

Okay—next tactic: How does this article fit in the chapter and into the entire book? Broaden my view, Stafford's idea of writing to learn fits in this chapter on the phenomenon of writing with a capital "W." He explains how writers develop their ideas that they share with their readers. This is important for students to realize that they too can be writers if they work the process. It is not some inborn trait that only special people get. Maybe this idea will be good for the students who read this book to think about. Bingo—another question. This is working.

Twelve minutes of focused freewriting led Liz to pull another idea from her brain. We want you to try this. Pick a topic or issue to explore. Write freely about the issue. Let your hand and your thoughts move across the page. Don't stop. If you lose focus, pull yourself back by writing "now, getting back to my topic." Give your brain a chance to discover a new focus or perspective on the issue. If your brain is not accustomed to this type of thinking, it might take some practice.

Shitty First Drafts

ANNE LAMOTT

Born in San Francisco in 1954, humorist and writer Anne Lamott is a graduate of Goucher College in Baltimore. She has taught at the University of California Davis and conducted many writing workshops across the country. She received a Guggenheim Fellowship, and is the author of six novels and four best-selling books of non-fiction. Her nonfiction books include Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year (1993), in which she describes her adventures as a single parent, and Tender Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith (1999), in which she charts her journey toward faith in God. She has also been the food reviewer for California magazine, a book reviewer for Mademoiselle, and a regular contributor to Salon's "Mothers Who Think." In the following selection, taken from Lamott's popular book about writing, Bird by Bird, she argues for the need to let go and write those "shitty first drafts" that lead to clarity and sometimes brilliance in second and third drafts.

Now, practically even better news than that of short assignments is the idea of shitty first drafts. All good writers write them. This is how they end up with good second drafts and terrific third drafts. People tend to look at successful writers, writers who are getting their books published and maybe even doing well financially, and think that they sit down at their desks every morning feeling like a million dollars, feeling great about who they are and how much talent they have and what a great story they have to tell; that they take in a few deep breaths, push back their sleeves, roll their necks a few times to get all the cricks out, and dive in, typing fully formed passages as fast as a court reporter. But this is just the fantasy of the uninitiated. I know some very great writers, writers you love who write beautifully and have made a great deal of money, and not *one* of them sits down routinely feeling wildly enthusiastic and confident. Not one of them writes elegant first drafts. All right, one of them does, but we do not like her very much. We do not think that she has a rich inner life or that God likes her or can even stand her. (Although when I mentioned this to my priest friend Tom, he said you can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.)

Very few writers really know what they are doing until they've done it. Nor do they go about their business feeling dewy and thrilled. They do not type a few stiff warm-up sentences and then find themselves bounding along like huskies across the snow. One writer I know tells me that he sits down every morning and says to himself nicely, "It's not like you don't have a choice, because you do—you can either type, or kill yourself." We all often feel like we are pulling teeth, even those writers whose prose ends up being the most natural and fluid. The right words and sentences just do not come pouring out like ticker tape most of the time. Now, Muriel Spark is said to have felt that she was taking dictation from God every morning—sitting there, one supposes, plugged into a Dictaphone, typing away, humming. But this is a very hostile and aggressive position. One might hope for bad things to rain down on a person like this.

For me and most of the other writers I know, writing is not rapturous. In fact, the only way I can get anything written at all is to write really, really shitty first drafts.

The first draft is the child's draft, where you let it all pour out and then let it romp all over the place, knowing that no one is going to see it and that you can shape it later. You just let this childlike part of you channel whatever voices and visions come through and

onto the page. If one of the characters wants to say, "Well, so what, Mr. Poopy Pants?," you let her. No one is going to see it. If the kid wants to get into really sentimental, weepy, emotional territory, you let him. Just get it all down on paper because there may be something great in those six crazy pages that you would never have gotten to by more rational, grown-up means. There may be something in the very last line of the very last paragraph on page six that you just love, that is so beautiful or wild that you now know what you're supposed to be writing about, more or less, or in what direction you might go—but there was no way to get to this without first getting through the first five and a half pages.

I used to write food reviews for *California* magazine before it folded. (My writing food reviews had nothing to do with the magazine folding, although every single review did cause a couple of canceled subscriptions. Some readers took umbrage at my comparing mounds of vegetable puree with various ex-presidents' brains.) These reviews always took two days to write. First I'd go to a restaurant several times with a few opinionated, articulate friends in tow. I'd sit there writing down everything anyone said that was at all interesting or funny. Then on the following Monday I'd sit down at my desk with my notes and try to write the review. Even after I'd been doing this for years, panic would set in. I'd try to write a lead, but instead I'd write a couple of dreadful sentences, xx them out, try again, xx everything out, and then feel despair and worry settle on my chest like an x-ray apron. It's over, I'd think, calmly. I'm not going to be able to get the magic to work this time. I'm ruined. I'm through. I'm toast. Maybe, I'd think, I can get my old job back as a clerk-typist. But probably not. I'd get up and study my teeth in the mirror for a while. Then I'd stop, remember to breathe, make a few phone calls, hit the kitchen and chow down. Eventually I'd go back and sit down at my desk, and sigh for the next ten minutes. Finally I would pick up my one-inch picture frame, stare into it as if for the answer, and every time the answer would come: all I had to do was to write a really shitty first draft of, say, the opening paragraph. And no one was going to see it.

So I'd start writing without reining myself in. It was almost just typing, just making my fingers move. And the writing would be *terrible*. I'd write a lead paragraph that was a whole page, even though the entire review could only be three pages long, and then I'd start writing up descriptions of the food, one dish at a time, bird by bird, and the critics would be sitting on my shoulders, commenting like cartoon characters. They'd be pretending to snore, or rolling their eyes at my overwrought descriptions, no

matter how hard I tried to tone those descriptions down, no matter how conscious I was of what a friend said to me gently in my early days of restaurant reviewing. “Amnie,” she said, “it is just a piece of *chicken*.” It is just a bit of *cake*.”

But because by then I had been writing for so long, I would eventually let myself trust the process—sort of, more or less. I’d write a first draft that was maybe twice as long as it should be, with a self-indulgent and boring beginning, stupefying descriptions of the meal, lots of quotes from my black-humored friends that made them sound more like the Manson girls than food lovers, and no ending to speak of. The whole thing would be so long and incoherent and hideous that for the rest of the day I’d obsess about getting creamed by a car before I could write a decent second draft. I’d worry that people would read what I’d written and believe that the accident had really been a suicide, that I had panicked because my talent was waning and my mind was shot.

The next day, though, I’d sit down, go through it all with a colored pen, take out everything I possibly could, find a new lead somewhere on the second page, figure out a kooky place to end it, and then write a second draft. It always turned out fine, sometimes even funny and weird and helpful. I’d go over it one more time and mail it in.

Then, a month later, when it was time for another review, the whole process would start again, complete with the fears that people would find my first draft before I could rewrite it.

Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts. You need to start somewhere. Start by getting something—anything—down on paper. A friend of mine says that the first draft is the down draft—you just get it down. The second draft is the up draft—you fix it up. You try to say what you have to say more accurately. And the third draft is the dental draft, where you check every tooth, to see if it’s loose or cramped or decayed, or even, God help us, healthy.

What I’ve learned to do when I sit down to work on a shitty first draft is to quiet the voices in my head. First there’s the vinegared Reader Lady who says primly, “Well, *that’s* not very interesting, is it?” And there’s the emaciated German male who writes these Orwellian memos detailing your thought crimes. And there are your parents, agonizing over your lack of loyalty and discretion; and there’s William Burroughs, dozing off or shooting up because he finds you as bold and articulate as a houseplant; and so on. And there are also the dogs: let’s not forget the dogs, the dogs in their pen who will surely hurdle and snarl their way out if you ever *stop* writing, because writing is, for some of us, the latch that keeps the door of the pen closed, keeps those crazy ravenous dogs contained.

Quieting these voices is at least half the battle I fight daily. But this is better than it used to be. It used to be 87 percent. Left to its own devices, my mind spends much of its time having conversations with people who aren’t there. I walk along defending myself to people, or exchanging repartee with them, or rationalizing my behavior, or seducing them with gossip, or pretending I’m on their TV talk show or whatever. I speed or run an aging yellow light or don’t come to a full stop, and one nanosecond later am explaining to imaginary cops exactly why I had to do what I did, or insisting that I did not in fact do it.

I happened to mention this to a hypnotist I saw many years ago, and he looked at me very nicely. At first I thought he was feeling around on the floor for the silent alarm button, but then he gave me the following exercise, which I still use to this day.

Close your eyes and get quiet for a minute, until the chatter starts up. Then isolate one of the voices and imagine the person speaking as a mouse. Pick it up by the tail and drop it into a mason jar. Then isolate another voice, pick it up by the tail, drop it in the jar. And so on. Drop in any high-maintenance parental units, drop in any contractors, lawyers, colleagues, children, anyone who is whining in your head. Then put the lid on, and watch all these mouse people clawing at the glass, jabbering away, trying to make you feel like shit because you won’t do what they want—won’t give them more money, won’t be more successful, won’t see them more often. Then imagine that there is a volume-control button on the bottle. Turn it all the way up for a minute, and listen to the stream of angry, neglected, guilt-mongering voices. Then turn it all the way down and watch the frantic mice lunge at the glass, trying to get to you. Leave it down, and get back to your shitty first draft.

A writer friend of mine suggests opening the jar and shooting them all in the head. But I think he’s a little angry, and I’m sure nothing like this would ever occur to you.

Thinking and Writing Questions

1. What is the essence of a “shitty first draft”? Why is this concept so significant to Lamott that she gives a whole chapter to it?
2. Lamott uses many images as metaphors to describe and develop her concepts. For example, “The first draft is the child’s draft, where you let it all pour out and then let it romp all over the place” (70). Make a list of these images. Why does she use these images? How does she use them to create her sarcastic, playful voice?
3. Drawing on Susan Wyche’s explanation of writing rituals, list the rituals that Lamott employs to write a restaurant review.

4. One of our favorite images is of snarling dogs that represent the voices in a writer's head. Many of us have messages in our head that we have internalized about writing: messages from teachers, parents, and textbooks that have shaped our view of writing. Every time Heather sits down to write, one of Heather's voices says, "Who are you kidding? You can't even string two sentences together to make sense." Record the voices and messages that you give yourself about writing. Identify messages that subvert your writing process. Develop some tactics to shut down these voices. Compose and repeat to yourself some positive messages that support your writing.
5. Try a little of your own image making. What is your writing process like? An Easter egg hunt in which you run frantically from tree to bush to porch, pushing all of the other children out of the way, looking for eggs and ideas? You fill up your basket and find a secluded corner to evaluate your discoveries. After pouring all of your candies on the floor, you sort them. You put the rich butter creams back into your basket where the ideas will grow and develop. You take the jelly beans and Peeps to your friends, hoping to trade for some more butter creams. This is a shitty first draft, but do you get the idea?

Internal Revision

DONALD MURRAY

Writer Donald Murray won the Pulitzer Prize in 1954 for editorials he wrote on National Defense for the Boston Herald. He taught writing at the University of New Hampshire and championed the process of teacher-to-student conferencing to teach writing. He authored books on the craft of writing and teaching writing, including Learning by Teaching; Expecting the Unexpected; and Crafting a Life in Essay, Story, Poem. He wrote a column for the Boston Globe on aging until his death in December 2006. Part of Murray's article, "Internal Revision," is reprinted here. It was originally published in Research on Composing—Points of Departure and reprinted in Learning by Teaching. Murray explores revision as a process of first making meaning and second making meaning clear to the reader.

Writing is rewriting. Most writers accept rewriting as a condition of their craft; it comes with the territory. It is not, however, seen as a burden but as an opportunity by many writers.