

Why Is Writing So Difficult to Accomplish?

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Writing is a struggle for everyone. If it seems easy, a writer is not doing it right. Because writing is mired in myths and misunderstanding, most writers – aspiring writers, in particular – consider the essential difficulty in writing as a pathology. They feel blocked and blank. Frustration and failure consume them. They give up, believing that writers are gifted, but they are not. While such a perception romanticizes writing as a supernatural skill, aspiring writers live that romantic notion of writing firmly. They read writers whose language is lively and enthralling; whose perspectives are unique and brilliant; and whose thinking is profound but is yet easy to follow. When an aspiring writer gets down to writing, she discovers that she falls short on all these fronts of writing. No way is she similar to the writing sophisticates she wants to emulate. Writing panics and perplexes her. She shies. She procrastinates. And

of writing have revealed and clarified the technical and structural aspects of writing. Gabriel Márquez, for example, in his interview with Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza in 2005 claims that even the most seemingly arbitrary piece of writing has its rules. Learning to write presupposes appreciating and applying the rules of writing. Alternatively, an aspiring writer can absorb those technical aspects of writing from the master writers that she savors. A writer needs some understanding about how writing is conceived and constructed to realize that writing is an outcome of diligence and determination. When an aspiring writer attempts to write without knowing the basics of writing, she finds writing unduly difficult.

Another artificial aspect of writing confounds a writer's difficulty further. Writing requires her to be logical and sequential. Influential composition scholar Peter Elbow reminds us in

interview Ernest Hemingway claims that he changed the last page of *Farewell to Arms* 39 times. When the interviewer asked about Hemingway's reason for changing it, he replied that he was not getting the right words. Neither does any writer, unless she is patient and persistent enough to re-write many times what she already wrote. Most aspiring writers consider that the first draft is the final draft and that professional writers are by default logical and coherent and free-flowing. That's not the case. Professional writers fret and fumble, and they compulsively edit their writings. Aspiring writers don't want to struggle through the process of writing; neither do they know that dealing with difficulty presupposes the production of graceful writing.

And because writing is essentially difficult, aspiring writers stay away from writing. That compounds the crisis even further. One becomes a writer by being

No way is she similar to the writing sophisticates she wants to emulate. Writing panics and perplexes her. She shies. She procrastinates. And she shirks writing. Writing seems so difficult. It indeed is! The difficulty of writing lies in the fact that writing is essentially artificial. Humans are not biologically primed to write. They are biologically primed to speak. They don't have to become speakers. They already are speakers because of their genetic composition.

or autobiographical, but writing presupposes that a writer has some personal investment in and familiarity with the topic she writes about. Add to that instruction in writing often artificially segments the process of writing into pre-writing, writing, and re-writing. These stages of writing are in reality intertwined and concurrent. Style manuals – all about styles of writing, not about strategies of writing – reinforce a false notion of writing. These manuals reduce the complexity of writing to a dichotomy of never or always. And they perpetuate the same commandments of writing for ages. For writing, there are no commandments. There are only options. A writer must be creative and courageous to discover and to avail herself of her options. Textbooks and style manuals, inadvertently, crush creativity and courage in aspiring writers.

Aspiring writers hardly write as such. When they write something, they are never satisfied with what has emerged. They are already consumed by a crippling sense of perfectionism. Perfectionism in writing is an illusion, because writers seldom write what they should write. They always write what they can write. People judge their writing and criticize them as bad writers. No writer was – or is – immune to criticism. For example, Gore Vidal in his "Paris Review" interview criticized Ernest Hemingway for not writing anything of value. That didn't stop writers like Hemingway to create their masterpieces. Aspiring writers are, however, hobbled by the bad rap that writing brings. Avoiding criticism has never been an option for a writer. Dealing with it is. And the only way to deal with it is to writing more and more. No one can make the Greeks and the Romans happy at once. Why should a writer even care about that? None is perfect in our behavior. Nor should we try to be, or expect to be, as writers.

Becoming a writer is a life-long calling. If one can't write, it does not mean that she lacks talent. All it means is that she lacks commitment. Writers write, regularly. What they write is not always brilliant. Writers are not by default brilliant people. They strive to sound brilliant in their writing. They fail, sometimes. Readers and critics rail. That doesn't stop writers, though, because writers know that writing is not for the faint of heart. Writing presupposes courage and optimism. With regular practice, courage and optimism concentrate. Hemingway once said "There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed." Testimonies of professional writers confirm that Hemingway didn't romanticize the difficulty of writing. An aspiring writer must not think that writing should be any easier for her. If she dares and perseveres, she accomplishes.

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courageous and committed enough to face and overcome the agony implicit in writing. So, the difficulty in writing deepens.

Steven Pinker claims in *The Sense of Style* that to write something, we need to have something to talk about (i.e., topic), and we need to say something about that topic (i.e., content). While some aspiring writers perhaps have topics, they are often constrained by content deficiencies. They must think, read, and research on the topics they intend to write about. They must have a mental blueprint of their writing projects to sieve pertinent information and to determine the sequences of presentation. That dimension of writing requires that writers brainstorm, but aspiring writers strain their brains and are stuck in a mental goo. Consequently, writing seems insanely difficult. Undoubtedly, doing any form of serious writing is difficult. But original writers somehow, through repeated effort, manage to tread uncharted terrains of seeing and experiencing the world by using unique language. They pursue new visions and cut into new frontiers of words and wisdom. And they stay focused on their visions. The final versions of their visions never come along until topic and content are closely aligned following multiple modifications. Aspiring writers, by contrast, are tentative about their topics; they don't look things up (research); and they don't have a mental blueprint to anticipate the sequences of their writing. When they get down to writing, they fuss and flounder.

As I claimed earlier, writing is a learned skill. But the teaching of writing of –if we are not careful– can complicate the problem with writing further concerning topics and content. Composition scholar Janet Emig claims in *The Composing Processes of Twelve Graders* that "school sponsored topics" disengage writers from writing, because students write to order. Writing doesn't necessarily need to be personal

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The difficulty of writing lies in the fact that writing is essentially artificial. Humans are not biologically primed to write. They are biologically primed to speak. They don't have to become speakers. They already are speakers because of their genetic composition. Didn't our ancestors live for thousands of years without having written anything? Writing is a cultivated skill. But the urban legend that writing is a gift is so uncontested –and of course, without any convincing evidence– that most aspiring writers forget that writing is a learned skill. Writers and scholars

Writing with Power that humans are not always logical and sequential. Humans don't always think through associations. Neither are they consistently rational in their thinking. Writing urges a writer to assume an artificial persona. Aspiring writers often lack the skill to be artificial required by the make-believe world of writing. What seems natural to us in writing is in fact the result of deep thinking. Deep thinking is no gift. It's a learned skill. That skill develops gradually but never culminates. Even professional writers don't draw upon a fixed source of skills. They are queasy about their writerly options. For example, in his "Paris Review"

a writer. Writing is skill enacted, but the act of writing also helps a writer discover and acquire new skills. With regular practice, writing skill accumulates. Mark Edmundson claims in *Why Write* that one needs to practice writing at least for 10 years to make writing facile. For most people, writing is a perfunctory engagement. They are neither interested, nor regular in writing. Their writing minds and muscles are always flabby. Writing becomes drudgery under such a circumstance. When most people have to write, they write to get rid of their writing task. And they come away from writing frustrated, helpless. Writing agonizes them, but aspiring writers are often not

The Beggar

MEHEDI HASSAN

Though I called out to the shopkeeper a couple of times, he didn't heed me. He was too busy rearranging the products on the rack. As I was waiting for him to respond, a middle-aged beggar woman turned up on my left and begged for money from me. At first, I ignored her, but she continued whining, whereupon I denied her request with a wave of my hand.

At this point, the shopkeeper appeared at the desk and I said, "Please, give me two Gold Leaf cigarettes." He handed me the cigarettes and asked, "Anything else?" I looked over various goods in the shop and noticed the Surf Excel mini packets. I remembered that my clothes were dirty, and they needed washing. So, I said, "Please, give me one surf excel mini-pack too." After putting the cigarettes

and the surf excel mini-pack into my pocket, I calculated that the shopkeeper owed me 21 taka- 16 taka for two gold leaf cigarettes and 5 taka for one surf excel mini-pack. Opening my wallet, I counted the money and saw that I didn't have 21 taka in change. Thus, I took out a twenty taka note and a two taka coin and passed them to the shopkeeper. He pulled open the cash drawer, put the money, shut the drawer and without giving me the change, returned to his work. I asked for the change from the shopkeeper and saw the beggar again on my right, begging for money from the shopkeeper now.

A while later, the shopkeeper placed a one-taka coin on the desk and returned to his work. The beggar and I exchanged glances and kept ourselves from taking the coin since neither

of us was sure whom the shopkeeper gave the coin to. I felt blood rushing to my face, and perspiration breaking out on my skin, for I failed to differentiate myself from the beggar. I wished to leave the place right away but failed to move. At length, the shopkeeper reappeared, pulled open the cash drawer again, took out another coin and placed it on the desk, pointing to the beggar. Glancing at the coin, I noticed that it was a two-taka coin. Just as the beggar picked up the two-taka coin from the desk, I breathed a sigh of relief and recovered my physical strength. Straight away, I flicked the one-taka coin to the beggar and took off from the place.

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