only computer team who understood the problem. We had it all wrong. Our solution wouldn't work, and nobody else caught it." (I learned much later that others had caught it, but had been afraid to write down their

analysis.) "We feel you're the only computer team that can do this job, and we want to give you a sole-source contract."

In the end, we pulled our whole team along, and I was promoted to architect for the Project Mercury tracking computers, plus IBM's seat on the project's Engineering Steering Committee. All because of what Bill Gaffney taught me.

Never attempt to write what you don't care about.

If you follow this rule, you won't always please your boss or get the promotion, but you'll save yourself gallons of blood.

———————————————————

Second Exercise:

If you're already free to write exactly what you care about writing, you need not do this exercise. But suppose you are not so free. Suppose, for example, you have to write something, for you job, or for a school assignment? Describe an approach to converting the assignment into one you do care about, or perhaps not doing it at all.

———————————————————

In the next chapter, I return to my college days and introduce a metaphor that has kept me busy for years, with assignments I do care about writing.

Chapter 2. The Fieldstone Method in Brief

Figure 2. Using the Fieldstone Method, you can gather diverse material and build your beautiful wall without ever being stuck. (Photo by Earl Everett)

Stonescaping without mortar is surprisingly easy. All you need to start are rocks, gravel, a few basic tools, and this book. [D. Reed,The Art and Craft of Stonescaping: Setting and Stacking Stone (Asheville, N.C.: Lark Books, 2000), p. 7.)]

In my sophomore year, I became a drug addict.

Stephen King, one of the most prolific writers of our time, had this to say about addiction: "The idea that creative endeavor and mind-altering substances are entwined is one of the great pop-intellectual myths of our time." [S. King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (New York: Pocket Books, 2000), pp. 91—92.] Although I agree with him in general, writers are not generalities. Each one is a specific case, and in my specific case, the drug addiction turned out to be fortunate for my writing career.

Here's what happened. At the start of my college career, I was 6' 3" tall and weighed 235 pounds—big enough to be offered a football scholarship to one university on size alone. I turned it down and devoted myself to the academic life, but by mid-semester of my sophomore year, my weight was down a full hundred pounds, to 135. I was suffering from grotesque skin lesions, crippling abdominal cramps and massive internal bleeding. Eventually I collapsed and was taken to the hospital in Omaha to begin a course of treatment. After three surgeries, I learned I had Crohn's disease. My weight was down to 110 pounds. I was put on a diet of boiled lettuce. And, if that wasn't bad enough, I was addicted to morphine.

For relieving my suffering, the morphine was a blessing. For destroying my mind, it was a curse. After withdrawing cold turkey—I was given no choice—I realized that I valued my mind more than I valued my comfort. I vowed never to become addicted to anything ever again. I've kept that vow for more than half a century, and that's why addiction helped my writing career.

Learning to Care About What You Have to Write

So, of course, Stephen King was correct, but what does addiction have to do with what you do do if you have a writing assignment that you don't care about, but have to do?

In later years, I came to study the dynamics of addiction. You become addicted to substances (or activities) that make you feel good in the short run, but worse in the long run, which enables the addiction cycle. You take the substance because you don't feel good, and you feel better. After a while, though, you start to feel worse, so you take more of the substance to feel better. It works—for a while. Then you feel worse again, and take some more. A few more of these cycles and you're hooked—unless you're smart and creative.

Why smart and creative? Because you can break the cycle if you're smart enough to know that there's more than one way to feel good, and creative enough to come up with some alternatives. And, in fact, that's exactly the combination you need to break your addiction to writing misery.

I once heard Louis Kahn say that an architect's first job was to take what's given and change it. But you are the architect of your writing, so when you're writing to someone else's specification, your job is to take what's given and use your intelligence and creativity to change it.

Now, I can't do anything about your intelligence, but I can offer you some alternatives to your writing habits—alternatives that have helped me throughout my career.

What You Learned In School Doesn't Work

Let's try a metaphor. Instead of writing something, suppose you were building a stone retaining wall for your swimming pool patio—don't all authors have swimming pools? You decide you want a certain reddish brown sandstone to match the color of the tile lining the pool. City folks would just head for the nearest stone yard, select the correct hue, and order a few tons to be dumped in their driveway. But what if you're a country folk like me? Although we don't have a local stone yard, we're not stuck. No siree, we country folks are creative and resourceful, so you'd probably go searching for fieldstones.

Searching those fields, how long will it take to find sufficient stones for your retaining wall? Suppose you calculate you need about a thousand average sized stones that have to match those reddish brown tiles. If you've got other things to do but spend all day, every day, searching for stones, you might find only one such stone each day. With a few days off for holidays and influenza, you'd need about three years to collect enough raw material for your retaining wall.

Part of the problem with this approach is that you can't find stones in a field just by saying, "I will now find such and such a color stone, of this size, over there!" But when you had to write English compositions, that's just what the teacher told you to do. "Go home tonight and find five meaningful ideas about starting an aardvark nursery. Then arrange these five ideas into an outline and write a 300-word essay."

No wonder you never wrote a publishable essay. No wonder you got stuck, probably calling it "writer's block." And no

wonder people like you always ask me, "How long does it take to write a book?" They think writing a book is like writing a school essay on aardvark nurseries.

Finding particular stones for a fieldstone retaining wall—or finding particular ideas for that essay on aardvark nurseries—resembles the problem of finding the last number on a bingo card. The first few stones come easily, but as the number needed decreases, so do your chances of finding just the one that fits your needs. Few kids learn about this "Bingo Effect" when writing aardvark essays. Why? Because most school kids simply use the encyclopedia, or the internet, as their "field." And there it is—"aardvark"—right on the first page.

For school assignments, standard reference sources might be boring, but they work well enough. They're also adequate when your boss demands a 300-word report on the relative merits of five different number-two pencils. Unfortunately, though, this reference method alone is useless for a professional author. No publisher wants to accept a story built entirely from facts and ideas gleaned from the encyclopedia or a business supplies catalog. Let's face it, professional writers must search for their stones—their ideas, their facts, their scenes, their plots, and their characters—in a much wider field. Life's aardvarks aren't usually on the first page.

What you were taught about writing essays will not be sufficient to make you into a successful professional writer. Wandering around in the fields looking for great ideas is almost guaranteed to stick you with the infamous writer's block. So, what should you do?

You can reconcile these discouraging observations by noticing that real professional writers seldom write one thing at a time. Personally, I know next to nothing about writing one thing

at a time—let alone writing one thing to someone's personal order. Look at the works I have in process right now—my work-in-process inventory. Including this manuscript, I have more than thirty books in various stages of completion, or incompletion. I have thirty-six unfinished articles for my monthly column, and twenty-seven for other publications, or no specific publication at all. In addition, I have an uncountable collection of bits and pieces with no specific outcome in mind. I might use these some day. Then again, I might not.

If you're preparing to make a fieldstone wall and you don't have a stone yard handy, you'll have to accumulate a pile of stones, one or two at a time. During this gathering phase, you'll traipse about in the fields of your life with an eye peeled for stones that might go into some wall, some day, some where.

If, like me, you have several current projects, you might find a stone and say to yourself, "Oh, this one looks as if it will fit well in Wall A." Obviously, you would put that stone in Pile A. But, you might just collect a stone because it appeals to you, and you might put it in a pile that's not designated for any particular wall—the X pile. The pile of stones worth caring about. The pile of stones you'll turn to when you are stuck for something interesting—something you care about—to stick in your wall.

The Fieldstone Method Does Work

For the most part, my students always knew how to construct sentences, build vocabulary, tighten paragraphs, and all the stuff that's taught in English classes. What had them baffled was assembling these pieces into large projects: articles, re-

ports, books, and scripts. Large projects—now that was something I knew very well. I'd always assumed that everyone else knew, too, which was why the subject was so seldom written about—or, rather, seldom written about by an author who actually publishes such works.

At one point, I was coaching James Bach on how to do such a project. James was having trouble understanding, perhaps because his father, Richard Bach, is a famous author (*Jonathan Livingston Seagull* and many more). James likes to think in analogies, so I explained that writing a book was like building a fieldstone wall.

James didn't even know the term, "fieldstone wall," so the metaphor didn't work immediately. But somehow it did capture his imagination, and in true James Bach fashion, he delved into the subject. He'd tried to write books before, but never quite succeeded. Armed with this Fieldstone Method, he soon found time in his busy schedule to produce his first book. [C. Kaner, J. Bach, and B. Pettichord, *Lessons Learned in Software Testing: A Context-Driven Approach* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002).] Many of my other students have done the same.

Fieldstone walls are not made from uniform materials like cinderblocks, adobes, or bricks. They are made from fieldstones—stones of varying size, color, texture, shape, and density as found in fields. Doesn't this remind you of really good fiction writing? Doesn't it tickle your taste buds for better nonfiction writing?

The Fieldstone Method uses ideas as its "stones"—snatches of writing, photos, diagrams, quotations, pictures, and references that you find interesting. Using such a collection of "fieldstones," you craft your "walls"—articles, reports, books,

and scripts.

The Fieldstone Method also uses "stones of time"—chunks of available writing time of varying quality and duration—snatches of time such as ordinary people find available for writing, but seldom know how to use effectively.

Out of such diverse material, you can build your beautiful walls without ever being stuck.

———————————————————

Looking at Walls

1. Take a walk in the country, small town, or city park.
2. Find a fieldstone wall.
3. Stop and study the wall. Imagine the person who built the wall. Where did they find their stones? How did they choose each stone as they were building?
4. If you wish, write a little story about that person and that wall.
5. How would you have built a wall like this?
6. How would you describe the wall in writing?

———————————————————

Chapter 3 Banishing Writer's Block

Figure 3. Using the same words,you can produce any number of creations. Here,we see the fieldstone analog: a kiln for drying oats in the Orkney Islands, showing four different shapes. (Photo by Fiona Charles)

"There's little point hurrying to complete a wall that will likely endure into the next millennium. And no point at all in busting a gusset doing it." [J. Vivian, *Building Stone Walls* (Pownal, Vt.: Storey Books, 1978), p. 3.]

Most people never publish an article. Of those who do publish an article, most write only one. Most people never publish a report. Of those who do publish a report, most write only one.

Most people never publish a book. Of those who do publish a book, most write only one. Most people never publish a script. Of those who do publish a script, most write only one. If you ask them why they don't write more, they will commonly say they are stuck, or "blocked." But these are just labels, and explain nothing. Most often they stop writing because they do not understand the essential randomness involved in the creative process.

The Structure of Creation versus the Structure of Presentation

Please don't get the impression that I read in the random way I write. Reading, by its nature, is more or less linear, like a string of beads, and I tend to read most works through from beginning to end. But written works can be created by superimposing any of a variety of organizations on that linear string of words. For instance, novels, being stories, are more or less linear; but novelists may use flashbacks, stories-within-stories, or parallel stories to break the linearity.

Dictionaries, encyclopedias, and reference manuals—though consisting of a bound sequence of pages—are generally organized for a random access by the addition of tables of contents and indices. Internets and intranets allow us to hyperlink written works in much more complex structures, though in order to use them, we frequently need aids such as index pages and search engines.

But none of these *reading* organizations have much of anything to do with *the organization of the creative process* by which the works came into existence. These reading structures are *presentation* methods, not creation methods. Cre-

ation doesn't work in any such regular way. It's more accurately modeled by the Fieldstone Method. Every day is different; every idea is different; every mood is different; so why should every project be the same?

Writer's Block and the Goldilocks Questions

"Of course every day is different," you may say. "Some days I'm entirely paralyzed by writer's block, and I don't accomplish anything at all."

If this is your problem, I can help, as I've helped many other writers. I didn't always understand how I was helping, until one student wrote the following:

As evidenced in some conversations with other students of yours and in my own writings, I think there are number of intangibles that you do offer—in much the same way that a coach or therapist does. These include motivation, raising self-esteem, building confidence in writing, considering self-other-context, discipline, thinking more clearly, or awareness, to name only a few.

Writer's block is not a disorder of you, the writer. It's a deficiency of your writing methods—the mythology you've swallowed about how works get written—what my friend and sometime co-author, Tom Gilb, calls your "mythodology." Fieldstone writers, freed of this mythodology, simply do not experience "writer's block." Have you ever heard anyone speak of "mason's block"?

Many writing methods and books assume that writer's block results from a shortage of ideas. Others assume the opposite—

that writers become blocked when they have a surplus of ideas and can't figure out what to do with all of them. But it's not the number of ideas that blocks you, *it's your reaction to the number of ideas.*

Here's how it goes. You have the wrong number of ideas, and that bothers you, causes you discomfort, or even pain. To lessen the pain, you turn to some other activity—coffee, beer, sex, movies, books, sleep, name your poison. This diversion relieves the pain in the short run, but eventually your mind turns back to that unfinished piece of writing. Now you feel worse because you've avoided the task. You might try writing again, but your mind keeps returning to what a bad, blocked writer you are. So, eventually, you turn to your relief—coffee, beer, sex, or whatever.

Do you recognize the addiction cycle? The Fieldstone method allows you to break this cycle in exactly the same way you break any addiction, by using your intelligence and creativity. I sometimes begin to feel "blocked," but when I do, I simply ask myself what I call the *Goldilocks Questions*:

"What state am I in now?
Do I have too many ideas?
Do I have too few?
Or, like Baby Bear's porridge, is it just right?"

If I have too many ideas, I begin some organizing activities, like sorting ideas into different piles. If I have too few ideas, I concentrate on gathering more. Usually, the first place I look is in my own mind, staying in the flow of the moment, one idea building on the next.

For instance, when I'm writing dialogue, I don't stop to search externally for just the right conversational "stone." That approach leads to overly clever dialogue, rather than the

more natural-sounding stones that just pop out of my head from my familiarity with my characters and millions of past conversations I've heard or overheard. Only if my natural mental flow fails me do I start searching for an external stone to trigger a new flow.

Then, when the number of ideas is "just right," I organize them, trimming and polishing a bit in the process, until I have a finished product—or until I have to ask the Goldilocks Questions again. I may be stuck for a few moments, but I'm never "blocked."

In this book, I'll sketch all three parts of the Fieldstone Method—first the gathering, then the organizing, then the trimming and polishing. I'll describe them in that order, not because I perform them in that order, but because this is a book, and books are linear organizations of ideas.

Unlike what your schools taught you about writing, the Fieldstone Method is not dependent on *any* particular order of doing things. Instead, Fieldstoning is about always doing something that's advancing your writing projects. As a Fieldstone author, you will have a variety of keep-moving activities, a handy list of tasks of all sizes, plus the knowledge to match each task to your mood, your start/stop time, your resources, and your total available time.

Each Fieldstone writer also has to find her own "magic" tasks, not all of which may seem "logical" to other writers. Meditation works for me, but others find it disturbing. Aikido boosts me, but it tires others. Some writers say you have to have a cat, a cigarette, and a cup of coffee laced with brandy. The cigarette and brandied coffee would kill me, which would be merciful because then I wouldn't have to watch the Ruby and Caro tear apart the cat.

$$$A Day in the Life of a Fieldstone Writer

To make the Fieldstone approach clearer, I captured all my activities for one Saturday in my writer's life:

8:47 I woke up late, having worked late the night before because I was writing well and wanted to finish a column for Contract Professional magazine. Before getting out of bed, I snatched my pen and notecards from the bedside table to capture a couple of ideas I'd been dreaming about. Also, I wrote the word "torpor," which was how I felt, though not a word I ordinarily use in my writing.

9:02 I wanted to take a shower to clear my head, but Dani had started a load of laundry. I didn't want the hot water to run out while I was all lathered up, so I sat down and read over the printed copy of the article I'd "finished" last night. I made a few red marks, then put the manuscript aside because I'd just gotten an idea for another article.

9:21 I sat down at my computer and checked that my automatic overnight backup had worked properly. (That's one way that words and stones differ—you don't have to back up a pile of stones.) Then I opened a fresh copy of my article template [just an empty file already formatted properly for an article—font, size, spacing, and so forth] and started sketching the new idea.

9:40 Something in the sketch reminded me of a fieldstone I'd captured a few months ago, but rather than interrupt the flow of the sketch, I simply embedded a searchable note telling me to turn to my stone pile when the time was right. I then continued sketching. While I was immersed in sketching, my phone rang. I didn't answer. The voicemail would capture anything worthwhile, and I could return the call when the timing was better.

10:14 I ran out of ideas for the sketch. Rather than tell myself I was "blocked," I applied the Goldilocks Questions, which told me it was time to switch to a new activity. I decided to safeguard my spine by standing up and walking about a bit. As I passed Dani's door, she asked me if I'd like to take a walk with her and the dogs. "Sure," I said, "but let me take a shower first." For me, showers are often sources of new ideas, though nothing came this time.

10:33 All showered and dressed, I started my walk with Dani, Sweetie (Caro's predecessor), and Ruby (Lovey's predecessor). It happened to be the first day the water was running in the Corrales ditch, always a sure sign of Spring. The bridge on Angus Road has a low overhang that catches all the floating trash from eight miles upstream. Today was an exceptional chance to see winter's accumulation of flotsam and jetsam—inspiring me to write a few notecards full of ideas. While discussing these ideas with Dani, she gave me another idea—which I duly captured.

11:48 I was back at my desk and decided to spend the few minutes before lunch checking the voicemail and email. Apparently the caller hadn't thought it worthwhile to leave a message—probably a telemarketer. There were, however, seventeen email messages—rather typical for a Saturday morning.

12:28 All the email answered or scrapped, I took time out for a leisurely lunch. While handling the email, I had seen and collected a clever quote from a correspondent's email signature. Nothing to do with the current article, but it went into my general purpose stone pile.

13:41 It had been a couple of hours since I'd written anything significant, so I warmed up by polishing up a few sentences

in last night's article, guided by my red marks on the draft.

13:58 I finished the polishing and placed the article in my outgoing email. Then I decided to return to the sketch and search for the stone I had remembered earlier. I didn't find it. I got distracted from my search by finding a perfect stone for one of the chapters in this book. I copied it from its pile and pasted it into the chapter's file. Then I continued to write from the pasting point. I got so engrossed that I forgot all about the stone I'd originally been seeking.

xx:xx? I also forgot I was keeping time for this record, so I don't have accurate data past this point. I recall that I was stuck once and read for a bit in one of the three books I'm currently reading—putting a few miles on my exercise bike in the process. I highlighted a few choice passages and affixed a few PostIts™. I definitely recall transcribing an idea that was stimulated by one of these passages—and that got me going again. I think I also handled the afternoon's email at one point, but I'm not sure.

17:53 I know I played a few games of solitaire whenever my head got clogged, and somewhere along the line I switched to a different project. I know I switched because that's where I was when Dani sounded the five-minute dinner warning. My trance was broken, so I spent the five minutes transcribing the morning's note cards into my general purpose stone pile. As I got up for dinner, I noticed that somewhere, during the day, I'd lost my torpor.

———————————————————

Observing Your Writing Activities

1. Choose a day or several hours that you plan to devote

to writing.

2. In your writing journal (see Chapter 14) record the start-stop time of different activities.
3. Record your feelings at the beginning and end of each activity. Don't interrupt your flow, but just capture a word or two.
4. At the end of the day, look at what you wrote in your journal. Do you see an addiction cycle?
5. How did you respond any time you were temporarily stuck?
6. What other activities could you have done that would have served you better?
7. How will you remind yourself of those activities when you repeat this exercise the next time you write?

———————————————————

Chapter 4. Prospecting: Gathering Explained

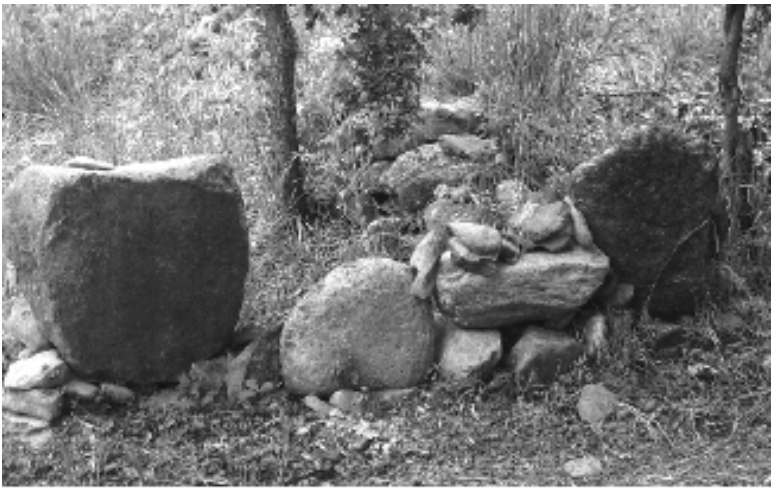


Figure 4. Interesting stones and fascinating words are everywhere, just for the gathering. (Photo by Earl Everett)

"When you become aware of stone, you'll be surprised at how much is available. I cannot take a trip anywhere without checking out the stones I see." [C. McRaven, *Stonework: Techniques and Projects* (Pownal, Vt.: Storey Books, 1997), p. 28.]

I'm the same way. I cannot take a trip anywhere—in real space or virtual space—without coming home with a collection of "stones." I'm always ready to "pick one up" within five seconds.

Writing versus Writing Down

"How long does it take to write a book?"—without doubt the most frequent question put to authors. To someone who has written more than one book, this question makes about as much sense as "How long does it take to make a trip?"

Early in my career, I discovered what most of these people really mean by the question. "How long does it take to write down a book?"—that is, how long does it take to type all those words. But typing all those words—though most intimidating to most people—is not most of the work of writing a book. Most of the work is gathering the fieldstones.

Why I Am Not Quite as Rich and Famous as Scott Adams

Some years ago, Scott Adams, the creator of Dilbert, was one of 8,000 employees working at the San Ramon office of Pacific Bell. During many of those years, Dani and I were consulting regularly at the same San Ramon building, often in Scott's department. Thus, Scott and I were exposed to the same replicated cubicles, the same idiotic memos, the same pointy-haired bosses—in short, the same cultural craziness. But from those experiences, Scott created a comic strip that entertained millions and made him rich and famous. I often ask myself, "Why Scott? Why not me?"

During his tenure at PacBell, Scott was gathering fieldstones for his "Dilbert Wall," but I was also gathering fieldstones at PacBell to use in my software engineering books. Around that same time, I actually tried to write a cartoon strip—Bugsy Coder—based on similar materials drawn from the

same source. If success had been a matter of who had the better *source* of fieldstones, I should have been the clear winner. I was a consultant, and PacBell was only one of many clients, while Scott was confined to gathering from one building. So, the difference couldn't have been in our sources.

Sally Cox, the artist I engaged to draw my cartoons, has an abundant talent. In fact, she illustrated several books for me, and they were all highly successful—though certainly not as successful as Dilbert books. So I can't blame Sally. The critical difference between me and Scott—really between Sally and Scott—is not artistic talent.

Could the difference be writing skill? Given the teensy bit of writing in a typical Dilbert cartoon, I doubt that writing skill is what makes the difference between me and Scott. But if it's not writing skill, not artistic talent, and not the access to different sources of material, what else is left?

The difference, I believe, is that Scott and I are different people. And, because Scott and I are different people, we walk through the fields of life noticing different stones. Out of a billion stones that pass our way each day, Scott notices some that are different from the ones I notice—and these become the fieldstones out of which his success is built. Also, of course, I notice some that Scott doesn't notice—to create my own success. But even when we notice the same stone, we probably assign it different importance, different "energy."

The Energy Principle

You can judge for yourself whether or not I'm envious of Scott Adams' success, but like most authors, I'm not indifferent to my own success. That's why I was a trifle upset when I read

a book review written by my good friend, Dan Starr. About somebody else's book, he wrote, "This book is a gold mine." The next time I saw him, I asked him why he never called one of *my* books a gold mine.

"You know what a gold mine is like," he replied. "There are a few gold nuggets, but you have to sift through tons of worthless tailings to find them."

I was starting to feel better, but then he added, "Your books are more like coal mines."

"Oh?" was all I could muster.

"Yes. You know what a coal mine is like. Every shovelful contains something worthwhile. Every one."

I'm satisfied to be writing coal mines. Oh, sure, I once imagined that I could write a book in which every sentence, every word, would be 24-karat gold, but *nobody* can sustain that level for an entire book. Even the "Greatest Book Ever Written" has long boring, repetitious passages that not even the most ardent evangelist will ever quote. So, if even God won't write a solid gold book, I'm content to drop that particular fantasy.

Fieldstone writing, properly done, produces coal mines—and sometimes coal miners do find flecks of gold in their shovels. I'm satisfied if my readers find some good coal. If they find a nugget, that's a bonus, but a bonus I don't need and don't seek. Even so, some of my students have struck rich veins of gold in their coal mines, and, yes, I've won a few honors for some of my coal mines.

And how do I know if my students have struck gold, or even coal? I know from their *response*. The stone itself is not the key to effective writing. *The key to effective writing is the human*

emotional response to the stone. If I, the writer, respond to a particular stone with tears of joy, or sadness, others will too. They will hear my voice—that is, the things to which I respond.

If I don't respond, my readers probably won't either. That's the secret of the Fieldstone Method—*always be guided by emotional responses*, or, as we say, by *energy*—the heat that the coal provides when it burns inside of you.

I call this secret the *Energy Principle*, though some of my students prefer the *Response Principle*.

Gathering material for your writing provides the first of many applications of the Energy Principle. When you notice a potential stone, turn your mind away from the stone's details. Instead, turn inwards and notice your response.

But perhaps you are skeptical of the Energy Principle. Many people have difficulty believing that the secret is not in the stone, but in the response to the stone. I suppose I once had the same difficulty—until I had a transforming experience in the San Francisco International airport. We were seeing some friends off for Macao, but their flight was delayed. We adjourned to the coffee shop. We had hoped for a few moments of quiet good-byes, but we were disturbed by the screams of a three-year-old child at the next table.

I've always been rather sensitive to child abuse, so I turned to see what torture was being inflicted on this helpless toddler. To my astonishment, the "torturer" was the child's mother trying to *force* him to eat *vanilla ice cream*!

Like a Zen monk, I felt the flash of enlightenment. If you can teach a three-year-old to despise ice cream, then human beings are capable of any response to any stimulus. I knew

then that *nothing* I would ever write would please all of the people all of the time, or even some of the time. All that's important is that *some* of the people respond some of the time—sufficiently often to keep me and my publisher happy.

How can you recognize energy? The mere act of copying tells you a lot about the energy you feel in a stone. Copying can also teach you how to make your own stones to which you will respond. Try this simplest of all possible exercises and learn about your emotional responses to words:

———————————————————

Learning by Copying

1. Choose a sample of writing you admire. Copy that sample, word for word, without interruption.
2. Writing journal (see Chapter 13): How did you feel when you heard the assignment? What did you feel as you copied? In what places did you notice particular emotional reactions? What were they? Look at those places and see if you can tell why you got that reaction at that particular moment?
3. What did you learn from the copying?
4. Copy the selection one more time. Write a paragraph stating what you learned the second time.
5. Look at what you wrote in your journal. In what way was your voice, your emotional tone, influenced by the voice of the selection you copied?

———————————————————

Are There Enough Stones for Me?

So, it's not really important to you as a writer what I respond to, what some English teacher responds to, what some critic in the New York Times Book Review responds to, or even what Scott Adams responds to. What's important is what you respond to. And, the *first* thing I want you to respond to is that you are neither Scott Adams nor Jerry Weinberg. Naturally, then, you will sometimes find yourself responding to stones that other people's eyes consider unworthy of further notice.

But, you might ask, with all the wonderful writers out there searching for fieldstones, will there be any left for you? After all, if Scott Adams picks up, say, 10 stones a day, and so does Jerry, and so do the rest of the million would-be writers, that makes ten million stones a day (10,000,000) that are being used up by other writers. So how can there be any good stones left for you?

Perhaps one of the world's greatest writers can help both of us out of this jam. Mark Twain used to ask people, "How old is the Mississippi River?" When they said they didn't know, he would answer, "One billion and three years old!"

"How do you know *that*?" was the inevitable response.

"Because three years ago an expert told me that the Mississippi River was one billion years old."

We can apply Twain's reasoning to the question: How many fieldstones are there? That is, how many are left, after the other writers have taken their share? I estimate that new stones are being generated at a rate of at least a trillion a day (that's 1,000,000,000,000). So, if we other writers are taking away 100,000,000 every day, that leaves only 999,900,000,000

for you. Do you think you can manage to scrape by?

But My Stones Are Not That Significant!

Although you now can see that there are plenty of stones for all, some of you might be saying to yourselves, "But the stones that are interesting to me are not worthy enough for others to read." One of my reviews asked me what I would answer to that statement, probably expecting me to argue that it wasn't true.

But I can't argue that way. It may well be true, but so what? Suppose you manage to produce an article or book that contains not a single stone that's of any interest to anyone else. What's the worst thing that can happen? (Stop and think about it.)

With all the articles I've drafted over the years, some of them have indeed been devoid of interest for other people. When that occurred, nothing of importance happened as a result. Sometimes the article was rejected by a publisher or two. Sometimes it was accepted anyway, and published, and nobody read it. Or somebody read it and said it didn't do much for them. That was the best result, because then I learned something.

In my early days as a writer, I suppose, these things bothered me, but then I learned to say, "they are only words on paper. They are not me." And so I went ahead and wrote something else. And something else. And something else.

Eventually, I was able to look back at those "nothing" articles and realize that actually, the stones in them hadn't been that interesting to me, either. Usually that was because I was writing to a deadline or for some other reason felt I had to

find "something" to write about. When you're starving, lots of stones look like food.

After you practice the Fieldstone Method for a while, you will have gathered large stocks of stones, so you won't be starving. If you do need to write something, you'll be able to find it in those stocks, so you won't have to start fantasizing that a brick is a chunk of filet mignon. The secret is to gather, gather, gather—and do it in advance of any pressing need.

The Most Important Book for All Writers

Now that you're convinced that there are enough stones so that no writer need be starved for material, I'm about to describe the one absolutely essential book that every writer should have! Quick! Get ready to write down the reference before the opportunity is lost!

Are you ready? Okay, here it is:

The most important book you'll ever have for your writing is the blank book, or the scrap of paper, or the card, or some modern electronic capture device that you have ready for writing down this reference.

This blank book is your primary fieldstone gathering tool, so my questions are these:

How long did it take you to get this book in your hand, ready to capture a fieldstone?

How long did it take you to switch from being an inactive writer to a writer in action?

If it took you more than five seconds (and especially if you didn't even bother to get it because it would be too much trouble), you're not ready to be a fieldstone writer. Stop reading right now and arrange to be prepared to capture within five seconds the next fieldstone you find. If you can't do that, forget about using this method.

If you're the one person in ten million who has a perfect memory for everything you ever see, hear, read, smell, think, taste, or feel, you don't need a recording device. You're already using the Fieldstone method. If you're like most of us, however, and fall short of memory perfection, you will still be gathering many of your fieldstones in your mind, or mind's eye. I'll say more about mental gathering later, but don't fool yourself. If you want to be a writer, you'll probably have to get in the habit of writing many things down.

When I'm out and about, I *always* have a set of 3-by-5 cards in my pocket, with at least two pens, ready to write down a fieldstone within 5 seconds after I respond to it. I carry at least two pens because I don't want to lose an energetic stone because a pen has gone dry. When I'm reading, I have a highlighter and some sticky notes at hand, in addition to the cards and pens. That way, I can simply highlight a passage and mark it with a sticky note without breaking the continuity of my reading. When I'm finished reading and happen to have a few minutes to spare, I can transcribe the fieldstones into my computer.

You will undoubtedly object that some situations make it harder to obey the five-second rule—when sleeping, for example. Yes, it's harder, but I get some of my best fieldstones in my field of dreams. I used to be frustrated when I woke up and found I'd lost them. So, nowadays, I keep a pad and

pencil by the bed—a pencil because by the time I take the top off a pen, my dream trance has broken.

When I'm driving, grabbing a pen and writing isn't safe, and it may take too long to reach the next stopping place. So, I keep a little tape recorder in the car, to capture ideas or observations that occur along the road. If for some reason my recorder isn't working, or I don't feel safe dictating and driving at the same time, I pull over to the side of the road at the first safe opportunity and capture the stone on one of my cards. If cell phones were more reliable, I might use one instead, sending voice mail messages to myself.

Perhaps my most challenging physical situation was swimming. I get some of my best ideas when swimming, usually after having my head soaked for about half an hour. I tried keeping my cards and pen at the end of the pool, but—surprise—water splashes. Eventually I learned to keep a special waterproof slate and pen in my swim bag. I lay them down at one end of the pool before I start my laps. If I swam in the ocean, I don't know what I'd do, but fortunately, we don't have many oceans in New Mexico.

Meditation is another difficult situation. Many ideas pop into my mind while meditating, but to write them down I'd have to break my trance. Even trying to remember them breaks the trance. So, when I meditate, I suppose I lose some marvelous fieldstones, but that's okay because I have so many.

Gathering During Interactions

I get some of my best stones in interpersonal situations—conversing, playing, dining—but early in my career I would lose most of them. My timidity made it difficult for me to

gather stones when I might seem to be interrupting someone. Eventually, I learned to say, "Oh, that's wonderful! I need to write that down!" Nobody ever objected, but that still didn't cover all situations.

For example, in my work I do much personal consulting, and though the intimacy of these encounters provides a huge number of energetic fieldstones, that same intimacy used to inhibit my recording of them. Whenever my consultee seemed to be in considerable distress, it never seemed proper to pull out a card and a pen and say, enthusiastically, "Oh, that's wonderful!"

I was stumped about how not to lose these fieldstones until one day I was demonstrating consulting for a conference for the Independent Computer Consultants of America. I was on stage with Dierdre, who was expressing her distress in a continuous, uninterruptible stream of words. I was having more than enough trouble following Dierdre's monologue, but I also was concerned about remembering points I would want to emphasize with the audience after the demonstration.

Finally, Dierdre had to breathe, and I asked, holding up a 3-by-5 card, "Would you mind if I take some notes so I'll be able to show the audience what we've done?" It seemed entirely natural at the time, but much later I realized that I ordinarily had trouble in this situation. What was different? Aha! I wasn't merely taking care of Dierdre; I also had a responsibility to the *audience*, so my caretaking behavior put me in a double bind. Fortunately, Dierdre understood that she had volunteered for a demonstration, so she had no reason to object to my note-taking.

After the conference, when I looked over my notes, I realized that I had actually done *three* things—helped Dierdre, taught

the audience, *and* gathered a few good fieldstones for my pile. From that day forward, whenever I'm doing personal consulting, with or without an audience, I take out my note cards conspicuously before we start. Then, as we proceed, I write down anything that seems to display or evoke energy. Some of these notes are valuable stones, and some are simply points I want to recall later in the interview. *Nobody* has ever objected to my note-taking. My reluctance was *my* issue, not theirs.

I still had trouble, though, in another extremely personal situation—massage therapy. I acquired a very painful condition that responds well to massage therapy, and I soon noticed how many wonderful fieldstones came into my mind during a relaxing massage. But, as with dream stones, I lost many of these massage stones because I didn't know how to capture them without breaking the spell. I continued to lose stones until one day, Richard, my therapist, gave me his special "hot stones" massage. In hot stones therapy, Richard heats his collection of smooth basaltic river rocks in a water bath, then places them on painful points all over my body. While he massages one part, the other parts absorb the soothing heat of the stones. The healing sensation is beyond my powers to describe, but I can say that it's especially conducive to creative thinking.

Sure enough, within minutes of my first hot stones massage, my mind delivered a glorious fieldstone, but I was trapped. Being piled with hot stones is not conducive to gathering cold stones. Paradoxically, my forced immobility gave me a perfect alibi. "Richard." I said, "your therapy has just generated a terrific idea for one of my books, and I don't want to lose it. Would you be willing to write down two words for me?"

"Only two? Sure, but why only two?"

"Because these two will be enough to jog my memory, and I don't want you to stop the treatment longer than that."

So Richard wrote my fieldstone for me, and I was cured of my final reluctance. Now, whenever I'm in a social situation where I can't write down the fieldstone—like while driving in traffic—I simply ask the person I'm with to do it for me. Of course, there still are social situations (which I need not describe) when none of us is in a position to write anything down—but it's okay to lose a fieldstone from time to time. There will always be trillions more where that one came from.

———————————————

Gathering Exercise

1. Stop reading for a while and take a little stroll with your blank book. Notice what fieldstones you notice.
2. When one catches your eye or ear or nose or fingers, switch your attention to your response.
3. If your response is lacking in energy, let the stone pass and move on to the next stone you notice.
4. If your response has some energy, capture it in your blank book.
5. Continue this exercise until you have captured at least three fieldstones.
6. You may want to do this exercise every day for a few weeks, or until you have collected at least fifty fieldstones.

———————————————

Excuses Exercise

1. Think of a situation in which you would have trouble capturing an energetic fieldstone.
2. Now think of at least three ways you could capture it anyway.
3. Then think of three reasons why you won't die if you fail to capture it.
4. Now try each of your proposed methods.

———————————————————

Chapter 5. Recycling Stones from Literature

Figure 5. Gathering from books is like gathering ocean-polished stones from Rackwick Beach in Scotland's Orkney Islands—vast numbers of smooth words from which to choose. (Photo by Fiona Charles)

"The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new

landscapes, but in having new eyes." —Marcel Proust [I found this quotation from Proust in D. Irvine's *Simple Living in a Complex World* (Calgary, Alta.: RedStone Ventures, 1997), p. 55.]

Like many writers, I spend much of my time wandering in the fields of literature, and many of my fieldstones are gathered there. Some of these ideas are only partially formed by their authors. Others are developed to their full potential, but in only one of several possible directions. Still others might be usable in a completely different context.

Gathering from Books

I found the Proust quotation that heads this chapter in a book by a friend of mine, David Irvine. I happened to be working on this chapter while I was reading David's book. The chapter had adjusted my "eyes" to see things about seeing and to gather things about gathering. The Proust quotation seemed to leap off the page and thrust itself energetically into my brain.

This particular fieldstone went immediately into the draft chapter. At the time, I didn't know just where in the chapter it would wind up. I didn't even know if it would ultimately stay there. At the time, it just seemed to fit.

From the same book, p76, I gathered the following quotation, attributed to Helen Keller:

"Security is mostly a superstition; it does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure or nothing."

At the time, I had no sense that this quote belonged in a book on writing, let alone a chapter on gathering fieldstones. It was a more typical fieldstone than the Proust quote—having no immediate place, but gathered simply because it caught my mind, my eye, and my emotions as something profound and true. I had no idea where I would use it, or even some general category. I tossed it on my general stone pile, to be found later, perhaps, in building some wall. Or perhaps it would be found later and simply act as a personal reminder of something profound. Or perhaps next time I found it in the pile, I would decide it wasn't so profound after all, which is just fine. Storage is cheap; I need not worry about retaining stones I might later decide to discard.

And, in the same book (pp 47-48), I found the following item:by an anonymous nine-year-old:

Everyone should try to have a grandmother, especially if you don't have a television. Because they are the only grown-ups who have time.

This narrative caught my eye with energy because I also have a life as a (male) grandmother. For me, grandfathering is a difficult role. While I was growing up, I had no grandfather to act as a role model. Consequently, my eye is always alert for useful tips on grandfathering.

I never figured this grandmother stone would ever become part of a fieldstone wall of mine (except that it has become one as an example of a stone that would never become part of a fieldstone wall of mine). Nevertheless, I picked it up like one of those pretty stones grandfathers find when walking on the beach with their grandchildren. It's something to show the kids, to admire, and then toss back for other grandchildren to enjoy. And that, metaphorically, is what I did: I sent it to my

children and their children, with a little note saying, "This is what I aspire to be." And then I tossed it back.

So, that's how gathering goes, from books, certainly. Some stones go directly into my current manuscript in a timely manner, though perhaps not in an exact place. Some go into future books, or perhaps they don't. And some just provide momentary pleasure, or pain, and pass to the world in other media, not in my writing.

———————————————————

Gathering Exercise: Nonfiction

1. Next nonfiction book you read, see if you can gather one stone per chapter.
2. Notice your reactions to the work if you cannot.
3. What does that tell you about how the work was written?

———————————————————

A Fringe Benefit of Fieldstone Gathering

One book by my friend, David; equalled three fieldstones for me. Not a bad return from a book I was reading anyway.

But my excursions into the fields of literature are not always so rewarding. Some books yield few fieldstones, except perhaps bad examples: Here's such an example, one that I invite you to attempt to read all the way to the end. But *please* don't stop reading *my* book if you cannot make it. ***Remember, it's a bad example.***

The blasphemies of the earth are sounding louder, and its miseries heaped heavier every day; and if, in the midst of the exertion which every good man is called upon to put forth for their repression or relief, it is lawful to ask for a thought, for a moment, for a lifting of the finger, in any direction but that of the immediate and overwhelming need, it is at least incumbent upon us to approach the questions in which we would engage him, in the spirit which has become the habit of his mind, and in the hope that neither his zeal nor his usefulness may be checked by the withdrawal of an hour, which has shown him how even those things which seemed mechanical, indifferent, or contemptible, depend for their perfection upon the acknowledgment of the sacred principles of faith, truth, and obedience, for which it has become the occupation of his life to content. [J. Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (New York: Dover, 1880), p. 7.]

My computer style analyzer tells me there are 156 words in this sentence. Its reading grade level is 67—where 12 would mean it's suitable for college seniors. [The fog index is drawn from R. Gunning, *The Technique of Clear Writing, rev. ed.* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973). It translates roughly into grade level.]

Its "reading ease" score is a flat zero—which confirms my suspicion that it's totally unreadable. [See R. Flesch, *The Art of Readable Writing* (New York: Hungry Minds, 1976).]

So just on style alone, I would never have gathered this fieldstone, except that I was searching for a good bad example.

When attempting to read this ponderous sentence, was your experience like mine? Is it sucking away your energy until eventually you gave up, or returned to the beginning to get back on track? This feeling is one manifestation of the Energy

Principle in action. When you feel like the passage you're reading is Count Dracula, sucking your life's blood, it's not a fieldstone for you.

You might well ask why I was reading this prose in the first place. Well, this sentence is one of hundreds of similar sentences taken from the 1880 edition of John Ruskin's *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, one of the great classics of literature, and, in particular, of architectural literature. I read it, or, rather, attempted to read it, as part of my preparation for a book on software architecture.

Though I don't resonate mightily with most of Ruskin's views, some of his tenets are of strong and lasting value in the architectural field. If I'm to write authoritatively on architecture, I *must* read Ruskin—or, at least, I must have read Ruskin. And I don't respond energetically to Ruskin. His work is too specific and too ornate, though that was the literary pattern of his era.

Perhaps you have your own particular Ruskin—books like mountain slopes that *must* be searched for fieldstones, but must be climbed so laboriously that searching is simply too much effort. Take heart! The Fieldstone Method—and in particular the Energy Principle—reduces these Ruskins to reasonably flat fields in which to explore for usable fieldstones. You simply need to notice your energy draining away and, having done so, skip ahead to the next sentence, paragraph, or major section. If there be any fieldstones along the way, you'll notice them.

Furthermore, when I'm reading a book and don't find a stone or two in the first fifty pages, I now know I probably won't finish it. That is, I won't finish it by reading to the end. Instead, I'll finish it by setting it down and recycling it.

Certainly this is an unexpected fringe benefit of the Fieldstone Method, and maybe there's a lesson there for me as an author!

———————————————————

Gathering Exercise: Required Reading

1. Next time you tackle a book you must read, see if you can gather one stone per chapter.
2. If you're having a hard time slogging through it, try skipping through it, as described above, picking up a few fieldstones along the way.
3. Particularly notice your reactions if you decide that it's not worth finishing. Do you stop, or do you drag yourself through it?
4. If you stop, do you really stop, or do you leave the book partly finished, as a nagging chore in the back of your mind?

———————————————————

There are two solutions for the dilemma: Search long and hard for a stone that fits the space, or learn how to shape the material. Both take lots of time.

Gathering from Fiction

What about gathering from fiction? I was not (until recently) a fiction writer, so how could I use fiction as a field for stone-gathering? Here's an example of a sentence gathered from a science fiction book I've just finished reading:

"The young don't normally make stupid mistakes, just youthful ones." [R. James, *Commitment* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997), p. 372.]

Why did this stone catch my eye? I don't know exactly, but I write a great deal about mistakes, and also about developing technical leaders. This is an idea I may well use someday.

Here's another extract from the same book. One of the characters is speaking about rape:

"What happened to you was not sexual. It may have involved parts of your body which you and I make sexual … The body part is not what governs the situation." (p421-422)

I'm not likely to be writing about rape, so what attracted me? I do write about problem solving and problem definition, and it's quite common to define a problem by a single prominent feature. This is an excellent example of that type, and highly charged with energy. Perhaps I will never use it in a technical book, but perhaps I will. Or perhaps I'll transform it into something more fitting for the context.

Here's one more:

"It is always easier to destroy a complex system than to selectively alter it." (p416)

In this case, my connection with the quote would be obvious to anyone who knows my lifelong interest in complex systems—how they're built, how they're maintained, and how they're destroyed. I instantly recognized the truth of this statement as something I've already written about, but I was struck by the sparklingly clear way it was stated. I'll probably never quote this sentence exactly (other than here), but I hope to use it as a model of clarity to which I will aspire.

As if to validate the Energy Principle, one of the readers of my manuscript, an award-winning fiction writer, wrote a comment in the margin about this quotation: "Woe. Such wide application. This has huge possibilities, much good for fiction, applied to characters, family, the natural world, global politics and governments, people of great gifts and some mental instability, and many more." Such is the universality of emotionality.

So there you have three examples of stones I collected from fiction, even though I wasn't then a fiction writer. Had I been more occupied with writing fiction at the time, perhaps the same book would have yielded more stones of a descriptive nature, or fascinating dialogues, or perhaps a plot twist or two. The stones you collect will be influenced by the types of walls you intend to build—and perhaps the types of walls you build will ultimately be influenced by the stones you collect.

———————————————————

Gathering Exercise: Fiction

1. From the next novel you read, see if you can gather one stone per chapter.
2. Or, from a short-story, at least two stones. In my experience, short stories tend to contain more "writing stones" per page than do longer pieces. And poetry is even more dense with fine stones.
3. Examine your collection and see if you can identify what energy attracted you to them.
4. How does this energy relate to the kinds of writing you're hoping to do?

———————————————————

Chapter 6 Stealing Stones Safely

**Figure 6. Stones are everywhere, though to non-writers, they may simply be nuisances that need to be removed from their fields. (Photo by Earl Everett)C> **

"There are two solutions for the dilemma: Search long and hard for a stone that fits the space, or learn how to shape the material. Both take lots of time." [C. McRaven, *Stonework: Techniques and Projects* (Pownal, Vt.: Storey Books, 1997), p. 4.]

When Is It Plagiarism?

When I offer the above gathering exercise to students, the question of plagiarism invariably arises, so let's tackle that one head on. My first advice to you is this: If you have even the

slightest doubt about whether you're plagiarizing, get legal advice. What follows, however, is not legal advice, but only some rules of thumb I've relied upon over the years. I've never been accused of plagiarism—though I have been plagiarized a few times.

This would be an appropriate place to tell you about one of those incidents where somebody illegally stole my work. An executive of a consulting firm published an essay in his company's customer newsletter. The essay was very similar to a chapter from my book, *The Secrets of Consulting*. In fact, it differed by only three words ("and," "but," and "or," if I remember correctly) out of more than three thousand. That was plagiarism.

The author maintained that every word was original with him—and that I was the one who had plagiarized his work. In a preface to the article, he claimed he had written the article during an inspired transatlantic flight. Inasmuch as the date of that trip was many years after the publication date of my book, his company's attorneys never contested my claim. They paid a very tidy penalty.

I must say, though, that the penalty didn't begin to make up for my feeling of being violated. What happened to me was not sexual. It may have involved something that was not even part of my body, but it felt like part of my body. The fact that it wasn't a body part didn't govern the situation. I don't know what rape feels like, but I felt raped. [With appreciations to Roby James, as quoted in Chapter 5.]

Having been intellectually violated, I would like to think that I would never violate another author. I will, for example, ask permission of Roby James to quote her work in this chapter, and offer to pay a fee for that permission. I'll leave it to her,

or her publisher, to decide if what I'm taking is "fair use"—a legal term that defines the amount one author can take from another without obligation to get permission and pay.

How do I know what's fair use? I don't, and in fact nobody does, for each case must ultimately be decided in court if those involved cannot agree. Or, in the case of scholarly works where there is no direct financial gain from the borrowed material, the question of plagiarism might be decided by your colleagues. For example, a university professor who becomes known as a plagiarizer will have a rather difficult time advancing through the ranks, or even obtaining or holding a post.

I follow some personal guidelines that are probably stronger than the law requires. For example, I can steal all the individual words I like. Nobody owns words, or, rather, everybody owns them. For example, while looking up the word "plagiarism," I just encountered the word "spoliators" in my thesaurus. The people who wrote the thesaurus don't own the word. If I ever decide to use the word, I won't pay them, or reference them, or let them know I'm using it. Yet none of that will make me a spoliator.

In short, I feel I can always steal a word, no matter where I find it. If it's a trade name, of course, I have to indicate that it's trademarked, as in "PostIt™."

Stealing Words

My father taught me to steal words. I smile whenever I remember him reading the newspaper in the living room when I was four years old. He must have already taught me how to read and write, because my favorite game involved

words that he would steal from his newspaper. He would show me ten words, and I had to copy each of them on a separate piece of paper. Then he would help me look them up in the dictionary and read their meanings. Once I'd heard all the meanings, I would take the words and use them in a story which I would be encouraged to read to him. I just now realized how much my father taught me about writing. Here's an exercise I dedicate to him:

———————————————————

Gathering Exercise: Words

1. Tomorrow, start your day with ten blank cards and endeavor to collect an energetic word on each card as you hear or read words throughout your day.
2. Look up any words whose meaning you're not sure of.
3. After you have your ten words, work the words into a composition of some sort.

———————————————————

I use this exercise in group form in my writing classes, and everyone loves it. If there are N people, each person makes N cards with words that have energy for them, then the cards are shuffled and dealt so that each person gets one card from each other person, plus one of their own. Then they write compositions and read them to each other.

Here's one of my compositions from a class of fifteen students:

Hunkered down at the adobe fireplace, feasting on honeyed watermelon sprinkled with crumbs of pig nut hominy, my twangy systems arguments lacked their accustomed harmony.

Instead, they were a lobotomized pestilence of empty words, slithering over a precipice of mistaken assumptions and trudging like a slimy rhinoceros on my delicate quiver of facts. "Humbug," murmured Alice Milkweed, my sly, sumptuous Navaho companion. "Seek your hara," she chants. "Enter the ki of the universe," she hums, transforming my ephemeral gelatinous meanderings into a warming, effervescent wholeness with a common hug and a sharing of the penultimate chocolate kiss.

Now of course that's terrible writing, and I would never publish it (except as an example of horrible writing). But it's an exercise, a practice fieldstone wall using stones I'd never have chosen for myself. Well, perhaps it's not a wall, but it is an interesting pile of stones.

And though it's horrible, it does have a certain kind of fascination, a kind of power. This is the power of words—word magic. Word magic can lull you to sleep, or it can be the awakening bell of much more powerful Writing Magic. Steal all the words you can. You can always throw them away.

———————————————————

Gathering Exercise: Laundering Words

After you steal a word, take a few minutes to launder it, making it yours so no reader will be able to identify it as stolen property. Whenever I steal an unfamiliar word, I turn to the internet to:

1. learn its exact definition, or definitions
2. study its origins
3. find examples of its usage, as in quotations

The next time you steal a word, take ten or fifteen minutes in this sort of play, to make the word your own possession.

———————————————————

Stealing Phrases

Though I would hesitate to use an entire sentence without asking permission and giving credit, I can always steal a phrase—like "selectively alter" from another Roby James sentence above. I might be allowed, legally, to steal a whole sentence under the "fair use" rules, which would generally allow me to quote up to twenty-five words of a prose piece. But if I'm borrowing several sentences, even in different places, I personally would want to give credit where credit is due.

———————————————————

Gathering Exercise: Phrases

1. One bright day, start your day with ten blank cards and endeavor to collect an energetic two- or three-word phrase on each card as you hear or read phrases throughout your day.
2. Look up any words whose meaning you're not sure of.
3. After you have your ten phrases, work the words into a composition of some sort.

———————————————————

Stealing Sentences

Even though I'm reluctant to steal an entire sentence, I could very well start with an entire stolen sentence and selectively alter it. I often steal interesting sentence structures in this way. For instance, I might start with

"The young don't normally make stupid mistakes, just youthful ones."

Then I could transform it into:

Beginners don't normally make stupid mistakes, just beginner mistakes.

I wouldn't consider that plagiarism, but even safer would be:

Beginners don't normally make stupid mistakes, just ignorant mistakes.

Or perhaps I would totally transform the idea into:

Don't criticize beginners for their ignorance. We were all born ignorant, and ignorance can be cured.

Borrowing *ideas* is never plagiarism. As Aristotle said, thousands of years ago, "It's not once, nor twice, but times without number that the same idea makes its appearance in the world." In fact, I'm quite sure that Aristotle knew that beginners don't normally make stupid mistakes.

———————————————————

Gathering Exercise: Sentences

1. Next time you're reading, steal at least three sentences containing ideas that have energy for you.

2. Examine your collection and see if you can identify what energy attracted you to them.
3. How does this energy relate to the kinds of writing you're hoping to do?
4. De-plagiarize each of the sentences into the kind of writing you want to do, borrowing the structure and the ideas, but not too many of the words.

———————————————————

Becoming a Professional Thief

Does thievery has a bad reputation with you? Get over it.

Sure, you shouldn't steal rocks from your neighbor's garden, but you're perpetually stealing letters of the alphabet and you think nothing of it. To write, you don't have to invent everything from scratch—what is scratch, anyway? Unless you're a calligrapher, you didn't invent the alphabet you use every day. Did you invent the English language? Fact is, you've stolen just about everything you've ever used in your writing.

Even when you write something original, your unconscious mind is probably stealing that 'original' phrase from memory. You even steal #styles#, as I did in making the outrageous statements in the preceding two paragraphs. I won't tell you from where I stole it, but I can assure you that making eye-catching outrageous statements is not my "normal" style—whatever that might mean. Of course you're not really a professional thief. Of course you sometimes create something absolutely new and different. You might even coin a new

word or two (but, believe me, it brings you nothing but trouble). Yet I needed to write something outrageous to counteract those years of schooling where "no cheating" was drilled into you and you were told (unoriginally) that only "originality" counts. Something you won't forget, you word thief, you.

So, you're not really a thief—digging is hard, honest work. Still, not all rocks have to be dug out of the ground. Some are just lying about everywhere, so practice your pilferage. For instance, some of them are in public documents, like this statement from the website of the Register of Copyrights:

Copyright protects the particular way an author has expressed himself; it does not extend to any ideas, systems, or factual information conveyed in the work.

That's a useful piece of information for this chapter, and, given its source, I have no problem quoting it exactly,

Just don't pinch excessively from any one source. As songwriter Tom Lehrer explained it, if you steal from one source, it's plagiarism, but if you steal from many, it's research. I'd quote you the exact song, but I never quote songs. Songwriters or their agents charge too much for permissions, and they'll tie your project in red tape so thick you won't be able to breathe. But it's not a problem; there are too many other good places to hunt for free rocks, as the following exercises show.

———————————————————

Gathering Exercise: Conversation

1. Next time you're in a meeting or having lunch with someone, see if you can gather one stone per fifteen minutes. This is a particularly good place to practice

gathering dialogues, and you can't plagiarize casual conversation.
2. Examine your collection and see if you can identify what energy attracted you to them.
3. Good fiction writers seldom steal actual conversations word-for-word, because actual words often sound phony on the page. So, steal the emotional energy from the stones you gathered, but shape similar but possibly new words into conversations that carry the same energy.
4. Notice what you did that preserved, or altered, the energy. How does this energy relate to the kinds of writing you're hoping to do?
5. Notice if you feel any discomfort with the idea of stealing these transformed stones for some work of yours? Would you feel better if you credited the person who gave you the idea? You're always allowed to do that, if it suits you. [I got the idea for this fifth step from a personal communication I received from John Suzuki several summers ago. I feel better for having mentioned that.]

———————————————————

Gathering Exercise: Conferences

1. Next time you're at a conference, set yourself a quota of stones to bring back.
2. If you're having trouble meeting your quota in a presentation, that's a sign that you should switch sessions.
3. Examine your collection and see if you can identify what energy attracted you to them.

4. See if you can work your collection into a report on the conference. Maybe you can publish it, or at least give it to your boss or coworkers.

———————————————————

Gathering Exercise: Any Time

This is an exercise in learning to notice what you notice.

1 Take five blank cards and gather in writing five things that attract your attention during the next hour.

1. Do this exercise during the time you're doing some "normal" activity.
2. Then do it during the time you're doing something exceptional, something you don't usually do.
3. Look at what you've gathered and compare the two sets. Put some words on paper about any differences or similarities.

———————————————————

Gathering Exercise: In Nature

Ultimately, all rocks come from nature.

1. Gather some items you notice on a walk, or hike, or trip in the natural world, or at least in a park.
2. Don't restrict yourself to words. Photos would be good, or sound recordings. If you can get some photos of fieldstone walls, that would be special.

3. See how many things you can gather, and how diverse they can be.
4. When you return from your excursion, lay out your collection on a table or the floor and play with their arrangement.
5. Try to discard half of the items. Notice your feelings when you attempt this, and record some stones about those feelings.

———————————————————

Chapter 7. Tools to Assist Your Gathering

Figure 7. The number one tool for gathering energetic fieldstones is your own eyesight. For words, you have your ears,too. (Photo by Keats Kirsch)

"It's not worth the added weight to haul a rock you won't use." [C. McRaven, *Stonework: Techniques and Projects.* (Pownal, Vt.: Storey Books, 1997), p. 21.]

When I first read this stonemason's advice, I was sure it didn't apply to gathering weightless stones that consisted of words, pictures, and ideas. As I read further, however, I realized that there were a number of tools that made lifting and carrying heavy stones easier. If I want to gather good stones, ideally I should never have to say, "Oh, that's the perfect stone, but it would be too hard to lift." And, since I gather word stones, I

also collect tools that ease the burden of lifting and carrying words.

The principal work site for my first book (one of the earliest popular books on computers and programming) was the Cleveland Park Branch of the Public Library. The site's big advantage was the quiet—at least when compared with the sounds of four preschool kids at home. Of course, no typewriters were allowed and personal computers weren't to be invented for another generation or two, so I had to draft the entire tome longhand. I also had to drag my stone piles back and forth with me, and though they were only paper, not real stone, they were heavy enough. No doubt this all was a character-building exercise, but I don't recommend that anyone else must write manuscripts longhand or lug two knapsacks full of paper in order to become a successful writer. Unless, of course, it works for you.

My Computer

It's hard, now, to imagine writing a book without my portable Macintosh computer, which I can take almost anywhere and work quietly. It carries my word processor, a variety of other handy tools, my manuscripts-in-process, and all of my stone piles. It weighs far less than those two knapsacks, yet I have all my stones and tools at hand the instant I need them. Of course, I back up the contents every night, religiously and automatically. A writer who fails to back up the computer has noodles for brains. Every tool has its costs, but backing up is a form of insurance. You can choose to make steady regular payments, or else pay all at once in a disaster.

Notecards and Pens

I don't actually carry my portable computer everywhere, but I always carry my notecards and at least two pens. People laugh at me for looking like a geek with my notecards and pencils in my breast pocket—but I've noticed that nobody who's laughed has ever written a book. My goal is never to be more than five seconds away from being able to capture a fine phrase or intelligent idea.

Highlighters and Sticky Notes

Drawing out my notecards and a pen is about as smooth and fast as Wyatt Earp drawing his Peacemaker at the OK Corral, but sometimes it's still too distracting. I don't like to break my reading trance, so I also carry highlighters and sticky notes so I can simply mark a passage and keep reading. The public library doesn't think it's polite to use highlighters in their collection, so I just sticky the page and hope I can find the passage when it comes time to transcribe it. If I can't figure out why I tagged the page, then I decide it couldn't have been such a terrific stone after all. No loss. As always, energy is my guide to what to highlight and what to leave untouched.

When I find a nice stone in one of my own magazines, I simply tear out the page and set it aside for later transcription. My old friend Barbara White used to tear pages out of her paperback books, but I've never been able to overcome my rules about mutilating books. Although I don't save most paperbacks, I do like to donate them to some charity or give them to my friends, so I stick with stickies.

I don't consider highlighting my own books to be mutilation, though some folks do. They're unable to highlight. Now

that we have eBooks, we can highlight and then erase the highlighting when we've copied the passage and moved it into our writing computer. (Aren't computers wonderful?)

Typing Skill

With all this tearing, highlighting, and posting, I quickly accumulate a large pile of literary stones to be transcribed into my computer's files. Nowadays there are portable scanners that would allow me to carry most of these stones to my computer with minimal strain on my back, but I've tried them and so far they don't do the job for me. I'm probably just an old-timer stuck back in my typewriter days—so don't take my practice as a recommendation. Nevertheless, for most of us today, typing skill is a basic part of your writer's tool kit.

I didn't purchase a scanner for my office for a long time because my typing speed is exceptional. The last time I took a formal typing test, my rate was an exceptional *minus* ten words per minute. That was back at Omaha Central High School, in 1949, where, amazingly, I passed the typing course. I was the only boy in the class, and Miss Walston, the typing teacher, explained that she was rewarding me for my courage. Also, she didn't want to drive other boys away from her future classes. "Besides," she told me, "it isn't as if you'll ever have to do much typing."

Funny how we get labeled—and then label ourselves. From 1949 until 1982 I thought of myself as a slow typist. I stood in awe of my secretary, Judy Cook, who was a 100-word-per-minute typist, with impeccable accuracy. One day, she came to my office to deliver a bibliography she had just typed. She arrived while I was typing, so she stood waiting for me to

finish. When I looked up, she said, "You're a *very* fast typist."

I was puzzled. It wasn't in Judy's nature to mock people, but clearly she was pulling my leg. "It's not politically correct to make fun of the typing-impaired," I said.

"But I'm not making fun," she replied. "You're *very* fast."

"Not true! I type minus ten words per minute."

"That's ridiculous." She waved the freshly-typed bibliography under my nose. "If you type minus ten words per minute, how can you have written all these books?"

"Oh," I mumbled, but I still didn't believe her. She decided to give me an unofficial typing test and measured my speed at somewhat over 120 words per minute. So, I thought, perhaps my 1949 high school test was not the best measure of my prowess. After all, Miss Walston's prediction hadn't been accurate. I *did* do a lot of typing in the thirty-three years between 1949 and 1982, so perhaps I improved a bit with practice. And perhaps the technology had something to do with it. I wasn't typing on a clunky mechanical keyboard that jammed every few words, with five carbon copies that had to be erased using an eraser shield every time I made an error. And, if I failed to correct an error in the test, I didn't have ten words per minute deducted from my score. So, yes, I was still an exceptional typist, but a different kind of exceptional.

I strongly recommend you acquire exceptional typing skill for yourself. You can do it the old-fashioned way like I did, by writing and writing and writing and writing. That's always good advice for a writer. But you also have the advantage of another new tool—typing tutoring through your computer. If you don't type, or type well, I'd suggest you give one of the tutoring programs a try. It's too late for me, but several of

my students have doubled and tripled their (positive) typing speeds in a few days of work with a tutoring program. Your back will thank you for lightening the heavy lifting load.

Other Technological Aids

Because of my enormous typing prowess, I don't require a scanner to do heavy word-lifting, but I do use other tools for particularly large stones. I've recently tried out some speech recognition software. This speech-to-computer software is a boon to anyone for whom it's difficult or impossible to type. When I first wrote this paragraph, speech-to-type had not proved useful to me, but the programs have improved to the point where I was able to retype it by speaking. Without error.

I have occasionally used a voice recorder, especially while driving, but I hardly ever use it now, though other writers think it's a fine tool for them. I imagine that a handheld data assistant would be quite useful for some people, though I don't carry one. My current technology seems to serve me well, so I'm not grasping for each new technology whizbang, but each of us has to find the gadgets that suit us best.

The Internet

The internet, of course, contains many fine stones, though there's a mountain of rubble to search through. Among my bookmarks are dictionaries, encyclopedias, and various services such as phone directories and what-shall-we name-the-baby sites—all excellent for choosing the names of characters. The internet is a wellspring of clip art and photographs, and I also have a digital camera to capture images of the world

around me. I used to buy disposable cameras and process the film into digital form on a compact disk. Now I can bypass the CD stage. I have several types of software to modify photos and drawings to suit my particular needs. I don't use these often, but when I do, they're indispensable.

Another useful Internet service is Project Gutenberg, on which volunteers are storing the text of out-of-copyright classics for free downloading. I don't particularly enjoy reading long texts on my computer screen, but once in a while I enjoy copying down a long passage that I would otherwise have to find, type, and proofread.

The internet can save you typing and searching, and it's changing too fast for a book to keep up. I have bookmarked dozens of useful sites, and you should collect your own. I'll provide one more example to give you a sense of the breadth of what you might find; then you can search for your own. If you're looking for quotations, there are a number of available sites. One that I like is at http://www.stkate.edu/library/, where the College of St. Catherine Libraries provides an extensive list of famous speeches, covering everything from each individual presidential inaugural address to speeches and articles by women from around the world concerning feminism. There are also quotation links available—from "Bartlett's Familiar Quotations" to "Words of Women", a database covering historic and contemporary females.

Email, of course, is essential if you are to maintain a network of supporters of your writing. I belong to several such networks, and we share interesting stones—including meta-stones such as urls of interesting websites. Don't try to master the vastness of the internet all by yourself.

Keeping the References

From the Library of Congress, through the Internet, I gather references. Though they're not long, they are tedious to find and to get exactly right. My taxes are paying for the Library of Congress, so why not use it?

To download references, I use a software tool called EndNote, though there are several equally good competitive products. I use EndNote as a specialized stone pile to store my entire collection of about a thousand references. References are a unique type of stone, and require the special handling that EndNote provides.

EndNote takes care of the formatting of references, which is otherwise a pain in the neck. The Style Manager in my current version of EndNote has access to "more than 4500 bibliographic styles for a variety of disciplines." If that's not sufficient, I can program my own styles and add them to the list. For example, my book, *An Introduction to General Systems Thinking*, is used in many fields, so is referenced in different journals. If it's being referenced in one of the Institute for Electrical and Electronic Engineering (IEEE) journals, its reference would be formatted like this:

> [1] G. M. Weinberg, *An Introduction to General Systems Thinking:*
> *Silver Anniversary Edition.* New York: Dorset House, 2001.

But if it were referenced in *Science*, it would have to look like this:

1. G. M. Weinberg, *An Introduction to General Systems Thinking:*
   Silver Anniversary Edition (Dorset House, New York, 2001).

The differences seem minor—some brackets and a colon versus a comma—but each journal will reject a paper formatted in the other's style and force the author to reformat and resubmit. I know.

If my book were referenced in the *American Anthropologist*, it would have to appear like this, with my first name spelled out and somewhat different punctuation.

> Weinberg, Gerald M.
> 2001 An Introduction to General Systems Thinking:
> Silver Anniversary Edition. New York: Dorset House.

Should it move to *Administrative Science Quarterly* , you'd think they might accept this format, but they don't want the slight indentation before the date, and would insist on the following:

> Weinberg, Gerald M.
> 2001 An Introduction to General Systems Thinking:
> Silver Anniversary Edition. New York: Dorset House.

The journal, *Biological Psychiatry*, would insist on something entirely different, with italics and initials without periods:

Weinberg GM (2001): *An Introduction to General Systems Thinking: Silver Anniversary Edition* New York: Dorset House

And so it goes, endlessly. And if you think it's bad for book references, I'll spare you the torture of looking at what you have to do to reference articles. But these trivial differences provide employment for otherwise unemployable English majors, plus the great pleasure they get from tormenting authors, so they're not going away. Fortunately, EndNote allows me to put something like this in my text:

[Weinberg, 2001 #726]

Later, EndNote can automatically replace this marker with precisely the right format for whichever publication happens to get their hands on the manuscript next. Ain't technology grand—solving problems we never should have had in the first place?

———————————————————

Gathering Exercise: Internet Resources

1. Find at least three other sites with names you can use for characters.
2. Find at least three sites with information about some location that's a setting for something you're writing.
3. Find at least three sites with quotations. Don't forget the online bookstores, which often contain good quotes from authors.
4. Find at least three sites with information about some subject that supports one of your projects.

———————————————————

Typing Exercise: Any Time

If you're not a proficient typist, obtain a typing tutor for your personal computer and raise your speed by ten words per minute. This will give you an extra 600 words for every hour your work. If you work an hour a day, 200 days a year, that will amount to an extra 120,000—a couple of books worth.

If you cannot type, obtain speech to text software and see if you can increase your transcription speed by ten words per minute.

———————————————————

Gathering Exercise: Highlighting

Some of my students object to using highlighters because they have too many rules about "destroying books." If you have such reservations, design a system of capturing stones from books for yourself that won't violate any of your rules—or any of the rules of your public library.

———————————————————

Chapter 8. Gathering Fieldstones from Memory

Figure 8. Really significant fieldstones remain in your memory long after you've first seen them, or sat on them, as your author is doing.This wall around the Macho Canyon Church in Pecos, New Mexico, is more than a hundred years old, and it surrounds a graveyard dotted with another kind of memorable stone. (Photo by Dani Weinberg)

"If it's important, you'll remember."—Harry Weinberg

We've just seen numerous tools for assisting your gathering, but I've saved the most important tool for last. When most people envision "writing," they see a person sitting down at a desk or and moving stuff from their brain onto paper or a computer screen. But if stuff is moved from their brain, how did it get there in the first place? Remember the old joke:

Q. *What is a college lecture?*

A. *A lecture is a system for moving words from the professor's notes to the student's notes, without passing through the mind of either one.*

Everything we write passes through our minds. But memories are just all the stuff we've been gathering in our heads since birth, and perhaps even earlier. Your brain is your best gathering tool, but like all tools, it sometimes helps to have an instruction manual.

Memory

Some gathering happens "naturally"—for example, as an outcome of a job or hobby. You can certainly foster this kind of gathering by using the techniques already explained, but what if you haven't been doing the job or hobby for years? Then, you can gather from your own memory.

Memory has a wonderful feature that other tools lack—an *automatic energy meter*. Whenever you recall something for your work, that implies that there's *something* significant about it—some energy, even if only your subconscious mind realizes it. Since you already have the item in memory, your five-second note merely needs to be a pebble—sufficient to

remind you of the incident, the phrase, the scene, or whatever. Later, when the timing suits you, you can expand and transcribe the pebble into one of your stone piles.

One night, while working on this chapter, I decided it was time to take a sleep break. I put the work aside, or so I thought, and sleepily prepared to end my day. On my way to the bedroom, however, I suddenly remembered a story about memory from the time I was seven years old—sixty years earlier. I was in no mood to do anything but sleep, but all I had to capture was the name, "Harry King." With those two words on a card, I was utterly confident that the whole story would be available to me in the clear light of morning. And it was, so here's the story.

The year was 1940, and Daniel Boone Elementary School was testing its second graders for "intelligence." At seven, I didn't know a whole lot about psychological testing, but I had the impression that it was easy and fun—except for the memory portion of the test. This consisted of a list of twenty names—Sally White, Joseph Beard, Harry King, and so forth—which we had a couple of minutes to memorize. Then we had to wait one minute, after which we were supposed to turn the page and regurgitate those names.

I clearly recall feeling that this was a stupid game, and not fun at all. Why would someone want to memorize the names of twenty strangers—especially when all you had to do was turn back the page to find all twenty? Of course, my test results showed I hadn't taken it very seriously. I got only two of the names right, and I was told, sternly, "You have a very bad memory."

Well, perhaps I have a very bad memory, but I do remember those words, that tone, and my emotional reaction, though

that was now more than seventy years ago. And I also remember one of the two names I got right—Harry King. I remember because my Dad's name was Harry, and I easily thought of him as King. That association created some energy around the name, and that energy helped me remember the name for sixty seconds, and then for sixty years.

Nowadays, I know a lot more about psychological testing, and I would draw some different conclusions from this story:

- There are several types of memory.
- In 1940, as today, psychologists didn't know a whole lot about how to measure long-term memory.
- I have an outstanding long-term memory for anything that I have energy around.
- I have an outstanding ability to forget things that aren't important to me.
- I shouldn't put too much credence in limitations that other people impose upon me.

Triggers

The words, "Harry King," probably don't mean a whole lot to you, but to me they are the key to a precious memory. The words "Harry Truman" are more likely to be a trigger for readers other than me, and "hairy legs" might trigger even more. In my book, *The Secrets of Consulting*, I have a full discussion of using triggers in the consulting business. I call this the Potato Chip Principle:

If you know your audience, it's easy to set triggers. [G.M. Weinberg, *The Secrets of Consulting: A Guide to Giving & Getting Advice Successfully* (New York: Dorset House Publishing, 1985), p. 93.]

Unfortunately, knowing the audience is more difficult for the writer than for the consultant. But not impossible. If it were impossible, there would be no successful book writers, only successful letter writers—using their correspondents' personal triggers.

A trigger is a small amount of input energy that sets off a large amount of output energy. So, you can use the Energy Principle to discover stones that are triggers for you, and might become triggers for some of your readers. Although the name "Harry King" is a personal trigger, the trick is to attach that energy to my writing by using more universal triggers. Look at some of the more universal triggers in my story:

1940; Daniel Boone; Elementary School; second graders; testing for intelligence; seven years old; psychological testing; easy and fun; memorize; wait to turn the page; regurgitate; stupid game; not fun at all; names of strangers; test results; take it very seriously, I was told; sternly; you have a very bad memory; tone; sixty years ago; I remember; my Dad's name was; I thought of him as King.

The triggers almost tell the story by themselves. The remaining words are merely transitions and other grammatical structuring devices. They're necessary, but they don't carry much of this particular story's energy. In other stories, the energy might be captured in the way the language works together, and would be lost in a mere recitation of some trigger words. There's much more art to building a wall than accumulating a pile of fine stones, but a pile of fine stones is an excellent place to start.

———————————————————

Gathering Exercise: Looking for Energy

1. Find a piece of writing you like especially well. Select a passage that's particularly moving (or raises your energy).
2. Extract and list from that passage the words and phrases that have any triggering effect for you.
3. Find a piece of writing you especially dislike. Select a passage that's particularly unmoving (or lowers your energy).
4. Extract and list from that passage the words and phrases that have any triggering effect for you.
5. Compare the lists from steps 2 and 4.

———————————————————

This exercise can be used for gathering good stones, but also for critiquing your own passages as you write them. For instance, I was searching for stones in some books about communication and ran across the following 100-word passage **(Warning: bad example ahead)**:

[The most effective aspect of system accomplishment is providing communications. An appropriately competent staff member should be designated as the system communication entity. This entity should be an individual who can implement the communication process and is allowed to provide methodology support to a variety of areas of technology. The communication from this entity should provide competent clarity. If the intention of the message is to assure the audience that the system is giving the highest priority to an incipient situation the spokesperson should be able to emphasize this and be prepared to provide any type of support involving

the situation.] [Actually, I put this paragraph together from several books since I don't want to pay a fee for quoting something this bad.]

Was this a worthwhile stone? According to the Flesch measure of reading ease, this segment isn't nearly as bad as the Ruskin passage quoted earlier. But there are other measures of quality, such as, the Cohen Cloudiness Count, which is based on the simple premise that *overabstraction* is the number one enemy of meaning and understanding. [G. Cohen and D.H. Cunningham, *Creating Technical Manuals* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984).]

Cohen's procedure uses a sample of exactly 100 words and counts all *abstract nouns* such as words ending in *-ance, -ence, -ion, -ty, -ent, -ology, -ure, and -ize*, including their plurals. It also counts the words *area, aspect, basis, concept, factor, support, system, unit.* It also counts all "abstract" verbs: all-purpose verbs that name some indefinite, general action. The ones I use in the computer field are *accomplish, affect, allow, implement, involve, perform, provide, require, support*, including all tenses. The result is a rating of understandability, the Cohen Cloudiness Count.

Cohen ranks the cloudiness as follows:

Count Rating

0 to 2 Very clear

3 to 4 Fairly clear

5 to 6 Fairly unclear

7 to 8 Very unclear

9 to 10 Approaching double-talk

11 and up Unintelligible

The cloudiness count of the 100-word passage above is close to 30! More or less the same conclusion can be reached without the math by scanning for emotional triggers in the passage. I was hard pressed to find any, and I concluded that this isn't a stone I want to keep (except as another good *bad* example), and no amount of chipping and polishing would save it.

Test Your Memory

I'm not showing you the Cohen Cloudiness Count so you'll be computing overabstraction as you read—though it's a useful test for what you write. I'm merely using it as an excuse to give you two passages to compare—my Harry King story and the communication lecture. Without looking back at either, how much can you recall of each?

I've used this little memory test over a hundred times, and I've yet to find *anybody* who can remember more about the communication passage. It's not only unintelligible, it's *unmemorable*—and you knew it without any mathematical tests.

You could say, "I can't remember this passage." Alternatively, you could say, "This passage isn't memorable." Most accurately, you could say, "My mental apparatus doesn't regard this passage as worth remembering." And, if you know the results of my testing on these passages, you could say, "Very few people will find this passage memorable."

Stimulate Your Memory

Here's a memorable story that arrived anonymously in my email this morning:

There was a young man who, in his youth, professed a desire to become a great writer. When asked to define "great," he said, "I want to write stuff that the whole world will read, stuff that people will react to on a truly emotional level. Stuff that will make them scream, cry, and howl in pain and anger."

He now works at Microsoft, writing error messages.

If you, too, want to move people, but you don't want to write for Microsoft, you must learn to trust your memory to provide you with memorable material that others will find memorable, too. To do this, sometimes all that's necessary is to listen to yourself talk. When you notice that you're telling some story with enthusiasm, catch yourself doing it. If you don't have your tape recorder handy, write yourself a trigger note that will bring back the story next time you're able to transport your stones into your stone piles.

But what if you're sitting alone, staring at your blank page, trying to think of something memorable to write? In that case, you need to understand what triggers your memory. Some of the most common triggers are times, places, sounds, sights, feelings, touches, tastes, smells, actions, and persons. It's hard to keep a pile of touches, tastes, or smells, but your photograph albums are great triggers, and so is your music library. But maybe for you, as for Proust, it will be something you eat. You never know, so be prepared.

———————————————————

Gathering Exercise: Discovering What Triggers Your Memory

In this exercise, you will write a series of memories, triggered by various starting phrases. You need to supply the particular triggers, but I will supply examples of each.

(1) Time: When I was 8 years old, the fat boy in the steelyard hanged himself.

You: When [insert a particular time]

(2) Place: Lubbock, Texas, makes me think of my first blind date, Natalie, my best friend Ron's cousin from Lubbock. She demonstrated Texas kissing techniques, and I thought Texas must be a swell place.

You: [insert a particular place] makes me think of …

(3) Sound: When I hear Mozart's Posthorn Concerto, I remember my first visit to Tanglewood, which makes me think of the first time Dani and I went there together. More than 50 years later, we're still together.

You: When I hear [insert a particular piece of music] …

(4) Sight: When I see stone houses, I think of the massive house on the corner of Greenleaf Street. The old lady lived there alone, and she always gave us the best treats on Halloween. Even so, I feared that she was a witch, like in Hansel and

Gretel.

You: When I see [insert some visual image] …

(5) Feelings: Whenever I'm sad, I think of the time my mother took my dog, Pango, to the pound and told us she had been lost. We searched the neighborhood for three days, until she told us it was too late to save Pango.

You: Whenever I feel [insert some feeling] …

(6) Touch: When I would pet Sweetie, I thought of the cargo office at the St. Louis airport, where we first laid eyes on one another, and where he charmed the entire office staff into stopping work for half an hour.

You: Whenever I touch [insert some thing] …

(7) Taste: Whenever I taste radishes, I think of that spring day on Quai Gustave Ador at Lake Geneva when I watched the man at the next table butter his radishes. I tried it, and I've now acquired his habit.

You: Whenever I taste [insert some taste] …

(8) Smell: Whenever I smell chopped liver, I recall my cousin's wedding where I was the ring-bearer and wouldn't give up the ring. I was only four, but I was able to escape the adults

long enough to disrupt the ceremony.

You: Whenever I smell [insert some odor] …

(9) Person: When I was with my father, we could always talk about the Cubs when we had nothing to say, or when we had something that was too difficult to say.

You: When I was with [insert some person] …

(10) Action: Whenever I think of canoeing, I remember the newly engaged couple we took paddling down Egg Creek—and how the trip lasted longer than their engagement.

You: Whenever I think of [insert some action]

(11) What else fits for you?

———————————————————

As you do each of these exercises, notice which kinds of triggers reached your memories most easily. From now on, you can use that knowledge to help you recall memorable things to write about.

———————————————————

Gathering Exercise: Combining Triggers

You can use this exercise when the previous triggers aren't working so well. The trick here is to generate an infinite

supply of triggers by combining two or more types of trigger.

(1) Time and smell: When I smell coffee on a winter day, I think of the time Tom's wife tried to motivate me to drink coffee by accusing me of being antisocial. I tried, with extra cream and sugar, but it didn't work. I've still never managed to down a swallow of coffee, even when I could use the warmth.

You: When [combine two triggers] …

(2) Continue the exercise with various combinations until you've done at least ten.

———————————————————

One last caution. When you do trigger an energetic memory, don't forget to capture it in one of your stone piles. Your memory may be perfect, but your recall isn't. You need not interrupt your other activities for long, but if you don't capture at least a few trigger words, you may not get another chance.

Chapter 9. Discarding Stones That Don't Fit

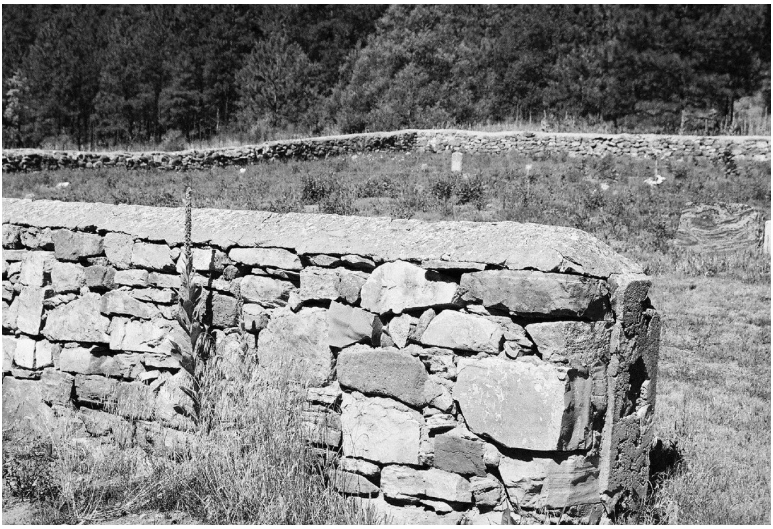


Figure 9. If you feel you have to use every last stone, you get a poor looking and unstable wall. Here,in this church wall, you can see that the builder left no large stabilizing stones for the top layers, but used lots of small stones chinked in. As a result,the top layer and side had to be held in place by a layer of concrete. If you don't save any good stuff for the end, your writing project will look like this,too. (Photo by Dani Weinberg)

"You need about three times as many stones to choose from as you'll actually use. (You'll probably want to start another project with the leftovers.)" [C. McRaven, *Stonework: Techniques and Projects* (Pownal, Vt.: Storey Books, 1997), p. 4.]

I have a recipe that starts:

Chop 1 1/2 cups of raw onions.
Brown the onions in 1/4 pound of unsalted butter.
Throw away the onions.
Keep the butter.

The "butter" of my writing contains the flavor of all the "onions" I've thrown away. Most of the work in writing doesn't show in the finished work. Most of the work in writing is deciding what to throw out. For every word you see in this book, I considered at least five other words and decided not to use them. But the words I kept mysteriously contain the flavor of the words that are no longer there.

The starters, the onions, are for learning, for adding flavor to the ultimate work. When you're finished with those onions, you can't feed them to the dog, so discard them with honor. In this instance, the fieldstone wall is a better metaphor than the recipe. You can't really save cooked onions for very long, but stone leftovers keep indefinitely if you still want them.

Carrying the Raft

Words also keep indefinitely, which is good—but also bad. Consider this version of an ancient Zen story of the traveler and the raft:

A wanderer on a lonely road came upon a torrential stream that had washed out the bridge. He couldn't swim, and he was afraid to wade, so he had to stop for several days while he cut down trees and vines with his small knife and built a raft. He built solidly, and the heavy raft carried him safely across the flood. On the other bank, he thought, "This is a good raft—if there's another stream ahead, I can use it."

And, so, he carried the raft for the rest of his life.

Just because I once found a word or phrase or quotation to be useful, that doesn't mean I have to carry it for the rest of my life. Just because I wrote some words when I started a piece, that doesn't mean I have to leave them there when the piece is finished.

Frequently, words that shouldn't be kept are found at the beginning of something—a book, a chapter, a paragraph, even a sentence. Here's the entire Preface of my book, *Are Your Lights On?*—one of my books written with Don Gause. [D.C. Gause and G.M. Weinberg, *Are Your Lights On? How to Figure Out What the Problem Really Is* (New York: Dorset House Publishing, 1990), p. xi.]

————————————————

Preface

PROBLEM: Nobody reads prefaces.

SOLUTION: Call the preface Chapter 1.

NEW PROBLEM CREATED BY SOLUTION: Chapter 1 is boring.

RESOLUTION: Throw away Chapter 1 and call Chapter 2 Chapter 1.

————————————————

Humpty Dumpty sat on a fieldstone wall and demanded that Alice "begin at the beginning." Fieldstone writing doesn't make that demand. Yet, even though I know that beginning words are generally unsuitable, I often find myself unable to resist. Fortunately, when my first son, Chris, was born I learned a great lesson from our pediatrician. When we handed him a seven-page list of problems, he remarked, sagely, "You

know, there would be no problem raising kids—if only you could throw away the first one."

Even so, I'm glad we decided to keep Chris, but I don't regret ever throwing away my "first words" of any writing. Because I still have this compulsion to start with Chapter 1, I no longer number my draft chapters, which makes for less work when I throw away the first one.

It's much the same with titles. Novice writers always have a title for their work before they have anything else on paper. But if they haven't yet written the work, how can they know what its title should be? Besides, the publisher always wants to rewrite your title as the last step in the publishing process. So, I invariably use a "working title" to which I form no emotional attachments. At the moment I'm writing these words, the working title of this book is simply "Fieldstones." I don't know what it will be by the time you have the book in your hands—but I don't waste a whole lot of prime writing time wondering.

Getting Off On the Wrong Foot

Perhaps you have visited our enchanting state of New Mexico and some of our cliff dwellings with foot- and hand-holds carved into the rock faces below. For security, those ladders were cleverly designed so if intruders started with the wrong foot or hand, they got trapped halfway up in a position where they couldn't move and became easy targets. I hope you attempted some of my triggering exercises to find first-rate fieldstones in your memory—but what if the trigger starts you off on the wrong foot and you get stuck halfway up? Here's an exercise that helps you escape from a poorly started sentence.

———————————————————

Exercise: Some New Starts

From a draft you're writing, choose a sentence that's giving you trouble. Rather than trying to manipulate the words in the sentence, trash them. Start over with the idea that you're trying to get across and write some new sentences with the same idea but different starting words. Here's an example: "There are measurement scales which can be used to express safety in a meeting in a quantitative way."

- **Start by asking a question**: How safe do you feel?

- **Start with "you"**: You can use a rating scale to quantify your feelings about safety.

- **Start with "I"**: I can express my feelings quantitatively. (This leads to why I would want to—since there's no energy in this one)

- **Start with the "why"—the motivation**: In some meetings, I feel safe enough to say anything.

- **Start with the motivation, but expressed negatively**: Some meetings scare me silly.

- **Start with "when"**: When meetings don't work, the typical problem is lack of safety.

- **Start with "if"**: If you don't feel safe in a meeting, how can you express yourself?

- **Start with "everyone"**: Everyone has feelings about meetings.

- **Start with "nobody"**: Nobody wants to suffer through a bad meeting.

- **Start with a quotation**: "Nobody wants to hear what I have to say," Ronnie complained.

- **Pick your own favorite starter**: "Wow! I've never seen a meeting like this before."

Now choose among these various starts the one that you'd like to keep in your draft. Set the others aside, or trash them, as fits for you.

———————————————————

Rules and Habits

Avery, a Ph.D. scientist from a large laboratory, found the New Starts exercise troubling. "I'm not allowed to start sentences with 'I'," he explained.

"But you just did," I kidded.

"You know what I mean. In scientific articles, there are certain rules one has to follow."

"Now you're *talking* like a scientific article. What's this 'one has to follow' business?"

Others in the class came to Avery's defense, so I backed off a bit. I'm not saying that everybody has to start sentences with 'I' or any other particular way. This is an exercise in throwing words away, so after you've replaced your original words with a sentence starting with 'I," you can throw away the 'I' and replace it with something else—if you have a rule about it.

The point, as always, is to discover the underlying message and its energy by peeling away the modifications and limitations imposed by your outdated rules and habits. And what are these rules and habits anyway? They're just another part of our store of memory stones. And if they're just words, the same arguments apply to them as to any other strings of words. Just because I once found a rule or habit to be useful, that doesn't mean I have to carry it for the rest of my life. Just because someone planted a rule in my mind when I was a child, that doesn't mean I have to leave it there when I'm an adult. All of my rules and habits make up a raft I have to drag around while I'm writing.

The Perfection Rule

When I began to learn the art of throwing words away, I started giving myself a message:

"This throwing away is a good technique. I should be throwing away more stuff."

This message has exactly the pattern of my mother's messages: Praise followed by BUT. For example,

"You did a nice job washing that pot, …

but why didn't you wash the glasses better?"

Underlying this message is a very common rule:

I must always be perfect.

I call this the Perfection Rule, and it's pure poison for writers. In its most common form, it paralyzes writers and prevents them from writing anything:

I must never write a word that isn't perfect.

The Fieldstone Method tends to counteract this form of the rule, because I can write lots of words and throw away the ones that are not perfect. In effect, Fieldstoning allows me to recast the rule into the form:

I must never publish *a word that isn't perfect.*

Or, as they say in the military, "It's not a mistake unless it leaves the office."

Even with this improvement, some writers get stuck. They can draft lots of words, but their interpretation of "publish" means "let anybody see it." This interpretation prevents them from sending their words out for review, which is the most powerful way to find out which words ought to be eliminated.

The Perfection Rule is insidious, and doesn't stop there. Some writers who can send work to be reviewed get stuck at the final moment, just before releasing it to the publisher. Much of my coaching work involves transforming this rule into more of a guide, such as,

I can publish words that aren't perfect, as long as they're reasonably good and have an overall purpose.

This guide is particularly helpful since I actually have no idea what perfection looks like anyway.

Maybe I'll Discard Something Important

The Perfection Rule isn't the only rule that haunts writers. As a Great Depression child, I grew up with a rule that said,

Don't waste anything.

It's been said that nothing is more dangerous than an idea, especially if you feel it's the only idea you have. Because the essence of Fieldstoning is tossing stuff away, the worst obstruction is a precept that makes you clutch onto an idea. My Great Depression Rule is precisely that sort of precept.

The Fieldstone Method's countermeasure for the Great Depression Rule is the "For Later Use Bin" (FLUB) bin. Whenever I find myself with an idea I can't use but can't "waste," I toss it into the FLUB. That way, I know that I can recover it should I ever change my mind—which I rarely do. The underlying philosophy here is "there are no bad ideas, only ideas that don't fit the current work." Thus, I never have to judge whether an idea is good or bad, but only whether it goes into the piece I'm working on right now.

Certainly, there are times when I have no doubt about the poverty of a particular piece of writing—and those items can go directly to TRASH, without passing through FLUB. But if I have the slightest doubt, the slightest inclination to hesitate about trashing the piece, I simply use my mouse and move it to FLUB.

———————————————

Exercise: Practice with Your For-Later-Use Bin

(1) Assuming you're using a computer for your writing, create a folder called For Later Use, or something similar. If you're not using a computer, use a paper folder.

(2) Choose a sentence that's giving you trouble in a draft of something you're writing.

(3) Move a copy of this troublesome sentence to the For Later Use folder.

(4) Delete the original sentence from your draft. Notice any emotional reactions.

(5) Continue writing for at least five minutes. At the end of that period, visit the For Later Use folder and retrieve the sentence you stored in step 3.

> (6a) If you want to restore the sentence to the draft, you may do so.
>
> (6b) If you want to leave it in the FLUB, you may do so.
>
> (6c) If you want to delete it from the FLUB, you may do so.

(7) In your writing journal, record anything you learned about your writing from performing steps 1 through 6. In particular, in what ways is the draft better now than it was before? Worse? Has anything of value been lost?

Repeat this exercise as many times as it takes for you to do step 4 on any sentence that's giving you trouble. You have then learned the proper use of your FLUB, and may proceed to the next chapter, where you'll start learning how to keep the FLUB from growing too large to manage.

————————————————————

[For more on how to transform rules into guides, see my book *Becoming a Technical Leader: An Organic Problem-Solving Approach* (New York: Dorset House Publishing, 1986), pp. 145—49.]

Chapter 10. Criteria for Discarding Stones

Figure 10. The big rock in the river would have made a substantial contribution to this fieldstone house, but simply wouldn't fit the style of the rest of the rocks. The flat rocks in the river wouldn't fit the style, either. (Photo by Dani Weinberg)

There is Jackson standing like a stone wall. —Bernard Bee, at first battle of Bull Run, 1861

The Fieldstone Method uses the analogy of stone walls for the writing, not the analogy of Stonewall Jackson for the writer. There are times when I need to stand firm about my writing, but not when I'm selecting stones to be discarded. The essence of the Fieldstone Method is gathering great quantities of

words and then discarding a slightly less great quantity. In this chapter, I introduce some exercises I've found useful in giving me the flexibility to decide when words don't belong in my current wall.

Sound Tests

Although speech and writing are two different media, writing derives from speech, so reading aloud is a good way to gain perspective on your writing. Here's an exercise from my writing classes.

———————————————

Exercise: Read Aloud (in a group)

One very effective method of feedback is to hear someone read your work out loud.

1. Select a working team of three.
2. A reads B's writing aloud, while C observes both A and B's reactions. B is not to comment on A's reading, but may make notes.
3. C reports on observations. B then reports on reactions.
4. Switch roles and repeat until all have had a turn.
5. Come back to big group and report on what the exercise itself was like.

———————————————

You can also do this exercise with just one other person, omitting the observer role. When you have another person

read your writing aloud, you benefit in at least two ways. First of all, hearing your own words is not the same as reading them, so you will gain new perspectives. Secondly, each place the reader stumbles is like a wobbly stone in a dry set wall—a place that can use some work to make the stones fit better.

Here's an example from my students doing this exercise. One wrote:

"I accept the fact that (not) everything that's being contributed will work for me, and that some of what I contribute will not work for others."

The reader actually omitted the first "not," and became completely confused about the meaning of the sentence. This led to a much clearer rewrite:

"Some of their contributions won't work for me, and some of mine won't work for them. I accept both imperfections."

Sometimes you don't have another reader handy, but reading aloud is still possible. My computer has the ability to read written material aloud, in various voices. It's not terrific at this, but it does let me change modalities and hear things that don't fit. I also get a similar benefit from reading my own material aloud.

When I read my own work aloud to another person, any time I feel the urge to explain a passage, that passage needs replacing. After all, I'm not generally going to sit alongside my readers to explain what the writing doesn't explain for itself.

Vision Tests

Sound isn't the only modality that's useful for testing my stones for fit. Although I read with my eyes, I can use my eyes for other tests besides reading. For example, I can generate various global views of my writing by fuzzing my vision, which is easy for me to do by taking off my glasses. When I can't read the words, I see instead the patterns the words and paragraphs make. Sometimes I see that a paragraph is too long, or I have too many short, choppy sentences in a row.

Touch Tests

Touch is another useful modality change. I often imagine my writing to be like clay, and I can "feel" it in my hands. Places that don't feel right get discarded or sent to the FLUB.

Words have textures. "Acquiescent" is slimy; "grab" is rough; "puppy" is cottony. Combined, they lend a unique feel. What happens when you grab an acquiescent puppy? Maybe you don't know, but the line "Sarah grabbed the acquiescent puppy" carries a lot of energy for me. In spite of how subjective all our senses are, such a sentence may well provoke energy in many readers.

These touch tests will not remain imaginary much longer. Haptics (from the Greek haptikos for grasp or perceive) is the scientific specialty devoted to mastery of the sense of touch. Haptics engineers are now producing computer interaction devices that allow users to "feel" virtual objects. Soon I'll be grasping my meanings, manipulating my sentences, and squeezing my paragraphs down to reasonable size.

Taste Tests

At times, I have to "eat my words." With a little practice, I learned that each word has a different flavor and substance. "Trudge" is a meat-and-potatoes word; "lithe" is watercress-salad; and "stab" is hot-mustard. Using my teeth and tongue, I reject certain sentences. "She trudged lithely, stabbing the aliens right and left."—not a balanced lunch.

Some words and sentences have no flavor or texture at all. When looking for stones to discard, I search for oatmeal verbs like "go," "is," "do," "get," and "has"—words that just flop on the page and stare at you. No texture. No flavor.

Any pronoun carries the risk of becoming an oatmeal word. Here's an entire oatmeal sentence:

He went there, and they did what they had to do for him, so he was able to get what he used to have—that's how it was.

How would you enjoy a steady diet of this mush? Maybe you'd be tempted to put some ketchup on it, or replace its principal noun with turnips. But if you try that, you'll discover that it doesn't even *have* a principal noun, which is all the test you need. Discard the sentence and start over. And before you start rewriting it, consider that you might not be hungry for a sentence here at all.

The Life Test

This is another application of the Energy Principle. Find the life that was in your thought before you wrote down the words. If there's no life, there should be no stone. For example, where's the stone in a sentence like this:

"Systems can be very complex, unless there are factors that make them simple."

If you try to rewrite this, you find out it's a syllogism:

Systems are either complex, or they're not complex.

What else is there? In other words, the sentence doesn't say anything. If a sentence doesn't say anything, trash it.

Weinberg's Target

I know two writers, call them X and Y, whose work affects me in different ways. I've attempted to read perhaps a dozen of X's articles, yet I've never managed to finish even one. Curiously, though, in spite of the deadening effect of his writing, I don't consider X a failed writer. His writing is so bad I can't really involve myself in his subject matter. Consequently, I never associate his abominable writing with his content. Even though I've tried to read a dozen of his works, I've never lost my taste for his subjects.

In contrast, Y is what I consider a terrible writer, even though his writing style is rather more polished than X's. I can actually finish Y's articles, but whenever I do, I hate his subject. X leaves me unmoved; Y moves me against his subject. To me, turning your reader against your subject is the ultimate writer's sin.

When I write a book or essay, I have one fundamental measure of failure, which I call Weinberg's Target:

After exposure to my work, do the readers care less about the subject than they did before exposure?

Or, there is the version I use for fiction:

After exposure to my work, do the readers care less about the characters than they did at the beginning?

If the answer is Yes, I've failed.

If the answer is No, I've succeeded, and I'm happy for it. Nobody really understands learning—not well enough to succeed with every student, or even seventy-five per cent of them. Learning, it seems, is a matter of repeated attempts, until one finds a teacher, a book, a film, an approach, a flash, or something, anything, that finally communicates the point. I want never to discourage a reader's continuing search for enlightenment.

Robert Burns once wrote

> *The best laid schemes o' mice and men*
> *Gang aft agley, (oft go astray)*
> *And lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,*
> *For promised joy!*

As a writer, Burns understood well that his best laid schemes might bring " ...nought but grief an' pain, for promised joy." Although we can read his collection of finished verse, we have no access to his collection of discards. We'll never see how he performed the most important part of his work—discarding those stones whose promised joy never materialized.

For some authors, it's possible to study successive versions of their work—perhaps in preserved manuscripts—and learn much about their process. If you have no access to these

manuscripts, you'll have to settle for seeing how I do it. Quite simply, I apply Weinberg's Target, which is actually a form of the Energy Principle:

If you care less about the material after you finish than before you started, junk it.

If it turns *you* off, just imagine what it will do to your readers.

Quality is Personal

Please be wary of any suggestions I offer in this chapter. Only you can decide which stones are to be discarded from your writing. (That's good to keep in mind when you begin working with an editor, too.) Here's an exercise I offer my students to help them spell out what they personally like and dislike in writing.

———————————————

Exercise: Developing Your Own Quality Criteria

(1) As prework for the class, each person has been given the following assignment: Bring one or more samples of someone else's writing that you admire. Bring one or more samples of someone else's writing that you detest.

(2) Form teams of three, then

(2a) Read samples of each "dislike" piece.

(2b) Based on what you find in these samples, brainstorm some measures of poor writing. Give examples.

(3) Discuss when each of your measures might not be applicable (e.g., different types of writing: technical, poetic, persuasive).

(4) Each person:

(4a) Apply the measures to a sample of your own writing.

(4b) Make three revisions.

(4c) Retest the piece.

(4d) Read the original piece to the team.

(4e) Read the revised piece to the team.

(4f) Discuss their reactions to the changes you've made.

(5) Share with the whole group.

If you have no group with whom to share, omit the group steps and used the time you save to begin assembling a writing support group with whom you'll be able to share other exercises. You need that kind of support on your journey to writing success.

——————————————————

If you haven't yet succeeded in assembling your writing support group, you may want to do this exercise yourself, then compare with the following list developed by one of the triads in my class:

• **Overpunctuation** (This is important!!!!!!!!)

• **Poor grammar** (This is real important!!!!!!)

• **Incomplete sentences** (Real important!!!!!)

• **Long sentences** (Some sentences continue well beyond the point when everybody reading them, even those who are not reading carefully because they have something on their minds other than the writing itself, can generally see the point.)

• **Irrelevant material** (Heart transplants should not be undertaken lightly—though I did want to say that my sister's dog, Mannie, is rather cute.)

• **No organization** (Second most important is the source of the problem, but the most important is something else.)

• **Trivial or self-evident ideas** (Some things cost more than other things.)

• **Overuse of rhetorical questions** (Does anyone actually like the overuse of rhetorical questions?)

• **Overuse of proverbs or aphorisms** (Writers must always remember, "a stitch in time saves nine" and "haste makes waste.")

• **Convoluted, abstract sentences** (Their essay was conceptually structured like a Moebius strip embedded in a Fourier-transformed n-space.)

• **What's the point?** (Here are forty essential things to remember.)

• **Wishy or washy** (You should take a firm stand, unless you prefer to wait.)

• **Jumping around** (I have no idea where the reader is. Or was? Well, anyway, where the reader might be if there were a reader.)

• **Single sentence paragraphs**

(Every one.

No exceptions.

Not even here.

Well, maybe fiction.

Sometimes.

Like narration.

"Or dialogue?"

"Sure.")

• **Accidental alliteration** (Adept authors always avoid accidental alliteration.)

• **Long words** (Does the promulgator instantiate multisyllabic nominalizations?)

• **False connections** (The knee bone's connected to the neck bone, so writers should all kneel to the king.)

• **Germanisms** (Avoid late surprises, hyphenated-elongated-linked-together words and long noun phrases that you never know if and when they're going to end or if they're going to end at all—unless you don't want to.)

• **Disruptive references** (We've often heard [Columbus, C. 1492] that we should avoid disruptively [see, Webster's Collegiate Dictionary] placed references.)

• **Foreign words, phrases, names** (Gemutlichkeit, et quelque chose comme ça.)

• **General conclusions from the sky** (Remember, all writers should follow this rule.)

• **Obscure references and pronouns** (It was evident, as he said, that she didn't want it unless they wanted it.)

• **Author's mood intrudes** (The cube root of 27 is 3, and it makes me really angry when I read that!).

• **Switching tenses in midstream** (We found them everywhere, and we will be unhappy about it, but we use it in fiction, sometimes.)

Problems with Meaning

Some of the items on this group's brainstormed list concern meaning—words strung together into irrelevant or senseless passages. I use the following exercise when I'm having trouble understanding a passage, even one of my own.

———————————————

Exercise: Do You Mean?

This exercise is adapted from a communication exercise Virginia Satir often used to untangle communication in a family. The purpose here is not therapy, but developing the ability to criticize your own writing and the writing of others. Specifically, the exercise is designed to develop consciousness of the many interpretations that different readers can make.

(1) Choose a sentence from your writing.

(2) Choose a partner whose role it will be to help you see other meanings in your sentence. (It's often better if your partner is not a writer.) Sit facing your partner and read your sentence out loud.

(3) Partner is to respond verbally to the sentence, not by agreeing or disagreeing, but by trying to understand at least three possible meanings that the sentence contains, especially those meanings of which you were not aware. The entire process is structured as follows:

> (3a) Partner asks a question beginning with the words, "Do you mean…?" followed by an idea of what the sentence may have meant.
>
> (3b) You are restricted to one of the three answers: YES, NO, PARTIALLY. You may jot down notes in your writing journal as you proceed.
>
> (3c) Your partner is trying to explore the full spectrum of implications, connotations, and possible confusions. Ultimately, your partner tries to get three YES answers, after which you may switch roles and repeat the exercise.

(4) If unable to get three YES answers in a reasonable time, your partner may ask you to rewrite the sentence and start over.

(5) After both partners are satisfied, and you're in a group, return to the group and share insights.

(6) Questions for your writing journal:

(6a) What were your feelings when your partner suggested a meaning you hadn't seen? Did you ever feel criticized?

(6b) Did you ever feel you wanted to say more than the three permitted answers? What did you do about it?

(6c) If you failed to communicate and had to rewrite the sentence, what did you feel? If you had to ask for a rewrite, how did you feel?

———————————————

Here's an example. If the sentence is "Henry dabbled in stocks," some questions might be:

- Do you mean that Henry was locked in stocks because of some sin?
- Do you mean that Henry was a chef who experimented with various bases for his soups?
- Do you mean that Henry risked only a small amount of money?
- Do you mean that somebody else was more serious about stocks?
- Do you mean that Henry didn't care about the outcome of his dabbling?

About one-third of the time, the problem turns out to be that the passage didn't mean anything, or meant several things at once. Later, we'll see how I use that information when organizing manuscripts.

Playing With Your Words

I haven't yet figured out how to do the *Do You Mean* exercise without a partner, but the next exercise can be done alone and comes close to *Do You Mean*. Moreover, it's based on the fieldstone metaphor. When deciding whether and where to use a particular stone, a stonemason will turn it over and study it from various angles. By playing with your word stone in diverse ways, you can achieve the kind of fit you see in a well-made fieldstone wall. Don Gause and I designed the following exercise for understanding the meaning of specifications for computer programs, but it turns out to be an effective way to figure out what your own writing means. [D.C. Gause and G.M. Weinberg, *Exploring Requirements: Quality Before Design* (New York: Dorset House Publishing, 1989), pp. 92—103.]

———————————————————

Exercise: Word Play

(1) Choose a "problem sentence."

(2) Choose a partner (or not) and play the following word games:

> (2a) Vary the stress patterns of words and notice changes of meaning.
>
> (2b) Change positives to negatives and vice versa.
>
> (2c) Change universal words like ALL to words like NONE, and vice versa.

(2d) Change absolute words like MUST to words like MAY, and vice versa.

(2e) Change adverbs and adjectives to their opposites.

(2f) Replace persuasive words (such as OBVIOUSLY, THEREFORE, CLEARLY, NATURALLY) with the arguments they are supposed to be replacing.

(2g) Replace the longest word with a shorter word. Do this several times.

(2h) Replace one of the short words with a longer word. Do this several times.

(2i) Draw a picture that represents what the sentence is saying.

(3) Rewrite the sentence the way you now want it to read.

(4) For your writing journal:

(4a) What did it feel like to play with your writing? Did you have fun? If not, why not?

(4b) What insights did you get about the meaning of a particular sentence?

(4c) What insights did you get about your writing in general?

———————————————————

Most people enjoy this exercise. If you don't, that's perhaps the most telling test of all. If you're not able to have fun with your writing, it's quite likely that something's wrong with the way you're going about your writing. The next few chapters may help you start having fun again.

Chapter 11. Decimating Your Work

Figure 11. A major part of your job is knowing which stones you shouldn't use in your fieldstone wall. These Standing Stones of Stenness in Scotland have been standing for 5,000 years, the tallest exceeding six meters. Of the original 12, eight were knocked down by a foolish farmer. Don't be so foolish in your own gathering. (Photo by Fiona Charles)

I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.
As when, O lady mine!
With chiseled touch
The stone unhewn and cold

Becomes a living mold.
The more the marble wastes,
The more the statue grows.
—Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564)

Art historians question whether Michelangelo was telling the literal truth when he explained that his principal accomplishment was removing unnecessary stone. Perhaps he actually worked from an overall mental image of what he would produce; perhaps he didn't. But even starting with a mental image, he also started with tons of stone, much of which had to be removed to reveal his image to the world.

Though we may debate whether removing stone is the end of the gathering phase or the beginning of the organizing stage, it's the same for writers. You have to carve tons of stone to set your creation free.

The Abecedarian

Some years ago, Norie Yasukawa, Bob Marcus, and I decided to write a revolutionary introductory textbook about computer programming. One of our revolutionary ideas was one lesson per pair of facing pages, with computer program examples on the right and textual explanations on the left. This format would allow the student to study the examples without flipping back and forth between examples and text. [G.M. Weinberg, N. Yasukawa, and R. Marcus, *Structured Programming in PL/C: An Abecedarian* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1973).]

We counted our words carefully to make sure each lesson fit on a page. In those ancient days, before personal computers, the text had to be sent to a printer for setting in type. When we

received the page proofs, we realized that somehow we had miscalculated how much type would fit on one page. Every text lesson was about ten per cent longer than would fit on a single page.

With only a few days to return the proofs, we panicked. We had no idea what we could do to save our design. We put aside all other work for the weekend and sequestered ourselves in the Weinberg dining room on Cornell Avenue, determined to find some solution. When we explained to Dani what we were doing, she said, "Well, that's easy. Just remove ten per cent of the words from each chapter."

What a ridiculous idea! We refused to consider the idea, because we knew it would ruin our book if we removed even a single one of our carefully crafted words. While we were arguing amongst ourselves, Dani picked up one of the proof pages and started making marks, saying, "Here are a few words I think you could remove without really changing anything for me."

Suffice it to say that once we took Dani's suggestion seriously, by Monday morning Norie, Bob, and I had managed to remove one-tenth of the words in every single chapter. And, to our surprise, each and every chapter had been improved by the exercise. We now call this exercise "Dani's Decimation."

———————————————————

Exercise: Less Is More (Dani's Decimation)

1. Select two paragraphs from your writing—a paragraph you think is great and a paragraph with which you are

not satisfied.

2. Rewrite each sentence in each paragraph, eliminating one-Nth of the words. (Note in your journal how you felt when reading this, while doing it, and after finishing.)
3. Now eliminate one-Nth of the sentences. (Note in your journal how you felt when reading this, while doing it, and after finishing.)
4. If it's better, but lacks something important from the original, allow yourself three words that you can add to restore that quality.

This technique can be used to "tighten up" a manuscript, or just to figure out what you're really saying, if anything.

You can adjust the fraction from 1/3 to 1/10, as seems appropriate. One-third is a good guess for many writers.

———————————————

Applying Dani's Decimation

Here's an example of a text that was extracted from a book, disguised, and given to me by one of my students to analyze. (**Warning: terribly bad example ahead**.)

Individuals gain a perception of our methodology and its concepts through both internal (to the organization) and external influences. Examples of external influences include media, stories from acquaintances who work in other settings, and

an individual's personal experiences outside their workplace (e.g., college courses, previous jobs, etc.). Internal influences on an individual's perceptions of our methodology include all messages (i.e., formal and informal communication), either intentionally or unintentionally about our methodology, such as internal training programs; speeches/presentations by organizational leaders; memos; policies and procedures touting the benefits, experience with previous change programs which are perceived to have been similar to our methodology ("oh, not another new methodology.")

An individual's perception and understanding of our methodology's principles will also be affected by their previous experiences with it—the effect gap—via behavioral conditioning e.g. [four references]. *This learning effect has been observed at the group and organizational level also within methodology improvement efforts* ([reference]). *In turn, current notions of our methodology impact the effect gap through the formulation of expected effects: a number of studies have linked expectations with management practice …* [here were four more references, plus a "as cited in a fifth reference"].

I could critique this on the basis of the list of things I don't like in writing. These two paragraphs contain more than half of the "don't like" items brainstormed by my students:

- poor grammar
- long sentences (61 words long!)
- irrelevant material
- no organization

- trivial or self-evident ideas
- convoluted
- abstract
- pointless
- wishy washy
- jumping around
- filled with long words
- false connections
- disruptive references.

But suppose this were my own work and I was blind to these flaws, as I often am. How could I evaluate it? If my computer supports algorithmic evaluations, I could discover that these two paragraphs have a Flesch Reading Ease of zero, a reading grade level of 25, and a Cohen Cloudiness Count that surpasses the "unintelligible" level. Surely that's enough evidence* to suggest reconsideration.

But suppose my computer doesn't support such measures. Now what can I do? As you may have guessed, I can apply Dani's Decimation. Here's how I reduced each sentence with a goal of removing 1/3 of the words:

Original: Individuals gain a perception of our methodology and its concepts through both internal (to the organization) and external influences. (19 words)

Decimated: Individuals learn our methodology both inside and outside their organization. (10 words)

Original: Examples of external influences include media, stories from acquaintances who work in other settings, and an individual's personal experiences outside their workplace (e.g. college courses, previous jobs, etc.). (28)

Decimated: External influences include media, friends, and personal experiences such as college courses and previous jobs. (15)

Original: Internal influences on an individual's perceptions of our methodology include all messages (i.e. formal and informal communication), either intentionally or unintentionally about our methodology, such as internal training programs; speeches/presentations by organizational leaders; memos; policies and procedures touting the benefits, experience with previous change programs which are perceived to have been similar to our methodology ("oh, not another new methodology.") (61)

Decimated: Internal influences include both formal and informal messages that allude to our methodology, such as training programs, speeches, memos, policies and procedures. Especially influential are experiences with previous change programs which are perceived to have been similar to our methodology. (40)

Original: An individual's perception and understanding of our methodology's principles will also be affected by their previous experiences with it—the effect gap—via behavioral conditioning. (25)

Decimated: Prior experience with our methodology will also affect an individual's understanding, … (11)

Original: This learning effect has been observed at the group and organizational level also within methodology improvement efforts. (17)

Decimated: … because people learn from experience. (5)

Original: In turn, current notions of our methodology impact the effect gap through the formulation of expected effects: a number of studies have linked expectations with management practice. (27)

Decimated: Also, people will be affected by what they expect of our methodology. (12)

By this transformation, I reduced the text to the following (**Warning**: **still pretty bad)**:

Individuals learn our methodology both inside and outside their organization. External influences include media, friends,

and personal experiences, such as. college courses and previous jobs. Internal influences include both formal and informal messages that allude to our methodology, such as training programs; speeches; memos; policies and procedures. Especially influential are experience with previous change programs which are perceived to have been similar to our methodology.

Prior experience with our methodology will affect an individual's understanding, because people learn from experience. Also, people will be affected by what they expect of our methodology.

That's 92 words versus 192 previously, with improved clarity, to my eyes at least. I then continued to apply Dani's Decimation at the sentence level, yielding **(Warning: not finished yet)**:

Individuals learn our methodology through media, friends, and personal experiences, such as, college courses and previous jobs. [They also learn through any] messages that allude to our methodology, such as training programs; speeches; memos; policies and procedures, [as well as] similar [methodologies]. Prior experience will [also] affect an individual's understanding, because people learn from experience and are influenced by their expectations.

Now it was down to 61 words, including the new wording shown in brackets, and I had a much clearer idea of what the author was trying to say. I figured I could reduce it to a single paragraph, which turned out to be a single sentence, 16 words long:

People learn about our methodology in various ways, not all of which are under our control.

Let's hope this is what the writer was trying to say—and the poor soul wasn't being paid by the word.

Cotton Candy Bricklaying

I suspect that the author started this work with an outline, and this one sentence is probably close to what the outline originally said. As the author expanded the outline, this not-too-nutritious idea probably became:

People learn our methodology in many different ways

(a) Influences

(b) Experiences

The sub-topics are then further expanded into sub-sub-topics:

(a) Influences

1. Internal influences
2. External influences

(b) Experiences

1. Past experiences
2. Future experiences (expected effects)

Using this expanded outline method, you're likely to wind up with cotton candy like this: **(Warning: Another bad example.)**

There are two kinds of people in the world—those who break everything down into two kinds, and those who don't.

Among those who don't, there are those who break everything down into exactly three kinds, those who break everything down into less than three kinds, and those who break everything down into more than three kinds.

*Among those who break everything down into exactly three kinds, there are those who break every one of those kinds into three sizes: small, medium, and large. (and on and on and on like this…)

Compared with the Fieldstone Method, this expanding outline method is like building with bricks—totally predictable and totally boring. Once in a while, a master bricklayer can give us a rather interesting brick wall, but not by repeating the same pattern endlessly. And not by using cotton candy as a substitute for solid clay or adobe bricks.

Why do so many people use the cotton candy bricklaying method? The major attraction of this method seems to be that even when writers believe words are hard to come by, and even when they don't have many ideas, they can fill many pages with cotton candy bricks. It's also quite secure

and predictable, for you can easily count the number of bricks you've laid, calculate an estimate how long the wall will take to finish, and predict exactly what the result will look like.

The Fieldstone method doesn't seem to be so secure and predictable. I remember an anesthesiologist telling me that a certain surgical procedure was like baking a cake:

"There are twenty-three steps, and only after the last step does it look like a cake. At every intermediate step, it looks like a mess."

To the untrained eye, Fieldstone writing also looks like a mess at every stage—until the book emerges magically at the end.

That's probably why teachers prefer to teach the cotton candy bricklaying method. At every step in the development of an outlined book, it looks like a book. The only problem is that even the last step may not produce a real book, but only something that just *looks* like a book.

Even so, every person's library should contain at least one cotton candy brick book. Why? Because there are two kinds of books in the world:

a. those that you enjoy reading and possibly learn something from
b. those that can be used when sleeping pills don't work.

———————————————————

Exercise: Decimating Fiction and Other Literary Forms

Although Dani's Decimation originated in technical writing, it's equally applicable to literary forms. Nevertheless, I fre-

quently find that "creative writers" don't believe that such a method could possibly apply to their work. Indeed, when I'm writing fiction, I frequently find that I'm the one who feels that way. So, here's a variation I use.

1. Choose a section of your manuscript that you don't feel quite right about. Save a copy of this section. Now you are completely safe to restore the precious passage in case the exercise does not, in fact, apply.
2. Rewrite each sentence in each paragraph, eliminating at least one of the words. (Note in your journal how you felt when reading this, while doing it, and after finishing.)
3. In dialogue, for example, each paragraph may be one sentence, so simply eliminate one sentence in ten overall. (Note in your journal how you felt when reading this, while doing it, and after finishing.)
4. Compare the revised passage with the original. If the original is better, then simply restore it. If some parts are better, restore those parts. If the overall passage is better, but lacks something important from the original, allow yourself three words that you can add to restore that quality.
5. Now repeat the exercise on a section that you feel is absolutely the best section in your entire manuscript. If that can be improved, think about what that says about the value of applying the technique to your entire manuscript.

———————————————

I do not apply these decimation methods while I'm first drafting a story, essay, or chapter. Instead, I wait until the passages

have ripened in my brain for at least one day. Knowing that I will apply them eventually, I'm free to write first drafts without worrying about making them "tight." Staying loose makes writing a lot more fun.

Chapter 12. Beginning to Get Organized

Figure 12. Although both the old house and the new addition use the same style of river rocks, you can easily see the change in the way they are organized. Readers can readily see this same effect in books with multiple authors, or that have been organized at different times,in different moods. (Photo by Dani Weinberg)

Suffice it to say that round stone and rubble wall building takes a sort of sixth sense to tell which stone goes in which position. Only experience can teach that. I've been at it for some time now and still have to handle most rocks a couple of times before I find the right fit. [J. Vivian, *Building Stone Walls* (Pownal, Vt.: Storey Books, 1978), p. 51.]

Having brought you this far, I owe you a confession: It's not really possible for anyone to teach the sixth sense that lets you organize your stones into a coherent wall. That's not because I don't know how to organize literary fieldstones into a coherent work. One the contrary, perhaps my greatest natural talent is organizing diverse pieces into a sensible whole. But mine is a natural talent, the work of my subconscious mind, which makes it difficult to teach to other people.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Fortunately, another natural talent of mine is the ability to see *process*. Perhaps the two talents are one and the same. In any case, once I become aware I'm doing something, I'm able to isolate the elements of the process in a way that makes them clear to other people. Sometimes, I can even bring the workings of my subconscious mind into consciousness. At times, I can even help others perform this trick.

I do have an enormous amount of experience helping people organize their writing. Whenever I isolate my processes and share them, other people seem able to modify my processes to their own taste and combine them into personal processes of their own. That's the approach I'm going to take here.

Although I say I have a "natural" talent for organizing, I suspect it's not really natural at all. Growing up in a crazy home, making sense of things became a matter of survival, so I've had much practice. I can offer lots of hints, but the secret is the same as the secret of getting to Carnegie Hall: "Practice, practice, practice." With experience, you'll get better at organizing.

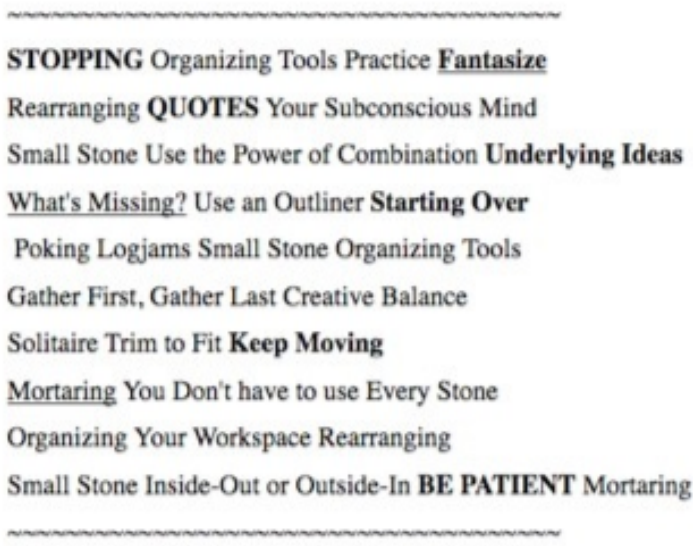
Gather First, Gather Last

If you have great piles of ideas, organization skills can help you write a story, an article or a book. If you lack ideas but you simply want to have written a story, an article or book, learning to organize will not help. Nobody can make a stone wall without stones. We've already seen a few frightening examples of what happens when someone tries.

On a stage set for a play, you might stack styrofoam blocks that look like stones, but out in the blustery world, a mild breeze would blow them away. In the same way, you can cover paper with printed words and bind it so it looks like a book, but it won't stand up to reading by real people. If all you want is to *have written* a book, hire a printer to bind some blank pages, emboss your name on the spine in gold leaf, and display it proudly in your bookcase. If you want to *write* a book, you will need stones. Lots of stones. So, if you've reached this point in reading this chapter and haven't yet collected a substantial pile of hard, dense, true stones, turn back! The Fieldstone Method starts with gathering, not with organizing.

Use an Organizing Principle

Fortunately for me, when I reached this point in writing this chapter, I had already gathered lots of ideas, lots of stones, about organizing. Unfortunately, I had way too many. Perhaps not too many for the finished manuscript, but way too many for my mind to grasp. I needed help. How was I going to organize all of them? To me, it looked rather like this melange:



I was completely stuck. I stopped pressing for an immediate resolution and allowed my subconscious to work on the problem (using techniques I'll explain later), I suddenly dreamed of an organizing principle. I don't always have an organizing principle—a rule by which I could place the stones in some order—but when I do, my organizing job becomes much simpler. So, this time I got lucky.

Here's my organizing principle for this chapter and the several chapters that will follow:

I will show you how I organize my fieldstones by offering running commentary on how I'm organizing these topics on organizing.

As I wrote these words, I didn't know how this organizing principle would work out, because I hadn't done it yet, but at least it would be an honest and immediate example.

Use Organizing Tools

I'm writing this section months later—after I'd applied the organizing principle of the previous section to produce a first draft. Looking back on what I've done since then, I realized that I have applied a number of important organizing tools to help me reach the final form you are now reading.

There are many right ways.

Many writers freeze up when faced with organizing a large pile of stones, but organizing is best done when relaxed. My major tool for relaxing is to remind myself that there are many fine ways to organize the same material. In fiction, or nonfiction stories, scenes can be presented out of a strict timeline sequence, using flashbacks and other techniques. In nonfiction, when there's no story line, it's even easier to choose an almost arbitrary sequence and make it work. True, some parts can be organized in only one way, but when that happens, it's so obvious it poses no problem.

Readers don't have to read in order.

Another relaxing idea is that in any case, you have no control over your readers. You may order material one way and each reader may choose a different way. My friend, Arthur, loves mysteries, but always reads the last chapter first so he'll know whodunit. My own way of reading nonfiction is to riffle the pages, scanning from back to front for something interesting that catches my eye, usually a picture or diagram of some sort. I start reading from there and continue until I lose interest. Then I riffle again and repeat the process. If the author fretted

too much over the book's organization, it was sweat that was wasted on me.

You don't have to get it right the first time.

In the old days, without computers, changing the organization of a manuscript was a tedious and painful experience, like tearing down a stone wall and starting over. Nowadays, if you don't like the way the way your wall of words is organized, a few taps on the keyboard, a couple of mouse clicks, and everything is rearranged.

You can always backtrack.

When you decide to rearrange your word stones, always retain a copy of the old organization. That way, you can return to it if you don't like the new structure. Now you are safe when you risk trying a new organizing principle

You don't have to do it alone.

After I drafted this manuscript, I sent it to a number of friends—Anya Achtenberg, an award-winning fiction author; John Suzuki, a meticulous reader of enormous numbers of technical books; Johanna Rothman, an author and columnist; Esther Derby, author, columnist and editor; David McClintock, a professional editor who has worked on many of my books; Terra Ziporyn Snider, another award-winning author who happens to be my niece; Geof Lory, a friend of a friend who wants to improve his writing and probably represents a typical member of my audience. Through their comments, and, of course, Dani's, I gained several new perspectives on how the organization could be improved.

You can try some off-the-shelf tools.

If you're having trouble getting started, or restarted, you can always try one of several standard methods of organizing. Alphabetical order might work for reference purposes. Chronological order sometimes works, too. Often, one topic builds on definitions introduced in another, which should obviously precede it.

In a story, characters who appear in one scene may have to be introduced in an earlier scene. Much nonfiction contains "stories," too—particularly if they (like this book) describe a process for doing something one step at a time. For nonfiction, I often try to order topics within a chapter so the most important ones come first—possibly preceded by topics that provide a foundation for them. Organizing by importance allows me to drop the leftover least important topics if the chapter is growing too long.

You can ask yourself what the reader expects.

In fiction, you want a certain rhythm to the rise and fall of the story. Readers in each genre have specific expectations that you can use to determine your organization. Romance novels have to have boy-meets-girl (or girl meets girl or boy meets boy, in sub-genres), boy-and-girl-have-difficulties, boy-gets-girl (or girl-gets-boy, depending on your point of view). A few romance novelists successfully vary from this pattern, but you do so at your own risk.

An adventure novel had better grab the reader early and provide an escalating series of difficulties to be overcome by the protagonist. Such genre patterns anchor the organization

just the way a few extra-large stones or immovable landscape features anchor a fieldstone wall. Ask yourself what your reader is paying for, then provide it through your organization.

You can always shuffle the cards and ask for a new deal.

As a last resort when faced with an intimidating pile of stones, you can always shuffle them at random and see what emerges in your mind. I like to write keywords for each stone on a three-by-five card, then shuffle the cards and deal them out on the floor (or the table, if the dogs are around trying to help). Each new shuffling produces new ideas about how things might be organized, and soon I'm back to my computer with a renewed sense of how to proceed.

Sometimes, the organization just flows by itself.

The first few sections of this chapter just fell into place for me. It seemed natural to emphasize the role of practice first, then the need for having a good supply of stones to organize. Once I'd described shuffling, I realized that I don't always use cards, but sometimes use an outliner, so I knew the section on using the outliner must follow soon after. But then I realized that I first needed to warn readers that the outliner is only one specific way of gaining a mental grasp on the possible arrangements, so I needed to tell about solitaire first.

Usually, several tools work together.

The natural flow of ideas provided the sequence of the original draft, but that sequence changed when Anya told me that she was losing her motivation as she worked her way through long lists of topics. I decided I had to shorten the lists while at the same time provide some motivation for following all this work, so I moved the section on using the power of rearrangement right after this one. "Use an Organizing Principle" did not appear in the original stone pile at all, but was added as a section when I realized that was the topic I was writing. Much later, after receiving more comments from my readers, I added the "Organizing Tools" section, which also didn't appear in the original stone pile.

Use the Power of Rearrangement

Rearranged, the stone pile for the beginning of this first organizing chapter now looks like this:

- Practice
- Gather First, Gather Last
- Use an Organizing Principle
- Use Organizing Tools
- Use the Power of Rearrangement
- Use the Solitaire Model
- Use an Outliner

Beyond those sections, I didn't yet know what I was going to do—and I didn't have to. I was pretty sure I would complete the chapter with "Pull Out the Wrong Rocks," and after Anya's comment about getting bored, I knew I'd want to say something about "Be Patient." The remaining stones would

go in other parts of the wall, perhaps in other chapters, or perhaps omitted. The important thing is to notice how much I had already accomplished.

The original pile of stones had about 23 items, and though I'd added a couple, I had now reduced the remaining pile to about 16 items. That may not seem like much until we analyze the mathematics of organizational difficulty.

Mathematics tell us that these 16 items may be rearranged in about 20,000,000,000,000 ways. No wonder organization is difficult.

Still, beyond difficult, there's backbreaking. When I had 23 stones, there were roughly 20,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 ways they could be arranged. So, by putting the first few items in order in a rather effortless, natural flow, I had simplified my remaining task by a factor of a billion.

IBM once published an ad that dramatically illustrates the power of rearrangement. The ad contained a long list of words with the caption: *"Anyone could have used these 4,178 words. In the hands of William Shakespeare, they became* King Lear." [In fact, the words in the IBM advertisement were probably collected from various scenes in *King Lear*. The number of words in the complete public domain text is 27,806.]

———————————————————

Exercise: Card Sorting

Try this technique when you're having trouble getting started with your organization, or just having trouble thinking of something to write.

1. At random, choose five stones from your general pile.

2. Write two or three keywords about each stone on a three-by-five card (or any size card that you prefer). Write large, using a marker pen, so you can read the words from a distance.
3. Shuffle the cards and deal them out in a line in front of you.
4. Try to sketch a piece—an essay or chapter, scene or short story, using that sequence. Don't spend more than five minutes doing this, but write the sketch on another card.
5. Now repeat the shuffling and produce a second sketch, and a third.
6. Lay the three sketches side-by-side in front of you and notice the energy they produce in you. If, by this time, you don't have a sketch you want to work with, repeat the entire exercise, this time using ten stones chosen at random from your stone pile.
7. If, by the end of this exercise, you still don't have a stimulating sketch, take a look at the stones you've chosen. Eliminate any that don't have energy now, replacing them with other stones chosen at random. Then repeat the process.
8. If, by this time, you still don't have a sketch you want to pursue, then put everything aside and go gather some more stones.

———————————————————

Exercise: Anchor Stones

Use this technique when you have so many energetic stones that they seem overwhelming.

1. For each stone, write two or three keywords on a three-by-five card.
2. For each card, assess its energy. Rate the energy from zero to ten and write the number on the card.
3. If you don't have any tens, assess the energy again until you find some. If you still don't have any, search your stone pile for a few tens of any kind, even if you don't see how they relate to the piece you're trying to write.
4. Sort the cards in descending order, with the tens first and the zeroes last.
5. Eliminate the zeros.
6. Copy the tens onto cards of a different color—ideally a bright color. These will be your anchor cards.
7. Lay the anchor cards in front of you and decide on an order you like.
8. Now take the nines in hand and lay each one next to the anchor card with which it most belongs. Repeat for the eights, and perhaps the sevens.
9. Now you have your draft organization in front of you. Start writing down your piece.

———————————————————

Chapter 13. Outlining with Fieldstone Solitaire

Figure 13. Make every stone action-oriented, then the whole creation will far exceed the sum of its parts, like this dramatically curved entrance wall. (Photo by Earl Everett)

"The elements, if arranged according to their atomic weights, show a distinct periodicity of their properties …. Elements exhibiting similarities in their chemical behavior have atomic weights which are approximately equal (as in the case of Pt, Ir, Os) or they possess atomic weights which increase in a uniform manner (as in the case of K, Rb, Cs)." — Dmitri Ivanovich Mendeleev (1834-1907)

The invention of the periodic table of the elements was one of the greatest feats of organization in human history. Mendeleev, a Russian chemist, developed the periodic table by placing the elements in order of increasing atomic weight. In 1871, he predicted the existence and properties of elements that would fill the gaps left in his chart. These elements were discovered between 1875 and 1885.

Mendeleev used an organizing tool. He placed his materials on cards and sorted those cards in terms of the elements that displayed similar properties. Mendeleev is said to have been addicted to playing solitaire. The resemblance between his organizing tool and his favorite solitaire game, Patience, is probably not a coincidence.

I claim kinship with Mendeleev because I'm also addicted to playing solitaire. I often use cards to help me organize piles of stones I've gathered. I also use mind maps, flow charts, and other sketching techniques to assemble the stones in two-dimensional arrays. Sometimes I just print out material on paper when I find that the computer screen isn't large enough to see the whole that I'm trying to organize.

And, after all the bad things I've told you about outlines, you may be surprised to learn that I sometimes use a computer-powered outlining tool, or outliner. In fact, I use my outliner in a variety of ways, as the following piece of an outline shows:

- Ways I use my outliner

    a. a way of seeing and testing what I have, after I've organized it.
    b. a way of moving big pieces around like solitaire cards.
    c. a way of creating a table of contents when I'm finished.

Many readers read bottom-up, not top-down. Standing in a bookstore, they might look at my table of contents (an outline) to gain an idea of whether they should buy my book. That's why I construct an outline—it's a marketing tool. But I don't construct this marketing tool until I'm finished writing the book.

The book's cover design is also a marketing tool, and few people recommend starting your project by designing the cover. Quite a few do start with a clever title, and that's usually all there is to it. I do not use an outliner as a way to organize a book from start to finish, but I would like to show you how I use it for moving pieces and testing my organization.

Make Every Stone Action-Oriented

As you saw, when I began assembling all my stones for these chapters on "organization," I was definitely overwhelmed with too much material. I had a pile of stones of all sizes, ranging from three-word trigger phrases to chapter-length expositions already drafted, plus lots of small stones that were of unknown value. I ignored the smallest stones entirely and captured the major heading of each of the other stones. Then I played with them at random until the "natural" order of the first sections of this chapter emerged. I assembled those sections, then removed those "cards" from the deck. At times, I would have actually done this with cards, but this time I used an outliner.

I shuffled the remaining cards into a flat outline that represented the stone pile and began to play solitaire with possible rearrangements. I still had difficulty with this mental task,

mostly because the list seemed so boring, so I made one change. I noticed that some of the stones specified actions ("use an outliner," "keep moving") while others were simply nouns or noun phrases ("subconscious," "stopping").

This observation gave me my next organizing principle, one borrowed from fiction writing. Most readers are bored by long descriptive passages where nothing *happens*, so in fiction, *you try to make every scene action oriented.* This isn't a bad idea for nonfiction, either, so I rewrote several of the items and produced the semi-random list of stones remaining to be organized:

- You Don't Have to Use Every Stone
- Fantasize
- Achieve Creative Balance
- Use Quotes
- Put Your Subconscious to Work
- Pull Out the Wrong Rocks
- Use the Power of Combination
- Organize Using Underlying Ideas
- Work Inside-Out or Outside-In
- Don't Be Afraid to Start Over
- Look for What's Missing
- Trim to Fit
- Use Mortar to Bind
- Be Patient
- Keep Moving
- Know When to Stop
- Organize Your Workspace

Work Inside-Out or Outside-In

As soon as I had rephrased each stone into this action format, several rearrangements became obvious. I moved this "inside-out" section here because as I was writing about solitaire, I realized that solitaire is a tool I use in several ways. I've placed solitaire under several topics—"Keep Moving" and "Put Your Subconscious to Work." Moreover, it was already in the draft of "Use Organizing Tools." So, I split the single "Solitaire" stone into three, but placed each of the three parts at a lower level. But since the solitaire model is so important to my organizing approach, I later decided to introduce it as the central topic of this chapter.

After I moved this topic—"Work Inside-Out or Outside-In"—into place there are "only" 8,000,000,000 rearrangements of the remaining 14 items. This may seem like a lot, but it actually felt easier to me, seeing only 14 items to be rearranged.

After looking over the items, I also marked several of them as "long" or "chapter"—which meant they were either long pieces of written text that might evolve into chapters or even longer ones very close to finished chapters already. Using this observation, I reorganized the remainder of the list as follows:

- Organize Your Workspace (chapter)
- Keep Moving (chapter)
- Trim to Fit (long, might be the basis for a chapter)
- Use Mortar to Bind (long, might be the basis for a chapter)
- Know When to Stop (long, might be the basis for a chapter)
- Still to be sorted (nine items)

The long or chapter stones became my anchors. They generally fit in only one or two ways, so now I had just nine major items to arrange (under "still to be sorted"). Moreover, I now had some anchored places to put them—within the chapter candidates. I still didn't know if this was closer to the ultimate organization, but I felt it was a more tractable problem. Mathematically, there are only about 360,000 ways to arrange nine items, which was a great simplification over the original billions of billions.

These examples illustrate two of the fundamental ways of reorganizing. By distributing stones among different piles, you can start with the smaller items and build up bigger ones—called bottom-up or inside-out. Conversely, you can start with a bigger item and break it down into several smaller items—called top-down or outside-in. There's some controversy among stonemasons about which is the better way to organize a fieldstone wall:

And herewith surfaces the Great Stone Wall Controversy: whether you chink in or chink out. … Half the best walls I know are chinked in, the other half are chinked out. You do as you see fit. [J. Vivian, *Building Stone Walls* (Pownal, Vt.: Storey Books, 1978), pp. 47—48.]

The same advice applies to writers. You do as you see fit, switching back and forth if that suits you best. But notice how both methods reduced the complexity of my organizational problem. I now had only seven major pieces, two of which were substantially finished wall sections (chapters) and the others were at least well started. The seventh one was just another rock pile with nine stones, and I had several unfinished walls (chapters) in which to use these rocks.

Pull Out the Wrong Rocks

Pay attention to the terrain. … a number of steep mountain slopes have big rock slides with thousands of fine stones. They're always hard to get to, though, and pulling out the wrong rock can start an avalanche and bury you quickly. [C. McRaven, *Stonework: Techniques and Projects* (Pownal, Vt.: Storey Books, 1997), p. 25.]

The danger in gathering rocks from steep mountain slopes is a potential asset when organizing words. Sometimes, when you are totally stuck about what to do, you pull out the right rock and the whole jam clears up by itself. Often, that right rock is the beginning of a sentence. Or, it might be the first sentence in a paragraph, or the first paragraph in a section. Sometimes the whole first chapter has to be moved. That's why I don't start writing with the first of anything.

Of course, it isn't always the first part that's jamming the whole piece of work, so how do you know which stone it is? Frankly, you probably don't—but you don't have to. Take advantage of your tools to help you move things around at random, if necessary, until you see something change. Randomization has a storied history—Mozart used dice to produce ideas for musical themes, and even designed a dice game for composing new minuets. [Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Musical Dice Game* was published after his death in 1791. First published in 1793 by J.J. Hummell in Berlin and Amsterdam, it was also published several times afterward in different forms.]

Be Patient

Don't be in a hurry around stone. … Stones are accustomed to waiting. [McRaven, loc. cit. p. 25.]

At this point, some readers might be eager to see how this all turned out, but you mustn't be in a hurry when you get to organizing. Language allows us to displace time and space. Words that have been lost for a thousand years or more are still able to reach us when they're finally rediscovered. So don't rush the organizing, and don't feel you have to use every piece. It's been a tendency of mine to put too much in my coal mines, or so some readers have complained. I want to provide value, but a stone that's impossible to lift is of no value to anybody.

I paused in my organizing at this point, worried about how to finish this chapter. I decided to play a few games of solitaire with this chapter in the background. While playing, I suddenly realized that two of my topics—"You Don't Have to Use Every Stone" and "Be Patient" are really one and the same, so I don't have to use both. That's the kind of thing that happens when you're patient.

Well, why not? For the most part, organizing is a solitary game, and the French name for solitaire is "Patience."

———————————————————

Exercise: Pulling Stones

Use this technique when your organizing seems to be all jammed up:

1. If it's a large piece, remove the first chapter or section and start reading from there. Is it better? If so, take a look at the removed material and see if it contains stones you want to put somewhere else. Often they're just the pieces you want for your conclusion or climax.
2. For a smaller piece, remove the first paragraph and look for improvement. If it's better, examine the removed paragraph for stones that belong somewhere else—or don't belong anywhere.
3. If it's a paragraph, use the same process with the first sentence.
4. If it's a sentence, use the same process with the first word or two.
5. If you don't like the result, you can always restore your saved original.

———————————————

Chapter 14. Organizing Your Work Space

Figure 14. Tucked away behind the old San Miguel Mission sits the oldest well in Santa Fe, dating from around 1600. Stone workers creating a patio for Carolyn Sigstedt's Mission Cafe and Sweet Shop work to preserve the character surrounding this historic well. (Photo by Dani Weinberg)

"The typical work site is a long-term commitment of space, and is not always tidy." [C. McRaven, *Stonework: Techniques and Projects* (Pownal, Vt.: Storey Books, 1997), p. 71.]

In my writing workshops, I send prework to each of the students a few weeks before the class begins. Part of that prework is to obtain a writing journal and a treasured writing

instrument. You might wish to try this assignment before reading further:

———————————————————

Assignment: Writing Journal.

I invite you to begin—or to continue—your own personal writing journal. Treat yourself to a bound journal that you love to look upon. Treat yourself to a writing instrument that you love to hold in your hand. You are a special person, and your writing part is a special part of you, so you deserve this treat.

———————————————————

Once the students are in class with their journals and writing instruments, I give the following assignment:

———————————————————

Assignment: Feelings About Taking Care of Yourself.

For the prework, in your writing journal, you wrote about these feelings: When you thought about choosing a special book and writing instrument for yourself, how did you feel? What was it like to actually choose these very personal items? What messages did you give yourself? If you weren't able to do the assignment, what did you tell yourself?

These feelings have a great deal to do with your ability to create the environment you need for writing.

———————————————————

Each time I use this exercise, I discover that some of the students have not purchased a special pen and journal. As one of them put it, "I've always wanted a good pen, and I found a terrific one. But it cost twenty-two dollars. That was too much to spend on myself." Well, if your writing career isn't worth twenty-two dollars, you should probably keep your day job!

This parsimonious behavior doesn't surprise me. When I first had my own writing place, it was such a luxury compared with Cleveland Park Branch of the Public Library that I didn't pay much attention to any factors other than the absence of noise. I plunged into my writing with greater fury and concentration than ever before—until I was brought down to earth by excruciating back spasms.

On my first visit to the orthopedic surgeon, I discovered that writing has one more thing in common with stonemasonry—you can easily and seriously injure your back. Although back sufferers never get much sympathy, they never seem to lack for advice. Among the dozens of suggestions I received from well-meaning friends, one question stood out. "What kind of chair do you use?"

This question stood out because I couldn't answer it. I didn't know what kind of chair I used. I told the doctor that I just used whatever old chair happened to be handy. He forced me to write down the names of several office chairs designed for excellent back support. "Oh." I thought on my way home. "That's easy. I'll get one of these chairs and pouf! No more back problems." Then I went shopping and saw the prices!

For me, the expensive back chair was my treasured pen—the thing I needed, and wanted, but felt I didn't deserve. I procrastinated for several months—one thing about writers is that they're quite creative when it comes to dreaming up

excuses. And, my back kept murdering me, and preventing me from writing. I did all the stretching exercises—after all, they didn't cost anything. I took all the pain pills—after all, my HMO was paying for them. But no chair—and not much improvement. Each time I'd start to feel a bit better, I'd eagerly return to my postponed writing projects—and injure my back, again.

Pain can do wonders. I can be a slow learner, but eventually I got the message and treated myself to a new orthopedically correct chair. For a while, I anguished over the expense, the self indulgence. But when a writer friend complained to me about back problems, I surprised myself by ordering him to buy a new chair. When he flinched at the expense, I told him I'd buy him the chair as a present. And that got me thinking. Do unto others what you're too cheap to do unto yourself?

As I learned more about the psychology of writers, I came to realize that many of us have debilitating rules about self indulgence. Perhaps it's because we enjoy writing so much in the first place. We think we actually should have to pay for the privilege, rather than being rewarded with additional comforts. But, if you talk to any other craftspeople—stonemasons, for example—you'll learn that the best of them don't classify the tools of their trade as luxuries. You may stint on other luxuries, but you buy the best tools you can afford. And then some. And that's why I start my students by suggesting that they buy a treasured pen.

Creating Your Environment

The pen, of course, is merely a test. Creating your optimal writing environment starts with the pen, but continues as

long as you're a writer. The rest of the pen-purchase exercise goes as follows:

———————————————

Assignment: Your Writing Environment.

What is your usual writing environment?

In your mind, picture yourself in that environment. What one thing would make that writing environment better?

In your mind, picture yourself in that environment and now make that one thing better. What happens?

Share what you learned from this exercise.

Can you benefit from something that someone else shared?

———————————————

Everybody's different. Some, like me, desperately need a chair. In a recent class, one student needed to remove the clock so he could be in a timeless environment. This surprised another student who had figured out that he needed an alarm clock so he wouldn't always be getting up to check the time. I collected most of the other environmental improvements (another set of stones for the book), and here they are:

- music
- air conditioning (two wanted this)
- some sunlight
- a view outside
- a bed for his dog
- a new computer
- a new disk drive for her old computer

- a new word processor
- a separate computer for writing, free of all games and distractions
- rearranging the existing furniture
- a wrist rest for her hands

And these were only their first environmental changes. What are yours?

Writing to Music

After a lifetime searching for a quiet environment in which to write, it's a bit ironic to discover that what I really wanted while writing was to be surrounded by music. I think I had been confused by elevator music, which is not the kind of music that fuels my writing engine. Nowadays, I understand that music has a special relationship to writing, much as the smell of the forest has to stone working.

For me, depending on my mood and my task at hand, I want ragtime, bluegrass, Sousa marches, bagpipes, classical guitar, and classical composers who wrote before 1850. (Right now, if you're curious, I'm listening to Mozart's German Dances, KV 509.) But everybody's different, and so I use the following exercise to help my students discover the effects of music:

———————————————

Exercise: Writing to Music

1. Choose a paragraph you would like to write.
2. While the each music selection is playing, write another draft of that paragraph.

3. At the end of each writing, make notes in your journal about how that writing felt.
4. When all music is done, share your learnings with the group.

————————————————————

I invite all the students to contribute their favorite writing music to the exercise, and I learn something new every time. So do they.

You can do this exercise by yourself. Give it a try. Here's what one of my students wrote after going well beyond this simple exercise:

"I find that some music puts me in writing space. Some music is helpful when I'm temporarily stuck. Some is outstanding for editing. I now have different kinds of music organized in iTunes (a Mac music player)—different playlists for writing, editing, office cleaning, email reading, and workouts."

Approach designing every aspect of your workspace with this experimental attitude. If you can't organize your workspace to please yourself, how can you organize your writing to please your readers?

Where Am I in the Organizing Process?

Sometimes, a whole chapter is so clearly defined in my mind that I'm not even aware of organizing it. This chapter was one of those. Because this chapter was already drafted as one large stone, it really didn't influence the organizing process in many ways, other than as a valuable anchor. I did scan it for opportunities to use unsorted stones, but all of the stones that

belonged here were already here in the draft. And, of course, having it already drafted simplified the overall organizing job, and gave me a restful place to go between two chapters that did need organizing.

Chapter 15. Keep Moving Until You Have Enough

Figure 15. To know when to stop, you have to step back from time to time to gain the perspective to see what's missing, then find just the right stone to finish the job. (Photo by Dani Weinberg)

"There is no such thing as a half-built stone wall. It's either a wall or a stone pile." [J. Vivian, *Building Stone Walls* (Pownal, Vt.: Storey Books, 1978), p. 2.]

There's no such thing as being halfway through your writing. Until some piece of it is finished, it's nothing but a stone pile. You must always keep advancing your writing in some way. You can't allow yourself to get stuck in one place, which is one of the beauties of the Fieldstone Method. There's always

something else to do that advances your writing when you feel stuck.

Here's how one of my students described it:

I also learned to appreciate my writing process. I start with some sketchy image of the overall structure. Then I write a few chunks that I have energy for, leaving other chunks for later. From there, I skip back and forth between writing new chunks and revising earlier ones. Eventually, I fill the holes and end up with a whole article. As I was writing the article, a part of me thought that I 'ought to' write a complete draft before revising. What I learned is that my skipping around is a way to keep my energy up, and helps me stay intensely focused on whatever I am writing or revising at the moment.

Thanks for the nudge!

All writers need nudging from time to time, but each of us has individual nudging needs. One of my readers commented on this student's style,

For me, a useful nudge is to write the whole thing (but not a complete draft) quickly, often finding a kind of coherence or shape that is very useful, turning up many thoughts and connected ideas without painful effort.

One of the things I do when I'm stuck is organize my workspace (which, if I'm not careful, can also be a distraction). Consequently, when I was a bit stuck in my organizing process, I noticed what actions I was taking, then picked up the "Organizing Your Workplace" chapter and moved it toward completion. Satisfied with that task, I updated my outliner/organizer to show that the chapter draft was finished.

Where I Am Right Now in the Organizing Process

Now that I had a better idea of what the rest of the chapters would contain, I took an inventory of large pieces I had already drafted. I added those already-written pieces into the outliner/organizer, then decided to work on this "Keep Moving" chapter. Viewed in a certain way, I saw that all of this material was about keeping moving, so I decided to focus on how to produce more material when you were stuck without enough. On that basis, I tentatively shifted some of the "still to be sorted" topics that I thought would belong here, giving:

- Keep Moving (chapter)
- Center, Enter, Turn
- Play Solitaire
- Use Quotes
- Use the Power of Combination
- Look for What's Missing
- Put Your Subconscious to Work
- Play Solitaire

Let's see where this led me.

When You Get Stuck, Center, Enter, and Turn

From my studies of the martial art of Aikido, I've adopted a general formula for what to do when I'm faced with a problem that's got me stuck. The Aikido formula of center-enter-turn

is designed for dealing with an attacker, or many attackers, but can easily be adapted to writing by considering that the "attacker" is some writing problem, rather than a person.

Center

The first step is always focused on you, not on the problem outside of you. Before you can deal with the world outside, you must get yourself comfortable, with other things off your mind. Here's an exercise I use in my classes:

———————————————————

Exercise: Recentering Breaks

Purpose

In the course of writing, you sometimes feel stuck, or at least bogged down. Effective writers have methods for recognizing that they are stuck and doing something to get unstuck.

Preparation

Choose a design team of 3-4 people. Design at least one "recentering" break, an activity that should have at least the following characteristics:

- It should be something that people can use when they're writing.
- It should "recenter" each person's thinking/feeling patterns.
- It should be fun.

Examples

1. Spend five minutes doing mild aerobics or stretching.
2. Go outdoors and take in the day, or night.
3. Meditate silently for two minutes, or as long as fits for you.
4. Stand up and balance a pencil on your nose for as long as you can.
5. Spend four minutes drawing a picture of something near your desk.
6. Brew some coffee, or tea, doing a very fine job of it. No instants!
7. Make something with modeling clay.
8. Massage your feet and hands.
9. Put on some music, and dance or sing to it for a few minutes.

Practice

Bring your design back to the group and demonstrate it.

Use During Class

During the class, members of your team are to watch for moments that cry out for recentering, just as you would if you were leading the group. If you observe such a moment, stand up and declare a break. Then conduct your exercise. After the break, you will be asked to explain what you saw, and why you thought your recentering break would be helpful.

———————————————————

Enter

Once you feel centered in yourself, it's time to engage the material you're writing. Do *something* with the material. If

you can't think of anything creative, choose something that's more or less mechanical. Keep it up and you will usually find that your mind soon starts putting things together creatively.

You can anticipate that you'll get stuck from time to time, so have a handy list of tasks of all sizes. The Fieldstone Method helps here because there's no specified order of doing tasks. Instead of having just one thing to do to enter the work, you have an entire list.

I match each task to mood, start/stop time, resources, and available time. Here's my own list, which assumes I always have my laptop computer available. I can start doing most of these activities in a few seconds. If they required more elaborate setup, I might find excuses not to do them.

- Correct spellings and grammar.
- Look up exact references. [May need Internet connection or library access]
- Reformat the text.
- Clean up odds and ends in the text, like throwing away stuff that no longer fits, or moving it to another text.
- Use the Internet to find some supporting material. [Can start in a minute, needs Internet access.]
- Use the word processor tool to measure the writing quality of each paragraph.
- Transcribe some new stones into the stone pile. [May need notes or books.]
- Read and revise some stones in the stone pile.
- Scan through the stone piles and re-sort various stones, possibly creating one or more new piles.
- Update the outliner/organizer to reflect prior changes.

- If you're really desperate, retype something that you've already typed.
- Read a paragraph, then try to reproduce it from memory, then compare with the original.
- Keeping your writing in mind, read something else, looking for connections. [Can start in a minute or so.]
- Play a game of solitaire with text in the background.

Each of these tasks helps me "enter" the work, though if I'm not mindful, they could also be used as excuses or diversions.

Having all sorts of work of varying size ready to do also allows me to use any sort of time intervals—duration and quality—that I have available. No time is wasted, unless I want it to be. (For instance, while I was working just now, Dani turned on the weather forecast, which would have been a distraction from some work, but didn't bother me enough to prevent me from fixing a few typos.)

Turn

Having entered the text, I should be ready to change something and get moving on my project. If I genuinely can't think of anything else to do, I can do the Blah Blah Exercise, which always gets me going.

———————————————————

Exercise: Blah Blah

1. Take a clean sheet of paper (or start a new file on your computer) and start writing the words "blah, blah, blah, …"

2. Continue writing blah, blah until something happens for you that makes you write something else besides blah, blah. When it happens, go with it, as long as you continue writing.
3. Share with the group what you experienced as you did this exercise.
4. Writing journal:
5. What did it feel like to write total nonsense? What old rules came up for you?
6. What happened to end the blah, blah phase?
7. What did this tell you about yourself as a writer?

———————————————

An Example of the Center-Enter-Turn Process

Here's an exercise that builds in the entire center-enter-turn process. It's another one that generally works for me.

———————————————

Exercise: Center, Enter, Turn

The purpose of this exercise is to get your mind out of ruts by getting your body out of a rut.

1. Select a piece of your writing (about a paragraph) about which you feel "stuck" in some way.
2. Read this paragraph at least once to yourself before going on to the next step.

3. Think of some place near here that you haven't been to before, if that's possible,and you can reach in no more than 5 minutes without crossing a street
4. Go to that place, now, by yourself. Observe as many things as you can that you do not normally notice. Stay for a few minutes, just taking in the feeling of the place. On the way back, listen for new sounds.
5. Come back within 15 minutes. Before talking to anyone else, sit down comfortably and think once again about the paragraph from step one—without reading it. Write notes in your writing journal about anything on your mind concerning this paragraph.
6. After writing all your notes, try to rewrite the paragraph from memory. When you are finished, compare your memory with the original paragraph. Then, if you wish, rewrite the paragraph in any way you wish.
7. Share your experience and perhaps your rewriting with the group.
8. Writing journal:
9. What was this exercise like for you?
10. Did it lead to an improved paragraph?
11. Can you do this when you are alone?
12. What other things do you usually do when you are stuck? Are they as effective as this exercise? What could you do to make them more effective?

———————————————————

Where Am I Now in the Organizing Process?

When I reached this point, I noticed that the chapter was already a reasonable length, though I had several topics left over:

- Play Solitaire (part of this topic)
- Use Quotes
- Use the Power of Combination
- Look for What's Missing
- Put Your Subconscious to Work

When I scanned this list of leftovers, I realized that they were all ways of "putting your subconscious to work." I decided that such an important topic probably needed a chapter of its own. I needed to terminate the current chapter and start a new one. Here's what that new chapter's prospective outline looked like now:

- Put Your Subconscious to Work
- Look for What's Missing
- Use the Power of Combination
- Use Quotes
- Play Solitaire

Let's turn the page and see if it turned out that way.

Chapter 16. Putting Your Subconscious to Work

Figure 16. It may have been built without plans or outlines, but it's been standing a long time, and every hiker caught in a storm will immediately recognize this croft as a place of shelter. (Photo by Fiona Charles)

"The whole business of artistry in stonework involves creative balance, incorporating odd-shaped stones using verticals and an occasional accent, and emphasizing large stones without making them appear out of place." [C. McRaven, *Stonework: Techniques and Projects* (Pownal, Vt.: Storey Books, 1997), p. 45.]

Once you've begun to organize your great piles of energetic stones, any tiny frustration will sorely tempt you to force an organization onto them. Be patient—you'll give birth to the right organizing idea when the time is ripe—though birth is possibly not the right metaphor.

From conception to birth usually takes about nine months for a human baby, regardless of what effort you put into it. Human ideas, however, have a different gestation pattern. My mind works on these ideas subconsciously, but there are steps I can take to foster a shorter gestation period and a healthy birth.

For instance, back when I was starting to arrange my fieldstones on the subject of organizing, I was overwhelmed, so I just backed off and let my subconscious mind go to work, using some of the techniques I will describe in this chapter. After a short time, the whole organizing principle for these chapters popped into my conscious mind. I have no idea what went on underneath my consciousness—that's why it's called "subconscious," after all—but I do know that I set the task and created the conditions that helped achieve a favorable result.

Look for What's Missing

When I'm having some trouble organizing, I try to look over the material one last time before going to bed at night. Perhaps that's why I often come up with new organizing ideas while sleeping.

Eating is another good break for my subconscious. By the time I had put all my main topic headings into the outliner, it was time for dinner. On the kitchen table, I keep a German

Shepherd daily calendar, with pictures and quotes about dogs. The quote for the day was from Robert Benchley:

"A dog teaches a boy fidelity, perseverance, and to turn around three times before lying down."

As I chuckled over the incongruity, my mind flashed back to the outliner. "Use quotes," it said. But this quote had nothing to do with the subject of organization. "Put your subconscious to work," I remembered. "What's missing?" Aha! The outline lacks any mention of incongruity. Yes, there's "achieve creative balance," and maybe that's where incongruity goes. Or maybe it's a topic all its own, to balance excessive balance. So, after dinner, I transcribed this stone into the working chapter. If you're reading it now, it must have stayed, but you won't be able to tell how many times it's been moved.

Here's an exercise I use to help my students mobilize their subconscious minds to see what's missing in their work:

———————————————————

Exercise: What's Missing?

Do all the following steps without discussing anything with anybody.

(1) Select a long piece of your writing (about an article or a chapter in length) that's supposed to be more or less complete in itself.

(2) In your writing journal, write the caption "What's Missing?" Then read the piece of writing once to yourself, and as you read, jot down any notes that come to your mind about what's not there that perhaps should be there.

(3) After going once through the article, try one or more of the following "eyes closed" exercises to get in touch with what else might be missing:

- Imagine that you are the piece of writing. What parts of your body feel as if they are missing? What parts feel out of balance? What don't you know that you need to know to be healthy and function well?

- Picture a similar piece of writing that you know well. What does this writing have that is missing in the present piece?

- Try to hear a time when someone yelled at you because you forgot something. Is something like that forgotten here?

- Try to recall a time you went on a trip and forgot something. Is something like that forgotten here?

(4) Now, reread the original piece. Pencil in notes for adding to the piece in any way you wish.

(5) Share your experience and perhaps your rewriting with the group.

(6) Writing journal:

- What was this exercise like for you?

- Did it lead to an improved piece?

- Can you do this when you are alone?

- What other things do you habitually do to notice what is missing?

———————————————————

Just because you discover that something's missing, don't assume you have to supply it. Perhaps the readers won't notice either, or perhaps they'll notice but appreciate your keeping the work smaller. Perhaps you'll put their subconscious minds to work and supply it.

Or perhaps you can mention that it's missing and give the interested reader a place to find it. For instance, my book, *The Secrets of Consulting*, has a chapter called "Seeing What's Not There." It's all about how a consultant can see what's missing in a client's organization or documents. Though that's a little different from seeing what's missing in your manuscript, writers have told me it's helpful. So, now that I've mentioned it, I can omit pages of material on the subject of "what's missing." Maybe you'll decide another one of my books is missing from your library. [G.M. Weinberg, *The Secrets of Consulting: A Guide to Giving & Getting Advice Successfully* (New York: Dorset House Publishing, 1985), pp. 69—86.]

Use Quotes

"This quarried stone is often too neat by itself, but mixed in with fieldstone, it can look fine." [McRaven, op. cit. p. 27.]

Quoted material is like quarried stone—too neat, and too easily overused. Any good writing book will warn the beginner

not to rely too heavily on quotations. Much as in a fieldstone wall, you don't want to use too much of this quarried stuff—but mixed in proper proportions, it can look fine.

When I headed this section "Use Quotes," I wasn't really thinking about using them in the conventional way—sticking them into the text to make myself appear clever and well read. Instead, I want to describe how to use quotations to put your subconscious to work.

The Benchley quote from my calendar illustrates one way I mobilize my subconscious mind for the organizing task. Quotations are phrases that have been said and said well—well enough to be triggers for many people. Selected in this way, quotations must necessarily contain scads of underlying energy. So, when I winnow collections of quotations, my mind warms with fresh energy.

I may never use the actual quotation in the text. Most often, I don't. Part of this section, for example, was inspired by a Mark Twain quotation that I found when scanning the Internet for quotations about quotations:

When a thing has been said and said well, have no scruples. Take it and copy it.

If I hadn't given you this quotation, nobody would have noticed, two paragraphs back, that I had copied the phrase, "been said and said well," from Mark Twain himself—and with his permission, obviously.

And, of course, I need not copy any phrases at all from the quotation. Another quote I ran across was this one from Oscar Wilde:

Quotation is a serviceable substitute for wit.

I didn't use any phrase from this quotation (so far, at least), but I captured it as a stone and let it sit on the screen inspiring me. It motivated me to encourage you to use quotations for inspiration when your own conscious wit is faltering.

I can definitely overuse quotes in my work, but I can never overuse quotes in my *working*—because my subconscious motivators might never appear in the finished piece of work.

Sweet Are the Uses of Solitaire

I feel the need to tell you about the relationships between solitaire and my subconscious mind. You already know that I use solitaire as a way of recentering, but that's only one of the relationships. Out of my collection of perhaps 50 solitaire games, the few I play have some carefully chosen characteristics:

- They all use an exposed deck—no hidden cards, no luck-of-the draw of unseen cards. These games, I feel, are better simulations of the writer's organizing task.
- They are not trivial card-moving operations. Each game has many choice points with many consequences of a poor choice. Each victory gives a sense of accomplishment.
- All games can be backed up to decision points and replayed with different decisions. Again, this is a good simulation of the Fieldstone organizing I do on my computer.
- All games (or virtually all games) are winnable, or, if not, I can choose at the outset not to play a particular deal. Again, that's the way Fieldstone organizing

> works. If I don't think I've got a "winning" set of stones, I can delay organizing until I've gathered more stones (re-deal).

[For the benefit of solitaire fans, at the time I wrote this I was playing a game called *Chessboard*, on a streak of 4,601 consecutive victories. Others I have used are *Trefoil*, *Seahaven Towers*, and *Beleaguered Castle*. When I revised the chapter, I was on a streak of 2,904 consecutive wins at *Tarantula*, an easier variation of *Spider*. *Spider* games took too long, and some of them were not winnable, so I switched to *Tarantula*. More recently, I'm playing *Red-Black Spider*.]

Playing solitaire games with these characteristics gives my mind many benefits. Because it's enjoyable, I can promise myself a *reward* of a hand of solitaire when I complete some dull or unpleasant job, like renumbering chapters or looking up references.

When I'm feeling defeated by my writing, I can use a game or two to *change my mood* to something more positive. I can always win, though not trivially, so after a few victories I can approach my writing tasks with a feeling of success and confidence in future successes. I know I haven't lost my mind.

As I play, I keep the current manuscript page partially visible on the screen. This background allows and *encourages my subconscious mind* to ponder problems that have been impeding my progress. Often, in the middle of a game, an idea will pop into my mind, and I immediately switch windows and pop it into the manuscript. Sometimes I continue writing from that idea for hours. When I finish, I'm generally surprised to find a half-finished solitaire game in progress.

Because of the parallels between the type of solitaire game and the organizing task, solitaire stimulates and exercises just those parts of my brain I use for organizing. I consider solitaire my mental gymnasium, the place I visit to warm up my aging mind and keep it sharp.

I also use solitaire for *task switching*. When moving from one engaging task to another, I always experience lag time in which my mind can't seem to let go of the first task and make way for the second. A game or two of solitaire in between erases the first and clears my mind for the second.

Solitaire also *tests* my mind. Because of my fibromyalgia, I have spells where my mind goes into what's called "fibrofog." At such times, my mind isn't really useful for difficult tasks like organizing, but because I'm in a fog, I can't tell that I'm in a fog. After one game of solitaire, though, I know the state of my mind. If I can't win a game with my usual alacrity, I know I'd better not tackle the job of organizing stones in my manuscript. Usually, then, I'll take a nap or perform a mild physical exercise—activity that helps clear the fog.

Fortunately, I don't have a "boss" standing over my shoulder questioning my every activity. I have only my internal boss to judge the value of this "play," and he understands. He knows that playing solitaire has many benefits for my writing, so I'm never stuck for something fun and productive to do. And he doesn't curse me for "wasting time" when my subconscious mind tells me to keep playing. He knows from experience that in the end, something good always emerges.

Use the Power of Combination

Even if you don't play cards, you can harness the benefits of solitaire. You can create your own "solitaire" games using the very stones you're trying to organize. Just keep in mind that the whole idea behind organizing, whether it's stones in a wall or words in a book, is making sense out of combinations of things. This is what the stonemason means by achieving "creative balance." Before the work, the stones are simply piles of random stones. After the work, they are a wall that will last for a thousand years.

And what kind of wall? Lovelace wrote: [Richard Lovelace, "To Althea, from Prison."]

> *Stone walls do not a prison make*
> *Nor iron bars a cage;*
> *Minds innocent and quiet take*
> *That for an hermitage.*

The same stones that make a prison can equally well make a hermitage. The same words that make a boring tome can equally well make a masterpiece. The major difference is how they are *organized.*

Einstein, voted Man of the Twentieth Century by *Time Magazine*, is considered by many to be the epitome of genius. His greatest achievement arose from putting two things together that nobody else thought went together—light and electromagnetism. Yet Einstein himself said that out of a thousand ideas that he tried, perhaps one ever amounted to anything. His secret was to try *tens* of thousands of ideas.

Looking over my career, any success I've experienced derives from the same secret. It can be your secret, too. For instance,

my book, *The Psychology of Computer Programming*, has been in print for over thirty-five years now, longer than any other "computer" book. Yet it's merely a putting together of computers and people, two topics that had previously been considered separate. I may run out of new ideas, but I'll never run out of new *combinations* of ideas.

So, to become an accomplished writer, you don't necessarily need to know how to create something out of nothing, but you do need to practice creating new combinations out of somethings that already exist. Solitaire does that for me; here's another "game" that might do it for you.

————————————————————

Exercise: Cut Ups

[Adapted, with thanks, from N. Goldberg, *Wild Mind: Living the Writer's Life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), p. 85.]

Purpose

When you write larger pieces, like books, you have to get used to reorganizing again and again. This type of exercise should give you practice dealing with feedback like these examples:

"It's a great book, Jerry, but the chapters are too long." [Cheryl Plum (my sister), personal communication concerning the manuscript for *PL/I Programming: A Manual of Style*. She proved to be right a few years later when Chapter 3 was reprinted as a book!]

"It's a great book, Jerry, but the chapters are in the wrong order." [My colleague, Judy Noe, personal communication concerning the manuscript for *Exploring Requirements: Quality Before Design* (New York: Dorset House Publishing, 1989).

I realized she was right the instant I saw her proposed reordering.]

Here are the steps in the exercise:

1. Everyone thinks of a word and writes it down on a card.
2. Post all the cards, then everyone writes a paragraph or two using all the words.
3. Read your writing aloud to the others. Look for learnings about organization.
4. Share with whole group.
5. Take the whole piece that you're writing and rearrange the chapters/paragraphs.

Variations

1. Take any old writing, yours or from magazines, and cut apart the lines with scissors (or use a word processor and an outliner). Paste them back together in a different order. Add in some additional lines taken from elsewhere.
2. One of my students, who is now a magazine editor, writes: *I've used a variation of Cut Ups to organize my own writing, and I also use it sometimes on articles I'm editing, when they are particularly jumbleacious. If I absolutely cannot discern a structure or logical progression, I cut the paper by paragraphs (or groups of sentences) and sort the snippets into piles. Then I can figure out how to reorganize.*

———————————————————

Fantasize

Does this game of Cut Ups seem silly? If so, here's a warning: If you're not prepared to make a fool of yourself, get out of the writing business. A fool is a person "lacking in judgment." Cutting and pasting "unrelated" things together (or just doing it in your mind) certainly requires the ability to suspend judgment—to fantasize what each combination might mean, not what it *does* mean. You must make your subconscious mind welcome, safe, and active. If you don't believe me, listen to Albert Einstein:

When I examine myself and my methods of thought, I come to the conclusion that the gift of fantasy has meant more to me than my talent for absorbing positive knowledge.

Where Am I Now in the Organizing

I had now rearranged the stones I thought would go into this chapter. I also brought in some stones that I previously thought would go elsewhere, and subordinated some stones to others.

What I had left to organize looked like this:

- Trim to Fit (long)
- Specificity
- Writing for Rapport
- Trimming Quotes
- Abstract/Concrete
- Use Mortar to Bind (long)
- Mortaring Techniques
- Sorting and Associating Stones
- Transitions

- Organize Based on the Underlying Ideas
- Know When to Stop (long)
- Don't Be Afraid to Start Over

Notice once again how the organizing task was becoming less and less daunting. And, also notice that all stones had now been placed in "chapters," so I had no more stones still to be sorted except within these chapters, a job that was mathematically much simpler. Be warned, though, that situation might have changed as I proceeded.

Chapter 17. ShapingStones to Fit

Figure 17.A certain amount of shaping may make your writing as memorable as this "Lady Kirk"in the Orkney Islands. The church ruin has a 13th century south wall of fieldstones, with the remainder from a reconstruction and enlargement completed in 1674. Notice how some of the stones are shaped in order to make a stable arch. (Photo by Fiona Charles)

"And hunting the right stone can take more time than shaping it. I do some shaping on about a third of the stones I lay, maybe only to knock off a corner, or cut down a ridge." [C. McRaven, *Stonework: Techniques and Projects* (Pownal, Vt.: Storey Books, 1997), p. 4.]

We're talking about fieldstone here, so forget about those

identically faced blocks that you see on old storefronts, arches, bridges, and door and window lintels. [McRaven, op. cit. p. 51.]

The fieldstone you've gathered comes in all shapes and sizes, and sometimes the job of organizing is finding a place for each unique stone, or a stone for each unique place. But sometimes organization is easier if you shape a stone you have to fit the wall you're making.

Making Your Writing Memorable

Abraham Lincoln was one of the great natural stylists of the American English language. His speeches have a memorable quality that retains its emotive force after a century and a half. The quote given below is a fine example of this memorable quality, and a good case study of where that memorable quality comes from.

"Whenever there is a conflict between human rights and property rights, human rights must prevail."

The logical *structure* of Lincoln's statement is familiar to computer programmers, if we substitute IF for "whenever." It's a *clear logical structure*:

IF A and B conflict
> choose A.

The *meaning* of the statement, however, may not be clear, depending on what we substitute for A and B—and on the reader's vocabulary. For example, try substituting unfamiliar words for some of the more complex words in the sentence.

The structure will remain clear, because it's carried in the small words, but the meaning—or the memorability—could be lost.

Suppose we chose, as many stylists do, to substitute foreign phrases to lend an air of scholarship. Consider what a little German will accomplish:

"When there is a conflict between menschlichrectsfragen *and* eigentumrectsfragen, *menschlichrectsfragen* must prevail."*

Surprisingly enough, the logical structure is still clear, but to the monolingual Anglo-Saxon, the *meaning* and the *memorability* are entirely lost.

So, what happens if we move our style in the other direction—towards simpler and more familiar words? Consider the following "reduction" of Lincoln's sentence to a more "basic" vocabulary, by substituting the dictionary definition for each essential word:

Whenever there is an opposition or simultaneous functioning of mutually exclusive impulses, desires, or tendencies between that which is due to someone having or manifesting the form, nature, or qualities of man, by law, tradition, or nature, and that which is due to something tangible or intangible by which its owner has legal title by law, tradition, or nature, that which is due to someone having or manifesting the form, nature, or qualities of man, by law, tradition, or nature must be greater in strength or influence.

Now it reads like a legal document. Legal documents are justly famous for obscurity. And definitely not for memorability. That's why we think legal clauses are in "small print," because we don't remember reading them. So, just because we understand every word in a sentence, we need not understand the

entire sentence.

Looking at this legalese example, we might conclude about vocabulary:

Whenever there is a conflict between richness and poverty in vocabulary, *poverty must prevail.*

But looking at the first example, with the German words, we might conclude:

Whenever there is a conflict between richness and poverty in* vocabulary, *richness must prevail.*

Actually, neither of these is correct, for writing isn't quite that simple. Here's what I think:

Whenever there is a conflict between richness and poverty in vocabulary, the author's got some work to do.

And that's where the art of shaping comes from: the quest for exactly the right level of specificity.

Making It Simple and Specific

Here is the opening of Chekhov's story, "Ionich": [A. Chekhov, "Ionych," *The Lady with the Little Dog and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 2002).]

When people who had lived only a short time in the town of S_- ***complained of boredom and the monotony of life there, the local inhabitants, as though in self-justification, claimed that on the contrary there was nothing wrong with S_****, that it had a public library, a theatre, a club, that balls were given there, and, last but not least, that there were quite a number of intelligent, interesting, and pleasant families with whom one could strike up an acquaintance. And they would*

point to the Turkin family as one of the most cultivated and talented.

What a striking portrait of the provincial town, its inhabitants, and its life—painted by the master with the words of a single sentence! Look at how much significance he piles upon his canvas with a single careless stroke—"a club." We watch in awe as stroke by stroke, he builds the social landscape of S___, and how, with a simple second sentence, he drops the whole Turkin family into its proper place in that landscape. (And don't forget, this is a translation from Russian, by Ronald Wilks, who has joined with Chekhov in preserving this masterpiece of writing.)

Perhaps you think you are a drudge who can never aspire to the genius of a Chekhov—not to speak of a genius that even survives translation. Perhaps you think it's arrogant to mention your name in the same sentence as Chekov's. When you sit down to write, put any such self-discounting aside. Regardless of comparisons you might make between yourself and the master, you can learn from studying his work.

But Chekhov's true mastery is that so few of his readers study his work at all. To us, the work itself is transparent. We are not reading words about a country town, we are *in* a country town. We read, we enjoy, we learn many interesting and useful things, but if we perceive the hand of the writer in the work, he has failed. It's like that fieldstone wall running alongside the road into S___. Nobody made it; it was always there. And even if we notice its beauty, we do not ordinarily notice each individual stone.

And so it is with our best writing, which passes unnoticed in the glare of our failures.

I do not know if Chekhov was actually in the town of

S___ when he wrote. Perhaps he made it up from memory or crafted it from the stones he had gathered in myriad other country towns. Whatever method he used, he managed to capture our common memory of whatever country towns we've known, even towns half a world away. He used the mastery of his genius to reach the common level of ordinary experience—and so he is loved everywhere, even in translation. Chekhov, we say, has the "common touch"—which, of course, is anything but common.

Any writer who has contempt for the reader's ordinary experience is bound to fail, for contempt stains a writer's work the way spilled motor oil stains a fieldstone wall. But there are other ways of failing, for "common" rarely means "simple." It is far more difficult to produce a readable story about a small town family than an erudite work on mathematical esoterica. The broader the audience, the more difficult the writer's job.

Writing for Rapport

*I prefer commencing with the consideration of an effect. Keeping originality always in view—for he is false to himself who ventures to dispense with so obvious and so easily attainable a source of interest—I say to myself, in the first place, "Of the innumerable effects, or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible, what one shall I, on the present occasion, select?"—[Edgar Allan Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition," *The Oxford Book of American Essays*, ed. Brander Matthews (New York: Oxford University Press, 1914), Essay 11.]

When you shape a passage and want to make it memorable, you cannot depend upon other readers triggering on your

personal triggers. If you want to reach many people, work with the common triggers—"the innumerable effects, or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible." Here's an exercise that I find helpful:

————————————————————

Exercise: Writing for Rapport

[Adapted from D.C. Gause and G.M. Weinberg's *Exploring Requirements: Quality Before Design* (New York: Dorset House Publishing, 1989), pp. 94—97]

(1) Choose or create a sample of your writing that you're willing to share. Select a section that is at least one paragraph long, and write the main message of that section in a single sentence. For instance, take

"Mary had a little lamb."

(2) Rewrite the sentence in four ways. For example:

- **blaming**: Mary's careless feeding practices are directly responsible for her lamb's stunted growth.

- **placating**: Mary's lamb was little, but it was a lot better than mine.

- **superreasonable**: Mary's lamb was 0.37 standard deviations below the norm specified by the National Board of Animal Husbandry.

- **irrelevant**: Mary's skirt looked like those little paper decorations fancy French restaurants put on little lamb chops.

(3) Work with a partner, reading your own four selections to each other. How do you feel when hearing each of these sentences?

(4) Rewrite the sentence in at least five ways, to evoke different emotions in the reader:

- **pity**: Mary's lamb was so undernourished it tried to eat the blanket we brought to keep it from freezing.

- **joy**: Mary's lamb was so tiny she could hide it in her pocket and kiss it whenever she wanted.

- **sadness**: Because Mary's lamb was so little, it was the only one of the lot to be rescued from the butcher.

- **anger**: Mary's lamb was starved and beaten by its previous owners until it became so puny they threw it in the garbage.

- **fear**: In Mary's Satanic rituals, she shrunk a live lamb to one-tenth its previous size.

(5) Work with a partner, reading your own five selections to each other. How do you each feel when hearing each of these sentences? If you're not evoking the feeling you want, rewrite.

(6) What feeling do you want to touch in your reader with the original selection? Rewrite that selection to gain the rapport you want. Check it with a partner.

———————————————————

Never apologize for your writing, and never tell readers how it should make them feel. Make the writing speak for itself. If it doesn't speak for itself, fix it. Or trash it.

Shaping Quotes

"Often you'll find a good-fitting stone that is too big; one end or corner sticks out. Then, take your wide chisel ... If the steel strikes sparks you probably have an igneous rock and should find another place for it to fit unless you want to spend a long time hammering." [J. Vivian, *Building Stone Walls* (Pownal, Vt.: Storey Books, 1978), p. 31]

What to do with stones taken from other people's yards? You have to leave them intact, like igneous rock, and give proper reference (and perhaps permission fees). Otherwise, you have to rewrite them in your own words. In between, it's plagiarism.

Let's take another example from John Ruskin's classic, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. (Using classics whose copyrights have elapsed avoids the permission fees, but not the plagiarism if we don't give the proper reference.) Ruskin begins the book by describing a question he put to an artist

about the source of his perfection—one sentence of 33 words. Then follows this monolith **(Warning: bad example ahead.)**:

The reply was as concise as it was comprehensive—"Know what you have to do, and do it"—comprehensive, not only as regarded the branch of art to which it temporarily applied, but as expressing the great principle of success in every direction of human effort; for I believe that failure is less frequently attributable to either insufficiency of means or impatience of labour, than to a confused understanding of the thing actually to be done; and therefore, while it is properly a subject of ridicule, and sometimes of blame, that men propose to themselves a perfection of any kind, which reason, temperately consulted, might have shown to be impossible with the means at their command, it is a more dangerous error to permit the consideration of means to interfere with our conception, or, as is not impossible, even hinder our acknowledgment of goodness and perfection in themselves. [J. Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (New York: Dover, 1880).]

In case you didn't count them yourself, this sentence has 148 words, a Flesch Reading Ease of precisely zero, and a 67th grade reading level. There is no way that a rock of this size can be used in any wall that I might build—except, of course, as a wretched example. Yet it happens that when I broke this boulder into several smaller rocks, I found four stones worth keeping in my "design" pile:

a. Know what you have to do, and do it.
b. Doing the right thing is more important than doing the thing right.
c. Don't let physical constraints interfere with your earliest conceptual designs.

d. Something that's impossible to do may still be useful to think about.

To use these stones (in another book), I had to trim in various ways. For stone a, I simply lifted a quote, word for word. I don't have to attribute this to the artist, William Mulready. Why not? First of all, no matter how famous he was in Ruskin's day, the name Mulready will carry no meaning to the majority of my reader's today.

Second, "Know what you have to do, and do it," is simple, clear language that might have been said by anybody, at any time. Adding a reference would only muddle the whole thing, and lose the point of its simplicity. It would be like writing the sentence,

"As stated in the Nike advertisement that appeared on page 78 of the January 1999 issue of X magazine (volume 17), just do it."

Everything but the last three words is just loose dirt coating an otherwise fine rock—dirt that must be brushed away.

The remaining stones had to be extracted and shaped into modern language my technical readers would find resonant. For a different audience, the shaping might be different. One of the exercises that has helped me and my students do this sort of shaping is simply to rewrite the idea in at least three entirely different styles—more if possible. For example, I might rewrite "doing the right thing is more important than doing the thing right" in the following ways:

1. Anything not worth doing is not worth doing right.
2. The equation for failure: Perfect technique plus wrong problem.

3. Don't polish trash.
4. Henry spent the entire year 2001 revising his manual on how to make software function correctly when the year changed from 1999 to 2000.
5. The Polish Academy of Medicine performed the world's first successful appendix transplant. (You may think this joke is politically incorrect, but it was told to me by my students in Poland.)

Now you try:

———————————————————

Exercise: Varying Styles for Varying Effects

Choose one of the following ideas and rewrite it at least three different styles. If you prefer, choose an idea of your own, or borrowed from some other famous, but not modern, author:

a. Don't let physical constraints interfere with your earliest conceptual designs.
b. Something that's impossible may still be useful to think about.

———————————————————

Where Am I Now in the Organizing?

Notice how I made a few changes to the organization in the process of drafting this chapter. I changed the name of the

chapter; I broke one stone into two; I changed the wording of some titles; I moved some unnamed pebbles that I found here into the two chapters that follow, and I dropped the abstract/concrete stone into the FLUB because it no longer seems to fit this book.

What still lay ahead was much less daunting, more like the last few pieces of a large jigsaw puzzle. That's how organizing works, when it's working right.

Chapter 18. Filling the Cracks

Figure 18. The builder of this well used excessive mortar to fill cracks, rather than design a more structurally sound arrangement. Mortar simply lacks the strength of natural rock, and you can see the result—the large crack running vertically through the entire structure. Don't let this happen with your project; use word-mortar sparingly. (Photo by Dani Weinberg)

If a stone wobbles it is better to chip off a wobble knob or dig out a hole or make a joint in the rock below than try to shim it up with small rocks and wedges. [J. Vivian, *Building Stone Walls* (Pownal, Vt.: Storey Books, 1978), p. 29.]

Stonemasons have a number of quality criteria for their walls, many of which depend on how the spaces between stones are handled. Drystone walls are made with no mortar, and they have higher status than mortared walls. Mortar doesn't stand up to time as well as the stones do, and a wall that depends too heavily on mortar will not last without heavy maintenance.

Drystone walls last longer, and drystone walls that fit tightly without small rocks and wedges last longest, because small rocks and wedges eventually work their way out. These observations can guide the writer as well as the stonemason.

After all my word stones are assembled (at least in draft form), I need to make them work together as a single, stable, wall. For this task, I require transition techniques—small rocks, wedges, and even mortar to fill in the cracks. Using these appropriately, I can combine almost any two stones—or any three—stones and make the reader see that they do indeed belong together.

In writing, as in building fieldstone walls, excess mortar is undesirable, but sometimes drystone walls can be just that—

dry. Sometimes my written stones don't happen to fit well, and though it's theoretically better to chip off the wobble knob, I simply can't manage it. I must add those small rocks or wedges or mortar to make the stones fit snugly.

Sorting and Associating Stones

Transitions are not a task I save for last. If I've been looking for snug fits while gathering, I have much less mortaring to do when I'm finishing. Sometimes as I search through my pile of stones, I'll notice one that's somehow related to one seen earlier. Then, even if those two stones are not related to my current project, I store them together—because connections are as much a part of the wall as are the stones. I usually put the matched pair in the same file, or in the same category in my filing system, or add a pointer in one to the other, or a double pointer back and forth, or add a keyword to both, or actually attach them so as to make them into a single stone.

For example, I was looking at some notes about an activity called "Schedule Chicken," when I recalled I had recently seen another note about "false confidence" concerning the way people talk in projects. I realized that these two were closely related, so I put the false confidence note into the file with the Schedule-Chicken notes. While doing that, I noticed that I now had enough for an article, so I dashed it off and sold it the next day.

By filling cracks, I associate closely related items and make subtle relationships stand out more clearly—but that's not all. If you're good at fitting, you can make almost anything stick to anything else, as you can test in the following exercise. If you don't have a teammate, you can use passages from three

different works of yours, or from literature.

———————————————————

Exercise: Transitions

Purpose

As pieces grow larger, you need to increase your attention to guiding the reader from one thought, paragraph, or chapter to another.

1. Form teams of three. Each person selects a piece of writing to work with.
2. Take one paragraph from each piece. Each person arranges the three paragraphs in a different order, and writes transitions to make the paragraphs into a coherent whole.
3. Read your writing aloud with the team. Look for learnings about organization.
4. Share with whole group.
5. Take a whole section or chapter from each piece and repeat the exercise.

Variations

You can do the same thing with sentences.

———————————————————

Here's an example showing the power of this exercise. The three sentences, given by three people, were all quotations of a sort:

1. I may have been born at night, but I wasn't born last night.
2. From a website: "We understand the growing complexity of today's applications, rapidly changing technologies, and increasing time-to-market pressures."
3. "Heavier-than-air flying machines are impossible."—Lord Kelvin, president, Royal Society, 1895.

Here's one result of the exercise:

In 1895, seven years before the Wright brothers flew at Kitty Hawk, Lord Kelvin, president of the British Royal society, confidently asserted that heavier-than-air flying machines were impossible. Apparently the only thing I can confidently assert about rapidly changing technologies is that anyone who asserts that they understand such technologies is either ignorant or lying. So, when their salesman assured me that he understood the growing complexity of today's applications, rapidly changing technologies, and increasing time-to-market pressures, I showed him the door. I may have been born at night, but I wasn't born last night.

The entire paragraph is seamlessly integrated and makes perfect sense, a lovely section of fieldstone wall.

Mortaring Techniques

When you look at a fieldstone wall but notice the mortar rather than the stones, it's a poorly made wall. Naturally, the same is true for fieldstone writing. There are many examples of binding techniques used in this book, but how many of them have you noticed as you read?

You might want to look back at what I wrote about Mendeleev. When first writing about organizing, the example of Mendeleev jarred me. I looked up some material on Mendeleev on the web and wove it in to make the connections more natural. This was like binding with small stones, irrelevant to the main wall, but holding things together and holding the reader's attention. Can you see the mortar?

Sometimes I provide a glob of mortar—a sentence or a phrase—between two paragraphs. I'll use many examples of mortaring transitions in the following paragraphs, but call attention to them by underlining them. Most readers find this emphasis breaks the flow, which is precisely my point. Without the emphasis, most readers would never notice these transitions, but would be moved along by them in exactly the manner I wish them to move.

Parallelism

First, notice that a wall can gain perceptual coherence without any physical binding just because similar stones are found in different parts. In writing, there are many such examples of *parallelism*. I can use the same memorable word again in the second sentence or paragraph. Or, I repeat a memorable phrase, or match the sentence structure. Or, I can just use the same rhythm.

Contrast

Paradoxically, *contrast* also works well to tie two parts together. On the other hand, contrast can be overused. But that view doesn't mean we should never use contrast. In a book on writing, however, I prefer to be cautious in the use of contrast as a binding mechanism, lest the readers think I'm advocating excessive use.

Cause and Effect

Now, what about connecting *ideas*? *Cause and effect* relationships make strong binding. Words such as "therefore" and "consequently" lead the reader's mind naturally to the next idea—but beware! If there is no understandable causal connection, the reader will be brought up short, like this:

He wore green socks with blue shoes, so I wrote his telephone number on the napkin.

Notice how this sentence hooks your mind *because* it raises questions about the connection between the cause and effect. Consequently, if you want to hook the reader's attention, use such apparent *non sequitors*. If you do, however, be sure to fulfill the implied promise that, by reading on, the reader will understand the puzzling relationship. Therefore, if you you don't intend to follow up, don't create a hook. ("She thought that color-blind men were sexier.")

Time Sequence

Conversely, all readers are familiar with stories, so *time sequence* works well as a binding device. The following paragraph makes a story, or at least our minds make a story, out of five otherwise isolated events.

We fixed the software. Then, we wrote some new code. After that, we left word for the operator. The next day, we found a bug. Subsequently, we complained about the product.

Obviously, our mind is making the connection, because putting the events in the opposite order makes just as much sense. That's why we have to take great care with story-like constructions.

We complained about the product. Then, we found a bug. After

that, we left word for the operator. The next day, we wrote some new code. Subsequently, we fixed the software.

Notice that none of the sentences is necessarily related to any other. It's the transitions make them into a story. Here's the same structure with different content, chosen at random.

I went to Chicago. Then, I found a crystal ball. After that, I took my blood pressure. The next day, I ate lamb for supper. Subsequently, I watched a Chaplin movie.

Did your mind struggle to create a story out of these unrelated actions?

Place

Next, from the movie studios, I borrow the technique of using *place* to make connections. I can shift the scene gradually: "As they moved towards the bench, …" Or, the transition can be abrupt, "Meanwhile, in the laboratory …"

People

Another movie approach is to use *people*. Real or imaginary people can tie almost anything together. You can quote an actual person speaking two thoughts, or create an imaginary person to speak them. One of my students told me that nonfiction contains many such fictional speakers. He also warned that, since many fictional characters are drawn from real life, the line between fiction and nonfiction was not a line at all, but a fiction itself.

Examples

And, for example, we can always make one stone an example of another. In that case, however, we need to indicate where the example ends and the next stone begins. Sometimes, we

do that by interposing a structure—like a section heading or an exercise.

Organizing Based on the Underlying Ideas

The higher the wall, the deeper should be the footings. … This is a lot of work lost to the eye forever, but it guarantees a good wall. [Ibid. p. 40.]

In the previous section, you saw how easy it was to slather your wall with binding material. However, a wall that's got too much chinking and wedging and mortaring is not a well-built wall. It won't last. No matter how expertly you make these transitions, you have to preserve the fundamental connections based on the underlying ideas or story line. These are the footings.

In the "Lord Kelvin" example above, the solid connection is based on an underlying idea: "How much should we believe from experts making predictions?" Although various transition devices were used, the feeling of seamlessness arises from the author's ability to find that underlying idea and lay it bare to the reader.

If you're writing a story, the underlying idea keeps the story moving for the reader. If it's a technical piece, the underlying idea conveys information. So, when you think you're finished making all the connections, step back and take a look to see if you've preserved the underlying idea. Here's how one of my students described this process:

I got a lot of value from writing this article. I remembered the simple, powerful nudge you gave me at the workshop—to get

underneath the "head" stuff and reconnect with the energy that made me want to write the article in the first place. I ended up doing something that felt scary at the time, writing a section about the feeling-about-the-feeling step, which I'm calling the "Acceptance" step. As I wrote that section, I learned something important that I already knew, but didn't know I knew—that the most powerful thing I can do to keep my communications straight is to accept what I'm feeling.

In other words, if the whole doesn't feel right—if you've somehow lost your way—you have more work to do. But don't be afraid; the work will be well rewarded.

Where Am I Now in the Organizing?

I made a few changes to the book's organization in the process of drafting this chapter. I changed the name of the chapter; I reordered two sections; I wrote one section as an exercise. Not much change, and now I was ready to tackle the last chapter on organizing—appropriately enough, "knowing when to stop."

Chapter 19. Knowing When to Stop

Figure 19. Your organizing work does not have to be perfect. If the stones are strong enough and large enough, you can make a rather substantial wall by more or less heaping them one on top of the other. Everything after the work does its job is optional. (Photo by Dani Weinberg)

Do try to save the flattest rock with the most uniform thickness for the top. The bigger the better, though don't save out any stones, no matter how flat they are, so large that you can't handle them easily at the top. [J. Vivian, *Building Stone Walls* (Pownal, Vt.: Storey Books, 1978), p. 29.]

As I approached the end of this book, the organizing work accelerated. But many of my students find that the work goes

more slowly near the end—and sometimes plods to a halt. When someone has trouble finishing a manuscript, I first try to determine the source of the problem. Three reasons account for ninety-five percent of the cases:

1. The authors have created some kind of Bingo Card.
2. They're afraid they won't be perfect.
3. They're afraid they won't be loved.

The Bingo-Card Effect

Using the Fieldstone Method, organizing should accelerate as the end approaches, much like fitting the last few pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Notice that I said *organizing* should accelerate. When you're finished organizing, you may or may not be finished with the project. You have the major stones in place, but a great deal more polishing, chipping, and mortaring may remain. In a novel, for example, you may know what the last chapter needs to do, but you may have many rewritings to go before you can put the manuscript to bed.

Outlines *seem* to provide a quick start, but as you approach the end, the unfilled holes in the outline look like pieces that belong to another puzzle. That's the first reason so many manuscripts die when they're "ninety per cent complete."

Earlier, I briefly described the Bingo Effect, but here I'd like to give you a personal example. A few years ago, Naomi Karten, James Bach, and I were assembling a book of essays for the Amplifying Your Effectiveness Conference [G.M. Weinberg, J. Bach, and N. Karten, eds., *Amplifying Your Effectiveness: Collected Essays* (New York: Dorset House Publishing, 2000).]

http://www.ayeconference.com. The essays were to be authored by the seventeen conference hosts as a way of introducing people to our work—an organization that required at least one essay from each one of us. Unfortunately, a few hosts were late in supplying their personal pictures, biographies, and the essays themselves. Each truant had a blue-ribbon excuse for causing delays, but the fundamental cause of the trouble was not their tardiness, but the way we had organized the project.

Since *everybody* had to contribute an essay, finishing the book was like trying to find that last number for a Bingo. Simple mathematics ensures that, in the end, these every-last-one projects will torture their editors.

In the AYE project, we eventually terminated our agony by relaxing the requirement that every host contribute an essay. We simply decided we could live with a few essays short. Relaxing this bingo-card requirement relaxed the three of us—and curiously enough, seemed to induce all the pictures, biographies, and essays to arrive on time. In the end, our willingness to omit somebody ensured that nobody was omitted.

Projects written to outlines frequently experience this Bingo-Card Effect. Years ago, when I was series editor for computer science books for a Winthrop Publishers, we received a delicious proposal for a textbook on compilers—those programs that translate software languages into hardware language. Horace, the author, was one of the foremost authorities in the field, and the proposal—as proposals tend to do—contained an outline and a sample chapter. On the basis of his reputation and the proposal, we signed him to a contract

Horace proceeded to write the manuscript to the outline. Once a month, like clockwork, the next chapter in sequence reached

my desk for editorial feedback. Each chapter was finer than the previous one; but, when 14 of the proposed 15 chapters had been finished, the flow stopped. I waited a month, two months, a semester. Finally, Winthrop's editor called me and asked me to speak to Horace about the missing final chapter. I drove over to his campus to lunch with him, and discovered that he *had* written the final chapter, but just as he was finishing, some new work on the topic was published.

"That's okay," I told him. "No book can ever hope to be up to date, even at the moment it appears."

"But the final chapter is called, "The Latest Word in Compiler Technology." I can't publish it as it is, knowing that there's something later and greater that isn't in it."

"Sure you can. I do that all the time. Otherwise, I'd never finish any of my books."

But he couldn't. Just after he incorporated this new "latest and greatest" material, another article was published, pushing the boundaries of the subject once again. And again. And yet again. No amount of coaxing could persuade Horace to release that chapter, because his original outline had promised that it would contain the last word on compilers. He couldn't violate his promise.

After three years of this unfinished Bingo game, we surrendered. The book was *never* published, partly because in three years, other material in the book had become dated and "had to be revised." By sticking literally to his outline, Horace deprived the world—not to speak of himself—of an outstanding text.

To be sure, many editors and agents advise that you should submit an outline, not a finished manuscript, when seeking a

contract. But, as a Fieldstone author, I never seek a contract unless and until I have the actual manuscript in hand. That way, the finishing process stays under my control at all times—not controlled by some Bingo-Card outline I hatched to sell the project to my publisher. If my publisher does insist on an outline rather than the finished manuscript, I simply provide the outline of the manuscript that lies complete and waiting on my desk.

And even if you do have a contract with an outline, publishers rarely insist that you stick to the outline precisely. They *expect* that a project will change as the writing progresses, so why should you expect to be the one exception? Plus, if your publisher wanted you to stick to a particular outline, why should you listen to them? Publishers may intimidate first-time authors, but they're no better at knowing what will sell a book than anyone else, as you'll see in the next chapter.

The Need to Be Perfect

Demand your own best work. You'll find some frustration in fitting stones and that will inevitably result in your using some that you shouldn't. Fight the tendency to lay a stone that's just "good enough." It won't look any better as time passes. Sloppy work will haunt you. [C. McRaven, *Stonework: Techniques and Projects* (Pownal, Vt.: Storey Books, 1997), p. 55.]

Many of us have received similar admonitions not to settle for just "good enough." That's fine advice, as long as we don't misinterpret it to mean that we have to be *perfect*. "Sloppy work" is not the opposite of "perfection." Sloppy work is the opposite of *the best you can do at the time*.

In addition to fighting his Bingo Card, Horace had complicated his completion with a desperate need for perfection and love.That need was at the root of his concern for having the last word. Many of my students articulate similar feelings to me as they struggle to complete a piece for publication:

I'm scared to finish! One of my fears is: being 'wrong', or not quite 'right' in my content. What if I make a "mistake"? That is, as I practice this stuff, I keep learning new stuff that works better or worse. In fact, in some ways anything I write is old. I have a core value of trying new things, synthesizing and debriefing myself as to what works. So, if I finish the O@(#$ book, it goes in print with something less than my current thinking, practice and experience … then I'll be mortified.*

Ellen added that she'd found one way to deal with her fear of imperfection:

By the way, I am telling myself that's okay, because I can use my web site for 'updates.'

Letting go of your fear of imperfection doesn't mean you can become sloppy. Sloppy authors rarely get published—but perfect authors never do. *Every* finished book contains *something* wrong. Usually, when I receive the first copy of a new book of mine, I open it at random, and half the time there's an error staring me in the face. In one case, the error was on the first line of the first page. I'm not saying my editors and I do sloppy work. It's just that we don't do *perfect* work.

Fieldstone walls are fine examples of the difference between imperfect and sloppy. Perhaps a brick wall can be perfectly laid, but a fieldstone wall never can be—and its very imperfection is what contributes half the beauty. I don't mean to say that there aren't *some* kinds of imperfection that will ruin a

book, but only that the last little touches are not worth holding back publication for three years.

Oscar Wilde once said, "A poet can survive anything but a misprint." That may be true of poetry, but prose authors have survived dozens or hundreds of misprints. Survived and thrived. Prose authors can survive anything but the infinite search for a misprint. So, do as another great writer, James Thurber once said, "Don't get it right; get it written."

You actually don't even have to *finish* the manuscript. In fact, you shouldn't even try to finish. Your publisher has editors for that job. All you have to do is produce a manuscript that says something worthwhile, says it well, and is not sloppy. "Perfect" is not the proper standard for authors; "my best work at this time" is. Allow your editors to do the work they love to do. If you actually produced a perfect manuscript, they'd be so unhappy that they'd change some parts anyway.

The Need to Be Loved

In the same letter, my student also expressed the third major reason for failing to finish:

Another fear for me: not being liked. A book "puts yourself out there". Despite the fact that I am in many ways self-confident, my "little girl" is afraid of not being liked (which you so revealingly pointed out in class when we were talking about getting a publisher). Note: I'm writing about not finishing, meanwhile, I'm not writing!

You do not have to show your writing to anyone. If you do choose to show it, you can choose who and when. I write poetry, but I rarely let anyone read it. As I never intended to make a living as a poet, it doesn't matter. But if you want to

be a professional writer, you will have to send your work out sometime, to someone—and when you do, you'll have to cope with criticism.

Here are the endings of two reviews of my book, *Becoming a Technical Leader*, one down, one up:

1. "This book is for followers, specifically followers of Weinberg: I do not recommend it for potential technical leaders …"
2. "In summary, I liked this book a lot. I am a better leader for having read it, and I will read it again. I did not agree with everything Weinberg said, but perhaps that is part of why I liked it."

Which one is right? It doesn't matter. If I need to have everyone love me, review number one will put an end to my writing career. Early in my career, that's what nearly happened. One critical comment would stop me writing for months. Then I learned what I now know as *Scither's Saving Statement*: [G.H. Scithers, D. Schweitzer, and J.M. Ford, *On Writing Science Fiction* (Philadelphia: Owlswick Press, 1981), p. 10.]

Editors do not reject people; they reject pieces of paper that have typing on them.

Over my career, I've received hundreds of reviews and critiques of my writing, no more than a few handfuls of which have been negative. Those negative ones cost me several years of writing time—until I internalized Scither's Saving Statement. Now, when I receive a negative review, I put it aside for a day to let the emotions cool, then spend an hour or so extracting what's useful about the critique. That's part of

the Fieldstone Method—just think of every review as another potential fieldstone. If it lacks useful energy, leave it.

How do I Know When I'm Done?

There's one more customary reason for not finishing. Fieldstone writing is fun. Fun can be a trap. Have you ever read a book that was so much fun you didn't want it to end? Well, it's possible to have such a good time *writing* a piece that you don't want it to end, either.

Different personalities have different ways out of this trap. Many writers escape this trap by anticipating the excitement of seeing the piece published. For me, though, publication no longer holds much of a thrill. I generally bring projects to an end *because I want to be free to go on to the next project.* There's danger in this method, so I use my reviewer network to slow me down—and to test whether I'm finished.

Sometimes I finish by not finishing. Once upon a time, I was collecting "bug samples" for a book on debugging computer programs. Over twenty years, I gathered dozens of sterling examples, but the book turned out to be too difficult to write. Each bug was like a little mystery story, but somehow in a book I could never recapture the difficulties we'd originally had finding the culprit. My writing skill wasn't up to the job, so I gave up.

I didn't give up writing; I gave up writing that particular book at that particular time, in that particular way. When you follow the Fieldstone Method, giving up one project is no big deal, because you have dozens of others to occupy your time and interest. I gave up another project when I simply

lost interest in the subject, and another when someone else published a fine book on the subject I was planning to address.

Conversely, I've resurrected several dead projects when someone else published a book that wasn't good enough—thereby infusing the project with energy and inspiring me to try again. Knowing that I can reincarnate a project, I can more easily set it aside. And knowing I'll always have other projects means I can more easily set aside leftover stones. I don't have to stick everything in my one and only project—which would create a reverse sort of Bingo Card Effect. All these thoughts help me finish.

One final thought. Sometimes you can't finish because you simply started on the wrong foot, and now your project is all twisted into impossible knots. If that's what's happened to you, don't be afraid to tear down your wall and start over by rearranging the stones in a different way. The Fieldstone Method ensures that you'll still have good piles of stones, and besides, unlike those outline-start methods, the whole process will go much, much faster the second time around.

The Last Few Stones

"Finally, don't hesitate to discard or set aside stones that simply refuse to cooperate." [K. Gardner, *The Granite Kiss: Traditions and Techniques of Building New England Stone Walls* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), p. 47.]

Ultimately, you must find your own reason for finishing—but not such a strong reason that you'll be in too big a hurry at the end. It's a tough balance between the need to finish and the need to do the best you can do. Sometimes leaping into

the next project means you're not really facing what needs to be done to finish the one at hand.

Sometimes, you'll be stuck looking for the last couple of stones to finish a project. You can just put the project away, or go on a specific search. I usually put it away, but I put my third eye on alert. Sometimes, I cannot tolerate waiting to reduce my pile of work-in-process, so I mistakenly force myself to search for closure. There are two things wrong with that tactic. One, the work doesn't really finish properly—it appears rushed, and the patches show.

But the second reason is what kills my temptation to rush the ending. Whenever I finish a work-in-process, my mind decides it's now free to think up two or three or more new ones. So, I'll never finish *all* my projects—and what a blessing that is. I cannot imagine a life in which I didn't have unfinished projects to occupy my attention.

One way to finish faster is to decide you need not include some of your material—especially material that you haven't yet found. For example, you may not wish to include materials you can reference instead—allowing the interested reader to look it up and the uninterested reader to save the trouble.

I used this technique in the next chapter—the final chapter. My original idea was to close by telling you how to get your manuscript published, but research showed several things:

- More than half of my readers are not writing on speculation, but are composing internal narratives, reports for clients, or company publications.
- Nowadays, any writer can publish his or her own work as an eBook or a print-on-demand book without the use of an old-fashioned publisher.

- A number of fine books exist telling you how to find a publisher or agent.
- My specialty is getting *my* works published. Although I've helped many of my students place their works, I simply can't match the experience of the authors of these how-to-publish books.

In light of these observations, I decided to relate some of my own publishing experiences, give you references to other helpful authors, and stop. In that way, finishing the final chapter—finishing the book—became easier.

And why did I decide to include my publishing experiences? I think it's important that a book doesn't just trail off at the end. Don't be a slave to an outline, but do save something good for the end. On the other hand, don't introduce some big new topic that you can't handle. Any reader who reaches the end deserves a reward, but they don't deserve the punishment of getting totally involved with something new, just when they thought their task was winding down.

So, I've chosen to end with some publishing stories, to give the reader who hasn't published extensively a chance to glimpse into the mysterious world of publishing—a topic that can't fail to fascinate new writers.

How It Turns Out

Fieldstone writing is not a deterministic process. This book might have turned out quite differently had I found some additional stone or two–or had I failed to find one of those that turned out to be "the flattest rock with the most uniform thickness."

But if you hadn't seen it being done, its organization might seem inevitable. How else could it have been written?

Chapter 20. What Happens After You Finish?

Figure 20. Finishing the work is only part of the job. It may be a magnificent castle, but if nobody wants it, it's just a ruin. A simple fieldstone wall may be more valuable. (Photo by Fiona Charles)

At a cocktail party, Oscar Wilde once bragged that he could speak on any subject for thirty minutes without preparation. A listener challenged him to speak about the Queen. "Sir," he said, without hesitation, "the Queen is not a subject."

The analogy between walls and manuscripts only carries so far. For example, fieldstone walls are rather difficult to move, but manuscripts nowadays can move with the speed

of light. I've never heard of anyone building a fieldstone wall on speculation, but many manuscripts are finished with no particular buyer in mind. If you haven't written your manuscript to order, your job as a writer is not finished when your manuscript is complete. Unlike the stonemason, you have to sell your work after it's finished.

Getting Published

Getting your manuscript published by a traditional publisher is like walking a tightrope. You must be sensitive enough to respond to feedback from potential customers, but not so sensitive that critical feedback discourages you from trying to find a customer.

Let me give some examples, starting with some predictions from publishers that, had I heeded them, would have seriously hurt my career as a writer. By now, I have published more than 50 successful books, yet I still don't understand how publishers arrive at their predictions. For instance, the most successful of my books thus far has been *The Psychology of Computer Programming*, which was delayed more than a year by a series of publishers who couldn't decide what to do with it.

I first sent the manuscript to the large publisher that had produced all my previous books—and had never hesitated to accept any of them. Here's what they said:

"It just is not worthwhile pushing this project any further. It may be that the concept is good … but the style and breadth of presentation is just not suitable. It could be that a major overhaul and rewrite will result in a marketable project. On

the other hand, it may be wiser to forget the book concept entirely ..."

The book was not overhauled, and not rewritten, but it was turned down by another publisher before it finally found a home. It's now been in print for more than 30 years, and has sold over 300,000 copies in English, and more in a variety of translations. For the company that eventually published it, *Psychology* sold more copies and made more money than the total of their next five best-selling books. In retrospect, the two declining publishers proved not to have much predictive power.

My second most successful book so far has been *An Introduction to General Systems Thinking*. Naturally, I sent this manuscript first to the perceptive publishers of *Psychology*. Here's what they said:

"Our referee believes that the market for such a volume is limited. With this in mind, I do not believe it is for us."

This one has been in print now for over 30 years, and has sold more than 250,000 copies in various languages.

The same pattern now holds for my third most successful book, *The Secrets of Consulting*, and the fourth, *Are Your Lights On?—How to know what the problem really is*, and the fifth, *What Did You Say?—The art of giving and receiving feedback*. In short, each my five best sellers has been turned down, yet none of my other books have ever been turned down by publishers. (Except this one—so I anticipate monumental sales. Well, maybe not. The publisher didn't really turn it down. Instead, they lost it.)

Publishers do know a lot about predicting the future success of a book—but what they know is often exactly backwards.

To be fair, their predictions seem to be backwards for new and different subjects. Shakespeare goes in and out of fashion, but even at low ebb sells pretty consistently. Algebra books compete with one another in a comfortable, steady market, as do introductory books in poetry, physics, and philosophy. Books in such traditional areas are more predictable, but, then, they're less likely to make a big splash.

In computing, the field changes annually, so for publishers of computing books, the subject of tomorrow's bestseller is unknown. Editors don't follow the field; they follow the *publications* in the field. Unless and until somebody else publishes a book on the subject, the editor doesn't consider it a subject at all. Those blinders are evident in the subjects of those books of mine that became the best sellers. Before the *Psychology of Computer Programming* appeared, the psychology of computer programming was not a subject.

Agents

If you can't reach publishers with your work, perhaps you need an agent to sell your manuscript for you. I've not had a lot of luck with agents. For instance, I sent an email to Tom DeMarco's agent about this very manuscript, briefly pointing out that I had already published forty successful books and several hundred articles. I thought that would attract their interest, but I received no response. Tom said they "prefer" paper mail.

Many agents I've looked into seem very backward technically and very inflexible. One agent explained that she gets about six hundred manuscripts a month, of which perhaps six ultimately get published. Given that ratio of one in a hundred,

you can see why agents are so fussy about doing things the way that's most convenient to them.

Based on my memories of grading English papers in college, I'd have to agree that agents' fussiness is a legitimate reaction to the flood of illiterate junk they receive every day. Asking for literacy is just the second screen (snail mail formatting being the first) to reduce the flood to a manageable trickle. They might occasionally miss a great new budding author, but I'm sure they figure the odds are against it. So, if you'd like to try using an agent, be sure to discover their fussy preferences and follow them. A good place to start is with *The First Five Pages*. [N. Lukeman, *The First Five Pages: A Writer's Guide to Staying Out of the Rejection Pile* (New York: Fireside Books, 2000).]

Even with a perfectly formatted manuscript, if you want to reach an agent (or a publisher) it helps to have a personal contact that will allow you to bypass all these mechanical screenings. Then you have a chance of being treated as a literate, sane, human being. This was the approach I used to publish my first book, and from that time to this, I've used this approach for almost all my books. If you're starting from scratch, however, acquire the latest edition of the *Writer's Guide to Book Editors, Publishers, and Literary Agents* and follow its advice religiously. [J. Herman, *Jeff Herman's Guide to Book Publishers, Editors and Literary Agents: Who They Are! What They Want! and How to Win Them Over!* 16th ed. (Stockbridge, Mass.: Three Dog Press, 2006).]

The only time I've had an agent was when my regular publisher, Dorset House, didn't think that my *Secrets of Consulting* fit their markets. I met an agent, Lily, through a student who had used her services with stunning success.

I persuaded her to try to sell the manuscript. I must say, Lily treated me very well, and truly tried, but finally gave up. I then returned to Dorset House and persuaded them to publish it. They finally gave in because I'd published so much else with them. In recent years, *The Secrets of Consulting* has been my absolutely best-selling book, and Lily would have made perhaps $50,000 from it. I've just written a follow-on, *More Secrets of Consulting*, which Dorset snapped up instantly, typos and all. [G.M. Weinberg, *More Secrets of Consulting: The Consultant's Tool Kit* (New York: Dorset House Publishing, 2002).]

Life After Publishing—The Matthew Effect

Once you publish your writing, you'll discover that it's not even over when it's over. After the public sees your work, the Matthew Effect comes into play, and people start collecting stones for you. The Matthew Effect is named for this passage in the *New Testament*:

MATTHEW 25: For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.

The Matthew Effect works in at least two ways. First, there's the attribution of nice sayings to more famous people. The first time I experienced this was when my friend, Victor Weinberg, complained that everyone thought his book on systems analysis had been written by me. Why? Because my name is Weinberg, too, and I had written several books. It was easier for some people to imagine there was only one Weinberg who wrote computer books. (I may suffer similarly from being

confused with the far more famous Steven Weinberg, the physicist.)

The Matthew Effect also works through the social dynamics of reputation, which makes well-known people attract the assistance of less well-known people. For instance, once Dilbert became a culture hero, Scott Adams no longer had to work so hard gathering his own fieldstones. Folks from all over the planet now send him voluntary contributions.

The Matthew effect has benefited me, too. Now that I've published dozens of books and hundreds of articles, other people are constantly gifting me with their fieldstone gatherings—their observations and memories.

Over the years, my understanding of the Matthew Effect has grown, and I've been able to use it to my advantage as a writer. At first, of course, I was pleased to receive correspondence from all over the world. After a while, though, I became annoyed at the sheer volume of correspondence such gifts involved. Eventually, I came to comprehend the generosity behind these gifts, and I began to encourage people to do much of my gathering work for me.

Hardly a day passes now without my receiving some useful fieldstone from somewhere in the world. Many of these are unsolicited mail from readers, but most of it comes from sources I've encouraged in some way. I teach classes, and the people who attend always bear gifts of knowledge. Many of my students ultimately become part of my network—my friends and colleagues—and gifts flow freely in both directions. I also maintain a website, geraldmweinberg.com, and on that site I formerly conducted the SHAPE forum ("Software as a Human Activity Practiced Effectively"). SHAPE is so full of fieldstones that we decided to build a series of walls,

the SHAPE Roundtable Series, out of them. [for instance, J. Bullock, M. Benesh, and G.M. Weinberg, eds., *Roundtable on Project Management: A SHAPE Forum DialogueV (New York: Dorset House Publishing, 2001), pp. xxiii—xxiv.]

Here's how James Bullock, a friend, colleague, Shaper, and coeditor of the SHAPE series introduced the first book in the series:

To me, SHAPE is the Algonquin Round Table of systems development. For a period of years, Dorothy Parker, Alexander Wollcott, Heywood Broun, and Robert Benchley gathered for long lunches at the "round table" in the Algonquin Hotel in New York City. They would gossip, trade quips, and chatter. They'd talk about their work, and their work was better for it. Seeds were sown over those long lunches that became columns, essays, and plays. They pushed each other by being worthy colleagues, and worthy competitors.

I am regularly struck by the quality of insight and advice that shows up on the SHAPE forum. The high quality of the writing matches the high quality of the content. I've found less wisdom in week-long expert training or in months-long mentoring than in one morning when I log in to read SHAPE It is power, I think, that comes from

- *the breadth of the participants' backgrounds*
- *the participant's individual depth*
- *the grace of the interplay between the participants*
- *the interplay itself*

We are not a bunch of Manhattan writers—though a few of us write from the Big Apple—and the common discipline is systems (Jerry says software) not literature. However, the

conversation certainly is literate, challenging, and enlightening. On SHAPE, there are dozens of authors, consultants, managers, and workers from every IT specialty and every kind of organization, spread over five continents. This community isn't available from my city, my school, or my company, and never has been. Like the Algonquin Round table, SHAPE is a high-quality community that pushes me to do better—to find the Algonquin analogy itself. SHAPE is a very big roundtable.

We Shapers are familiar with the entire existing canon of systems development. (In fact, we wrote some of it.) We don't limit ourselves, however, the conversation includes psychology, anthropology, operations management, math of various flavors, physics, science fact and fiction, history, music, literature, and training—of people, dogs, and even horses. Even better, we use our own experiences. Hanging about on SHAPE are a couple thousand years of system building experience. This richness leads to tremendous "signal to noise"—part of Jerry's description of SHAPE. Whatever I read on SHAPE is relevant, informed, and always worth my time.

Building systems is, I think, one of the hardest, most human activities. Why spend hours discussing hard problems on the SHAPE forum, with a bunch of people who can't advance your career—and who don't even pay you? For me, the joy of the association and of what I learn is reason enough. I believe the Algonquin Round Table made those writers' work better. To do my work, I need all the help I can get.

You can see why I recommend that every writer set up a network to put the Matthew effect to work gathering fieldstones. Perhaps Shapers think they are sending fieldstones to me (Matthew Effect), but in the process they're sending them to dozens of Shapers who are not yet as well known

(counteracting the Matthew Effect). At the same time, each contributor gets to practice writing fieldstones and receiving feedback from other Shapers.

As a bonus, your network may yield that personal contact you need to catch the attention of your next publisher or agent. I try to keep track of Shapers' writing successes, but I've lost track after more than a hundred published articles and an impressive batch of books. So, if you're just starting out, build your network and put the Matthew Effect to work for you, not against you.

[NOTE: Shape has now been closed because it took more of my time than I could afford to take away from my other writing, but I have hundreds of SHAPE threads stored away to provide years and years of inspiring fieldstones. I now recommend to my writing students that they start their own "roundtables," on their own favorite topics. It's simple to do in these internet days.]

It's Not All Sweetness and Light

Although as a published author you will have the Matthew Effect working for you, you'll also have several new problems. After *The Psychology of Computer Programming* became so successful, I received a visit from an editor from the publishing house that had initially said "It just is not worthwhile pushing this project any further." He had, he said, a terrific idea. Personal computers were just beginning to flood the market, so he wanted me to write a book called *The Psychology of Personal Computer Programming*. He would publish it and make big bucks for both of us.

"I don't think so," I answered.

"Why not?"

"I don't know anything about the subject."

"That's okay. You can just write the same stuff and rework it a little."

"Even if I *would* do that, I *couldn't*. I don't have the time."

"That's okay," he smiled knowingly. "We'll get somebody else to write it. We just have to use your name as author, and people will buy it."

I felt he was carrying the Matthew Effect a mite too far, and I told him so. As I showed him the door, he held his ground for a moment and said, "But I still don't understand why you don't want to do this project with us."

"Yes," I replied, guiding him out firmly by the elbow, "and that's the main reason I don't want to do this project with you."

Although I wasn't tempted by this meretricious proposal, I did succumb once to a publisher asking me to write a specific book. When I was series editor of the Winthrop Series in Computer Information Systems my editor kept urging me to write a flagship textbook, Computer Information Systems, for the series. [G.M. Weinberg and D. Geller, *Computer Information Systems: An Introduction to Data Processing* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1985).] Though many of my books have been used as texts by unconventional professors, I'm not a textbook writer. Nevertheless, Dennis Geller and I agreed to write the book. Unfortunately, we were then given an outline of topics that professors in this kind of course "demanded."

Though *Computer Information Systems* was moderately successful, Dennis and I had to endure all the anguish of writing

a non-fieldstone book. I hope that you, my reader, will benefit from our experience and not have to suffer the way we did. Become a fieldstone writer and be guided by the energy in your heart, not by the rationalizations in your head. And, if you feel this book has helped you in any way, let me know about your successes, so I can rejoice with you.

Postscript added for eBook edition

In the few years since the original edition of this book, the publishing world has begun to undergo a violent revolution, spurred by technology. eBook readers are selling by the millions, and authors all over the planet are racing to move their books to the internet (like this one). The possibility of eBook publishing has allowed writers to bypass the stranglehold traditional publishers have held on them for more than a hundred years. So, everything about publishing is changing, and changing so fast that no book can keep up with the changes.

Nowadays, I publish my own books first as ebooks. After they've proved themselves by selling well, publishers approach me about them producing a paper version. But they are so slow, so fussy, and their royalty structure is so low, that I do much better publishing my own paper versions, if that's what I want. But don't these big publishers do a better job of marketing my books? Quite simply, NO. Mostly, they don't do *anything* in the way of marketing. Even if they did a better job, I'm making much more money because of the higher royalties on (maybe) fewer books. Besides, I'm making more than enough for my needs, so why be greedy?

My advice to you writers is this: follow the revolution on the

web, and don't be afraid to risk trying new things. On the other hand, the new world is attracting new scammers trying to make a living off of writer wannabes. To protect yourself, remember this one principle, often repeated by my friend and mentor, Dean Wesley Smith:

Money should flow to the writer, not from the writer.

Good luck, and good writing.

References

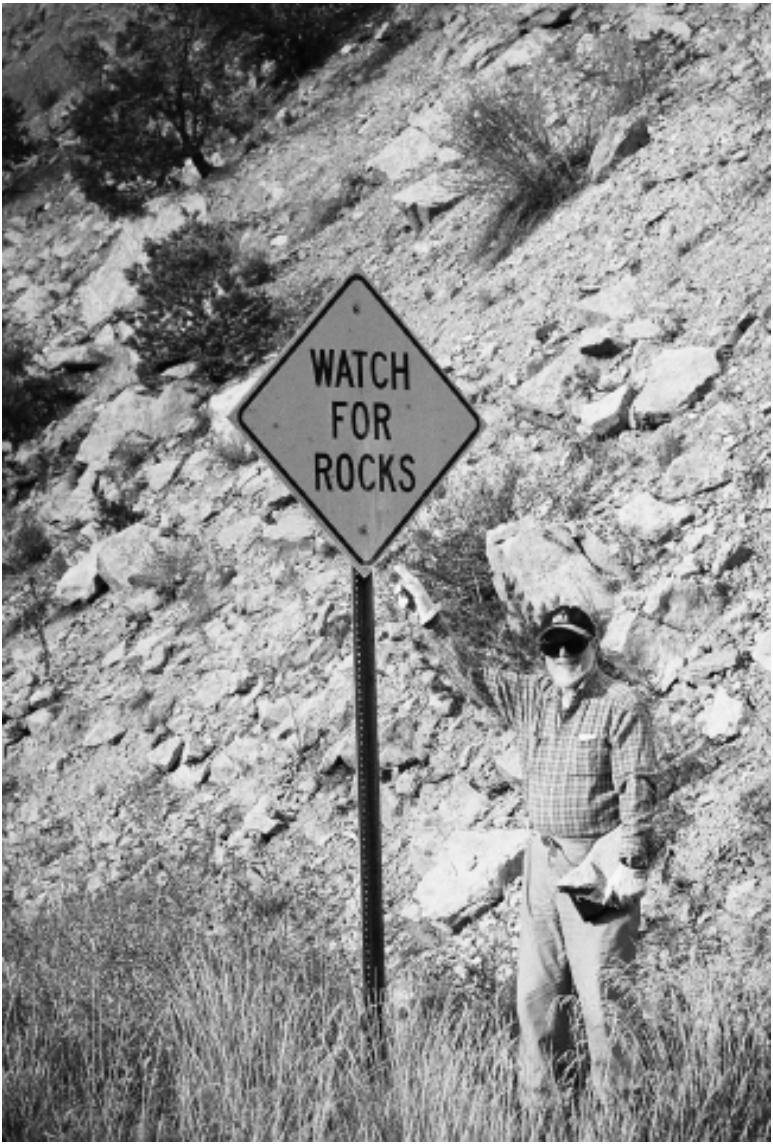


Figure 21. Never cease watching for wonderful stones,starting with your library,but escaping from your desk to head outdoors once in a while. (Photo by Dani Weinberg)

"My library
Was dukedom large enough."
—William Shakespeare, The Tempest

Writers read. In the Bard's day, a fine library might consist of a mere handful of books. But today, with thousands of books on the subject of writing, and tens of thousands of good examples to study, a bit of guidance might be in order.

Here is a selection of books I have found helpful in my writing career—and quite often fun to read. My annotations are intended to help you choose the one you need at any moment. I've arranged them in groups according to the problems they address, in rough order of importance, but many of them could have been placed in several categories.

One could do worse than set aside time to read them all, and others besides. Many of my students have been helped by reading one writing book per month—plus at least a couple of good examples of writing they admire.

Fundamentals

Even if you're an experienced writer, you'll want to refresh yourself with these small books from time to time. Nothing loses readers faster than sloppy writing.

Strunk, W., Jr., and E.B. White. *The Elements of Style.* New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959.

Reading this tiny classic is a great way to tone up and tighten up your writing. The book emphasizes the "principal requirements of plain English," particularly rules of usage, principles of composition most commonly violated, and an approach to style.

Ross-Larson, B. *Edit Yourself: A Manual for Everyone Who Works with Words.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982.

Written by an editor, this book tells you what editors look for and what they cut and change—so you won't be surprised, and so you can do these things yourself.

Lukeman, N. *The First Five Pages: A Writer's Guide to Staying Out of the Rejection Pile.* New York: Fireside Books, 2000.

Each quarter-hour spent with this small book would help improve anyone's writing technique, and help avoid those quick rejections that plague every writer.

Browne, R., and D. King. *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers.* New York: HarperCollins, 2001.

Nowadays, self-editing may be the only kind of editing your manuscript will ever get. If you want your manuscript to be published, rather than merely printed, you'd better learn to edit it yourself.

Miller, C., and K. Swift. *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing.* New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1981.

An indispensable handbook for all whose words—whether by law, guidelines, or preference—are to be free of sexism. The classic answer to those who say that they "can't avoid" sexist writing.

Delton, J. *The 29 Most Common Writing Mistakes, and How to Avoid Them.* Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1985.

This book delves into the 29 writing pitfalls most likely to turn off an editor. Each is illustrated with lively examples.

Lerner, B. *The Forest for the Trees: An Editor's Advice to Writers.* New York: Berkley Publishing, 2000.

More basics from someone who writes with authority.

Craft

Above and beyond grammar, spelling, and punctuation lies craft— difficult to define, but easy to recognize. Craft is what translates your messages into words and plants them firmly in your reader's memory.

Gunning, R. *The Technique of Clear Writing, rev. ed.* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973.

This classic book is the source of Gunning's ten principles of clear statement, including his injunctions to keep sentences short, prefer the familiar word, and put action in your verbs. It's also the source of the famous Gunning Fog Index, a measure of clarity in writing. Along with Strunk and White, this is a good book to return to every year or so, to get your writing back on track.

Provost, G. *Make Every Word Count: A Guide to Writing That Works—For Fiction and Nonfiction.* Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1980.

Provost delivers as promised. You'll learn how to speak the reader's own language; how to control reader reaction; how to avoid weak words and "waste" words; what rules to follow and how rules can be misused effectively; how to appeal to the reader's senses; how to create your own style; how to be aware of the hidden work of words.

McClanahan, R. *Word Painting: A Guide to Writing More Descriptively.* Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1999.

McClanahan explores description in its many forms, with exercises to develop your senses and powers of observation. Rather than let descriptions be so much dead text to skip through, you can transform them into vital, exciting parts of your work.

Kress, N. *Beginnings, Middles, and Ends (Elements of Fiction Writing).* Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1993.

A fine guide to structuring—and restructuring—a fiction manuscript; either novel or short story.

LeGuin, U.K. *Steering the Craft: Exercises and Discussions on Story Writing for the Lone Navigator or the Mutinous Crew.* Portland, Oreg.: The Eighth Mountain Press, 1998.

One of the great storytellers of our time shows her readers by example and exercise how to raise the level of their own storytelling craft. A delightful, short book by one of my favorite authors.

Tools

I hesitate to list any tools because the Internet has become a kind of meta-tool, a rich guide to so many other tools for writers. Although it's my number one reference tool, it changes daily, so any sources I might cite are bound to be outdated before this book appears before your eyes. I'd suggest developing a library of bookmarks to sites you find useful, including sites that list collections of sites.

They should be easy to find using any of several popular search engines. Today, I searched for the exact phrase "Web-

sites for writers." The search, on a single search engine, turned up more than 10,000 sites, more than any writer could use in a lifetime. Following, though, are some tools—printed and electronic— that remain useful to me, even as the online world changes by the second:

Fisher, D., and J. Reginald Bragonier. *What's What, A Visual Glossary of the Physical World.* Maplewood, N.J.: Hammond, 1981.

This is the "Whatchamacallit Book," the reference to use when you can't think of the name of something, or when you want to be sure you name things precisely. It consists of pictures of just about anything you can imagine, labeled with the names of all parts. It can also be used as a mind stimulator when you need to be re-centered. Because it's picture-based, it may prove superior to word-based searches when you're stuck.

Grambs, D. *The Describer's Dictionary: A Treasury of Terms and Literary Quotations.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993.

With so many word sources on the Web, you may not need this book as much as formerly, but a writer never has enough sources for words. This one focuses on descriptive words you might otherwise not consider.

Unless you don't use a computer in your writing, you'll probably also want to equip yourself with a few software tools. For me, the essentials are a reliable word processor (not a word formatter, in my opinion, unless you write documents that require specialized layouts, such as television or movie scripts), a dictionary program, a spelling checker (I would use a grammar checker if I ever found a good one), a thesaurus or other word stimulator, a filing system for notes, a drawing program for the kinds of drawings or diagrams you use

in your writing, and, of course, a backup system. I won't recommend any particular products, because they change rapidly and often disappear from the market. EndNote, listed below, is an exception. It has been with me for more than ten years, and it looks like it's here to stay. (Let's hope this isn't a curse.)

EndNote Plus: *A Reference Database and Bibliography Maker.* Emeryville, Calif.: Niles & Associates, 2003.

This software program for formatting references can be used with almost any popular word processor. It saves references in a database and can format them in any of many standard formats, or in a special format you develop.

Exercises

Professional athletes are always training to maintain and improve their prowess. Writers are athletes of the mind, so why should they be different? Many of the books in the preceding sections contain useful exercises, but the ones below are almost entirely devoted to writers' workouts. Develop a routine—perhaps a new exercise every week—and stay in shape.

Rico, G.L. *Writing the Natural Way: Using Right-Brain Techniques to Release Your Expressive Powers.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983.

This book is "a course in enhancing creativity and writing confidence." It includes a number of techniques not covered in the typical left-brain writing book, flexing skills in clustering, recurrence, re-vision, image and metaphor, creative tension, the trial web, and language rhythm. It's particularly useful when the writer's problem is finding enough words.

Goldberg, N. *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within.* Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1986.

Like all of Goldberg's books, *Bones* is a refreshing place to visit when writing has bogged down.

Goldberg, N. *Wild Mind: Living the Writer's Life.* New York: Bantam Books, 1990.

Like the classic *Writing Down the Bones*, *Wild Mind* is a refresher for tired writers' minds. In addition to being inspiring, it has dozens of specific exercises to get you going, keep you going, and make you a better writer.

Elbow, P. *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.

Writing with power means power over the writing and power over the writer. Elbow's book emphasizes exercises that each of us can do to increase both kinds of power. Many of Elbow's exercises have been adapted for my writing workshop.

Bernays, A., and P. Painter. *What If? Writing Exercises for Fiction Writers.* New York: HarperCollins, 1991.

Eighty-three exercises for every situation, to continue your development as a powerful writer. Anyone who works through even a quarter of these exercises is bound to improve by an order of magnitude.

Emotional Issues

Out-of-control emotions ruin more writers than does out-of-control grammar, but few books or courses address the mastery of the ingenious emotional traps that writers are heir to. The following books are exceptions, and should be read from cover to cover.

Becker, H.S., and P. Richards. *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986.

Becker and Richards address the emotional issues in writing, particularly in the publication of professional work. Dani, an anthropologist, found this book very helpful.

Bernard, A., ed. *Rotten Rejections: A Literary Companion.* Wainscott, N.Y.: Pushcart Press, 1990.

A compendium of rotten rejection letters to such greats as Sherwood Anderson, Jane Austen, Gustave Flaubert, Tony Hillerman, and Erle Stanley Gardner. It includes the nasty rejection letter Pearl S. Buck received for her manuscript of *The Good Earth*, for which she ultimately received the Nobel Prize in Literature. Keep this on hand to skim whenever you've received a rejection letter. Knowing you are in such great company will send you back, smiling, to your writing.

Weinberg, G.M. *More Secrets of Consulting: The Consultant's Tool Kit.* New York: Dorset House Publishing, 2002.

A series of emotional tools for anyone who makes a living offering advice to other people, based on Virginia Satir's self-esteem tool kit. Many writers have attested to the usefulness of this book when they are stuck in a loop of their own confused, self-destructive thoughts.

Lawler, J. *Dojo Wisdom for Writers: 100 Simple Ways to Become a More Inspired, Successful, and Fearless Writer.* New York: Penguin Compass, 2004.

Lawler uses her experience in the martial arts to help the writer become, as the subtitle promises, "a more inspired, successful, and fearless writer." Even if you aren't interested in martial arts—or perhaps *especially* if you aren't interested

in martial arts—this little book may help you fight your way through some hard writing times.

Adams, J.L. *Conceptual Blockbusting: A Guide to Better Ideas.* San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1974.

A classic work on problem solving that identifies some of the major blocks—intellectual, emotional, social, and cultural—that interfere with ideation and design.

Nonfiction

Poynter, D. *Writing Nonfiction: Turning Thoughts into Books, 4th ed.* Santa Barbara, Calif.: Para Publishing, 2005.

A successful nonfiction writer tells how he does it, with many valuable tips. See Poynter's site at http://www.ParaPublishing.com.

Cohen, G., and D.H. Cunningham. *Creating Technical Manuals: A Step-By-Step Approach to Writing User-Friendly Instructions.* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984.

The inventor of the Cohen Cloudiness Count tells you how to write user-friendly instructions.

Weinberg, G.M. *The Secrets of Consulting: A Guide to Giving & Getting Advice Successfully.* New York: Dorset House Publishing, 1985.

This book is a guide for anyone who offers advice at the request of other people, which, of course, includes authors. It contains, among other topics, a complete explanation of the Orange Juice Test.

Holmes, N. *Designer's Guide to Creating Charts and Diagrams.* New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 1984.

If you write technical nonfiction, you want your charts and diagrams to do at least half of your work.

Robertson, B. *How to Draw Charts and Diagrams.* Cincinnati: North Light Books, 1988.

Another source of inspiration for the writer who uses charts and diagrams.

Tufte, E.R. *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information.* Cheshire, Conn.: Graphics Press, 1983.

Tufte, E.R. *Envisioning Information.* Cheshire, Conn.: Graphics Press, 1990.

Tufte's work is essential for those who use charts or diagrams in their technical writing. He is the master of communicating quantitative information.

Fiction

Card, O.S. *Characters and Viewpoint.* Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1988.

If I were restricted to recommending only one book for aspiring fiction writers, this would be it. Card not only writes well, but he thinks well about the craft of writing.

Peck, R.N. *Fiction Is Folks: How to Create Unforgettable Characters.* Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1983.

Although oriented to fiction writers, this book should be read by all nonfiction writers who want to put humanity into their books. The best fiction is nonfiction, and the best nonfiction is fiction.

McKee, R. *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting.* New York: HarperCollins, 1997.

The best book I know on the story elements of writing. It is oriented toward screen and television writing, but it applies well to novels, too.

Zuckerman, A. *Writing the Blockbuster Novel.* Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1994.

"For anyone who has lost all track of time in the thrill of a page-turner and wonders why certain novels grip you in a steel fist and won't release you until the final paragraph, here is the answer, here's how it's done, from a man who knows what he's talking about." From the back cover, and it's true.

Publishing

If publishing is your aim, don't go at it willy-nilly. Prepare yourself with these tools.

Curtis, R. *Beyond the Bestseller: A Literary Agent Takes You Inside the Book Business.* New York: New American Library, 1989.

The subtitle tells it all. A literary agent takes you inside the book business, though things have changed enormously since this edition was published.

Meyer, C. *Writer's Survival Manual: The Complete Guide to Getting Your Book Published Right.* New York: Crown Publishers, 1982.

The best and most inclusive introduction to the traditional publishing process and the writing trade. Includes such topics as how to find a publisher; what a literary agent can do for you; how to read and understand a publisher's contract; what a publisher does to sell a book; what income an author can expect. Unfortunately, this wonderful book doesn't seem to

have been updated, but it's still useful, and you can probably find a used copy on the Internet.

Abbe, E., ed. *The Writer's Handbook.* Waukesha, Wis.: Kalmbach Trade Press.

Published annually, this handbook's value lies mostly in the market listings—which may now be supplanted by Internet listings updated continuously—but it also includes essays on various writing topics by well-known writers.

Poynter, D. *The Self-Publishing Manual: How to Write, Print, and Sell Your Own Book, 14th ed.* Santa Barbara, Calif.: Para Publishing, 2003.

If you're thinking of self-publishing, read this book first. See Poynter's site at http://www.ParaPublishing.com.

WritersMarket.com.

WritersMarket.com provides the most comprehensive market contact information available, with electronic tools. More markets than you'll find anywhere else, updated daily. At about $30 for an annual subscription, online access is a much better deal than the annual edition in print.

Meredith, S. *Writing to Sell.* New York: Harper & Row, 1987.

A practical guide to creating and marketing your own writing, by one of the most successful American literary agents. Had I paid more attention to some personal advice the author offered me more than thirty years ago, my fiction-writing career might be thirty years further down the road.

Herman, J. *Jeff Herman's Guide to Book Publishers, Editors and Literary Agents: Who They Are! What They Want! and How to Win Them Over! 16th ed.* Stockbridge, Mass.: Three Dog Press, 2006.

A source for places to publish, but nowadays the Internet is probably a better place to obtain up-to-date information. A book simply cannot keep up with the rapid changes in the publishing industry, but the Internet is just as likely to be inaccurate or out-of-date. Before you submit your manuscript, be sure you have the latest correct information about where you're sending it.

The Writing Life

It seems that every successful writer wants to write about the writing life. These biographies are often so much fun to read that they distract you from the real work of writers—sitting down to write. But, in moderation, they can be inspiring, informative, and, above all, cautionary. Here are a few of my favorites:

Simon, N. *Rewrites: A Memoir.* New York: Touchstone, 1996.

If you're interested in writing plays, or screenplays, you'll want to read this memoir by Neil Simon to get an idea of how much work it is—how many rewrites and how many people try to rip you off.

Miller, J. *Amarillo in August: An Author's Life on the Road.* Los Angeles: Cool Titles, 2004.

This book can serve as an amusing antidote for those who fantasize about the romance of the writer's life on the road, autographing books in all sorts of glamorous places—like Amarillo in August.

King, S. *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft.* New York: Scribner, 2000.

A famous, best-selling author describes the ups and downs of his life, sprinkling advice to writers in painless doses along the way. Required reading for all Stephen King fans, and probably also for those who are not.

Welty, E. *One Writer's Beginnings.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984.

Lovely autobiographical writing, by one of the great American fiction writers. Without preaching, Welty manages to teach her reader a great many important lessons about the writer's life.

Index

One of the beauties of eBooks, for both readers and authors, is the lack of any need for an index. If your computer or eReader has a search function, you can look up any word instantly, without turning pages in an index of questionable quality.