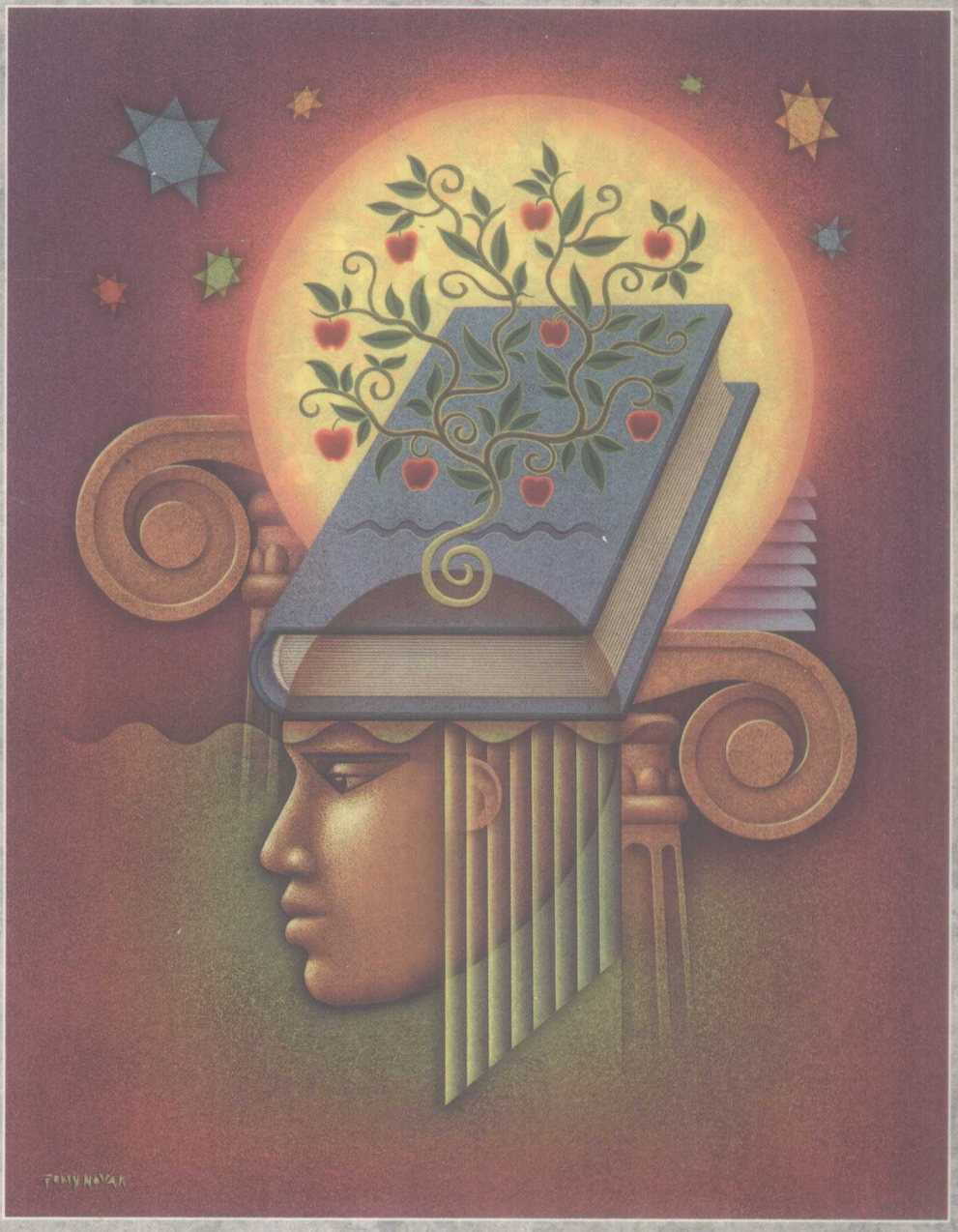
WRITING FROM LIFE

Collecting and Connecting



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Preface

Writing from Life: Collecting and Connecting is the result of a lifetime of teaching and learning, of observation and concern. Its basic assumptions are simple. First, students need to write more. Writing encourages them to collect their thoughts and to make essential connections between their own lives, beliefs, and experiences and the lives, beliefs, and experiences of others. Second, students need to read more. Reading exposes them to the thoughts of others and suggests further connections. Third, students need to take responsibility for their own mental growth and education by collecting ideas and making connections for themselves.

These things, it seems to me, have always been clear to us as teachers of writing and thinking. However, in the reality of the classroom, practical problems, time constraints, and entrenched habits stand in the way of our best intentions and most careful planning. After much experimentation, *Writing from Life* has emerged as my path toward good teaching and good learning.

Writing is a skill that must be learned both by practice in safe, private settings and by efforts at peak performance, with the pressure such performance entails. *Writing from Life* provides abundant opportunities for both.

Part One, "A Hundred Writing Projects," provides material not only for spontaneous, exploratory writing but also for formal essay assignments. By collecting a great many significant ideas in a format that is easy to use, Part One frees both the student and the teacher from the ruts of repetition and mind-numbing "exercises." In addition to providing important topics for class discussion, the projects collected in Part One afford students ample opportunity to struggle privately with ideas, to change and develop their opinions, to listen to personal voice, and to experiment with a variety of rhetorical methods. On the other hand, any of the projects in Part One can yield formal essay assignments that emphasize attention to structure and development and call for careful revision and editing.

Part Two, "Seeing: A Collection of Readings," provides selections that focus in various ways on the theme of perception. Not only have the readings been chosen to challenge student perceptions and provide meat for discussion but they can also be used to provide a basis for discussions of rhetorical matters such as style, tone, organization, and development. They are varied enough to provide choices of focus and variations in course design without requiring constant and extensive course reorganization.

As with the projects in Part One, the "Seeds" that follow each reading provide discussion topics and give students a starting point for their own writing, whether private or public. Responding to the "Seeds" after each reading connects the student's own assumptions, thoughts, and experiences to those of the author of the reading. Because there are no "questions for review," there are no right answers. Students must ask and answer, must read, think, and write for themselves. I have found that every student is capable of this, no matter his or her skill level. As with the projects in Part One, the readings allow students to start wherever they may be and to move on from there. Both the least and the most skilled students can make connections, recognize the value of their unique experiences, and think and write more deeply.

The organizational patterns in Part Three, "Visualizing Organization," offer the student models and provide the basis for discussions of formal essay structures and thought patterns. The presentation is designed to take advantage of all student learning styles: visual, aural, and tactile.

I have found in my own classes that, with the materials and approach of *Writing from Life,* students write more, read more, and take more responsibility than ever before—and do so at all levels of skill. Beyond that, I enjoy teaching without the heavy burden of obsessive grading. The class is "working" the way it needs to; good teaching and good learning are going on both in and out of class. I can stay fresh without constant, time-consuming course reorganizations, and I can change writing assignments on the spur of the moment to address current events and issues. I hope that you and your students will find *Writing from Life* as stimulating and as practical as my students and I do.

I am most grateful to my colleagues at Century Community and Technical College (formerly Lakewood Community College) for their practical and active encouragement of innovative teaching and learning methods. They have continually been examples of the attention to quality, care for students, and concern for learning that make good teaching the center of the college experience. Moreover, they have contributed immeasurably to my personal and professional growth.

Many have encouraged the development of the teaching and learning methods that you see here. However, I must thank Tom Broadbent at Mayfield Publishing Company for his recognition of their value and his willingness to edit and support a text unlike any other. Indeed, Mayfield's whole staff has been most helpful in each stage of the publishing process.

Contents

How to Use This Book

Writing from Life: Collecting and Connecting is a flexible tool for generating thinking and writing. It is not linear and not sequential, so you don't have to start at the beginning and work to the end. You may move around within the book because each project, each reading, each organizational design may stimulate your writing in a variety of ways. *Writing from Life* is a collection of minds alive on the page—minds that have learned, experienced, observed, questioned, and considered. In their writing, they are speaking to you here and asking you to make your mind come alive on the page.

"A Hundred Writing Projects" (Part One) is a collection of short, pointed comments created by minds from all over the world and throughout time. Each comment is a starting point, and each point can generate writing in many directions, using various methods of organization. The Writing Projects are not presented in a fixed order or sequence. You might start anywhere in Part One and move in any direction. The focus for writing might be one of the projects or a related collection. At different times, the writing might result in a single paragraph or a fully developed essay; it might be loosely exploratory or tightly organized and revised. There are no "right answers." The ideas are collected here so that you may consider how the experiences and thoughts from each author's life connect to your experiences and thoughts.

"Seeing: A Collection of Readings" (Part Two) is based on the theme of perception—seeing and thinking. Again the key is flexibility, and again the readings are points to begin exploring your own experience and observations. Because these minds are alive on the page, you may be attracted or repelled; you may like one and dislike another; you may be startled or energized or dissatisfied or challenged. These varied reactions are good because they stimulate the creative process.

"Visualizing Organization: Ways of Connecting" (Part Three) emphasizes the variety of designs you can use for thinking and writing. Each way of thinking produces different ideas in your writing because you are using a specific method to focus your thoughts. Each design can stimulate you to think and write in a new way. You could begin at one point in a writing project or a reading and generate many different essays based on which connections and organizational strategies you are using.

Throughout human history, writing has been learned and practiced within a community of other readers, thinkers, and writers. *Writing from Life* is a way to enter this human conversation. By responding to the minds that you encounter here, you can both expand and sharpen your skills. Because you are writing, you are continually exploring and discovering ideas, including your own. Writing can help you clarify your thoughts. Also, by making your thoughts concrete and specific, you can examine and test them. Your experiences and observations can be enriched by collecting and connecting to the thinking and writing of others.

Your writing may sometimes be spontaneous and exploratory and at other times highly structured and sharply focused. You may work on a few writing projects and readings in depth, or you may quickly work through many. Because the three parts of the book are designed to complement each other and to interlock, you may skip here and there, using a variety of projects, readings, and organizations simultaneously. *Writing from Life* will give you the flexibility to explore and exercise your imagination, memory, development, and organizational skills in a variety of ways.

In using *Writing from Life,* you will be collecting your own thoughts as well as the thoughts of others. You will be testing their connections and making your own. You will be showing what you mean with concrete, specific details and examples drawn from your own life experience, as well as what others have shown you from their life experiences. Seeing, thinking, and writing are woven together when you are writing from life.

LEARNING TO WRITE

Learning to write is like learning a sport. In every sport the reality is that we must pay our dues. A good basketball or baseball player both knows the rules of the game and practices. Reading a book on basketball or baseball is somewhat helpful, but no one would recommend it as the way to learn to play. The player must get out on the floor or the field and play both at the individual skills and in the games that are the sum of those skills. Shooting a hundred free throws a day, dribbling back and forth around obstacles, or taking batting or fielding practice may not be "fun," but individual skills develop by practicing them individually. On the other hand, the individual skills are never left in separate mental or physical boxes. Players do not go into the "big game" without first scrimmaging and playing "little" games.

Writing is like a sport. Sometimes a writer/player has great natural gifts or talent, but even with that advantage, practice alone and with the team and the coach is still necessary for both the writer and the athlete. No one would assume that skill in a sport appears fully developed as if by magic—least of all the athletes who make it look easy. In the sport of writing, we all must pay our dues: discipline ourselves to do our own work, to go to the practices, to contribute to the teamwork, and to be coachable, consistent,

and determined. Finding our own voices and creativity comes as practice frees us from concentration on each individual skill. The sport of writing, like any other sport, requires both knowledge and intuition, both the practice and the gift. Ask a coach. Ask the best players. Ask the ones who make it look easy.

Learning to write is like learning to make music. Playing and singing are both natural and learned—they are progressions of difficulty. We sometimes assume that this progression should be simple when actually it requires hundreds of discrete skills and often years of practice. This practice may be unnoticed because the learning is part of living and playing. Like the pianist or the singer, the writer gradually begins to do each of the necessary skills automatically; they become implicit. These automatic skills free the player or singer or writer to perform in spontaneous and imaginative ways that would never be possible if he or she were thinking about each individual skill.

Only when some correction needs to be made are we aware of all our previous practice and learning. Perhaps we have formed a habit of tension in our hands or of shallow breathing or of inexact hearing, something that may have worked at first when we didn't need as much technical skill but that will limit the further development of our music. The writer is often faced with a similar need for explicitly relearning or correcting something that has become an implicit habit. We have been making sentences so long that we no longer notice what we are doing until the writing coach suggests a variation or improvement in style or rhythm. We have been using the same vocabulary for so long that we no longer notice our word choices. Perhaps we have become so used to a certain error that we no longer recognize it; in fact, we cannot remember ever learning about it. This relearning requires conscious attention to what had become unconscious. It makes us awkward and uncomfortable until a new habit is created and practiced until it becomes automatic.

Continuously paying attention, practicing, and learning new words and ideas free us to make music and play with words, spontaneously and imaginatively, with greater and greater levels of skill. Mindfulness in the details can lead to freedom in creation of the whole.

Writing is like weight training. The training program includes different exercises and routines for the specific purposes of enhancing flexibility, endurance, and strength.

Flexibility requires reaching out for new thoughts that may at first be just beyond us, reaching in various directions, not being so muscle-bound that we can think in only one direction or use only one style of expression. *Writing from Life* encourages flexibility by providing thinking and writing exercises using ideas that stretch us a little at a time. With flexibility exercises, we continuously extend our reach and range of motion.

Endurance requires many repetitions with light weights. Endurance is created in *Writing from Life* with many writing exercises of relatively short duration. This kind of training shows us ways to keep writing and thinking

when the words don't come easily, or to keep going with an idea to find out what insights are below the first gush and froth.

Strength requires "maxing-out" with the heaviest weight we can lift—not every day, but periodically after building up strength with lighter weights and many repetitions, after detailed attention to balance and technique. In a writing course, strength may be formal essays, the research paper, or the analytical report. This requires writing at home, over a period of time, in depth. Even after we have prepared ourselves carefully, maxing-out involves some risk, perhaps doing more than seems easily possible. But after each session, we expect to add one more weight or go on to the next level of difficulty.

Even though the coach/trainer designs and supervises exercises that would be most useful, the writer/lifter is the only one who can do the workouts and make the gains in flexibility, endurance, and strength.

A PERSPECTIVE ON WRITING

When the rule-oriented or perfectionistic part of our brain controls our writing in the beginning stages, experimentation, spontaneity, and imagination are inhibited. In the following short piece, Gail Godwin examines how this Watcher at the Gate prevents imaginative and intuitive ideas from flowing freely into her mind. *Writing from Life* is designed to let the ideas flow in so that they can be recorded for later reflection. The judging, organizing, analyzing "left brain" can then work on the raw material that the spontaneous, imaginative, intuitive "right brain" has gathered. Vision comes before re-vision.

The Watcher at the Gate
Gail Godwin

I first realized I was not the only writer who had a restraining critic who 1
lived inside me and sapped the juice from green inspirations when I was leafing through Freud's "Interpretation of Dreams" a few years ago. Ironically, it was my "inner critic" who had sent me to Freud. I was writing a novel, and my heroine was in the middle of a dream, and then I lost faith in my own invention and rushed to "an authority" to check whether she could have such a dream. In the chapter on dream interpretation, I came upon the following passage that has helped me free myself, in some measure, from my critic and has led to many pleasant and interesting exchanges with other writers.

Freud quotes Schiller, who is writing a letter to a friend. The friend complains of his lack of creative power. Schiller replies with an allegory. He

says it is not good if the intellect examines too closely the ideas pouring in at the gates. "In isolation, an idea may be quite insignificant, and venturesome in the extreme, but it may acquire importance from an idea which follows it. . . . In the case of a creative mind, it seems to me, the intellect has withdrawn its watchers from the gates, and the ideas rush in pell-mell, and only then does it review and inspect the multitude. You are ashamed or afraid of the momentary and passing madness which is found in all real creators, the longer or shorter duration of which distinguishes the thinking artist from the dreamer. . . . You reject too soon and discriminate too severely."

So that's what I had: a Watcher at the Gates. I decided to get to know him better. I discussed him with other writers, who told me some of the quirks and habits of their Watchers, each of whom was as individual as his host, and all of whom seemed passionately dedicated to one goal: rejecting too soon and discriminating too severely.

It is amazing the lengths a Watcher will go to keep you from pursuing the flow of your imagination. Watchers are notorious pencil sharpeners, ribbon changers, plant waterers, home repairers and abhorrers of messy rooms or messy pages. They are compulsive looker-uppers. They are superstitious scaredy-cats. They cultivate self-important eccentricities they think are suitable for "writers." And they'd rather die (and kill your inspiration with them) than risk making a fool of themselves.

My Watcher has a wasteful penchant for 20-pound bond paper above 5
and below the carbon of the first draft. "What's the good of writing out a whole page," he whispers begrudgingly, "if you just have to write it over again later? Get it perfect the first time!" My Watcher adores stopping in the middle of a morning's work to drive down to the library to check on the name of a flower or a World War II battle or a line of metaphysical poetry. "You can't possibly go on till you've got this right!" he admonishes. I go and get the car keys.

Other Watchers have informed their writers that:

"Whenever you get a really good sentence you should stop in the middle of it and go on tomorrow. Otherwise you might run dry."

"Don't try and continue with your book till your dental appointment is over. When you're worried about your teeth, you can't think about art."

Another Watcher makes his owner pin his finished pages to a clothesline and read them through binoculars "to see how they look from a distance." Countless other Watchers demand "bribes" for taking the day off: lethal doses of caffeine, alcoholic doses of Scotch or vodka or wine.

There are various ways to outsmart, pacify or coexist with your Watcher. 10
Here are some I have tried, or my writer-friends have tried, with success:

Look for situations when he's likely to be off-guard. Write too fast for him in an unexpected place, at an unexpected time. (Virginia Woolf captured the "diamonds in the dust heap" by writing at a "rapid haphazard gallop" in her diary.) Write when very tired. Write in purple ink on the back of a Master Charge statement. Write whatever comes into your mind while the

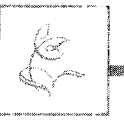
kettle is boiling and make the steam whistle your deadline. (Deadlines are a great way to outdistance the Watcher.)

Disguise what you are writing. If your Watcher refuses to let you get on with your story or novel, write a "letter" instead, telling your "correspondent" what you are going to write in your story or next chapter. Dash off a "review" of your own unfinished opus. It will stand up like a bully to your Watcher the next time he throws obstacles in your path. If you write yourself a good one.

Get to know your Watcher. He's yours. Do a drawing of him (or her). Pin it to the wall of your study and turn it gently to the wall when necessary. Let your Watcher feel needed. Watchers are excellent critics after inspiration has been captured; they are dependable, sharp-eyed readers of things already set down. Keep your Watcher in shape and he'll have less time to keep you from shaping. If he's really ruining your whole working day sit down, as Jung did with his personal demons, and write him a letter. On a very bad day I once wrote my Watcher a letter. "Dear Watcher," I wrote, "What is it you're so afraid I'll do?" Then I held his pen for him, and he replied instantly with a candor that has kept me from truly despising him.

"Fail," he wrote back.

PART ONE



A Hundred Writing Projects

Collecting ideas and making connections are the primary processes of writing and thinking. The Writing Projects in Part One are collections of ideas. When connected to our own observations and experiences, these varied ideas can draw us into the universal human questions. The Projects provide freedom and opportunity not only for writing as skill practice, but also for writing as thoughtfulness, learning, growth, and connection.