

A Community of Writers

A Workshop Course in Writing



Third Edition

Peter Elbow | **Pat Belanoff**

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A COMMUNITY OF WRITERS: A WORKSHOP COURSE IN WRITING

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A Community of Writers

A Workshop Course in Writing

Peter Elbow

Peter Elbow is Professor of English and Director of the Writing Program at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Before writing *A Community of Writers*, he wrote two other books about writing: *Writing Without Teachers* and *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*. He is author of a book of essays about learning and teaching, *Embracing Contraries*, in addition to *What Is English?*, which explores current issues in the profession of English, *Oppositions in Chaucer*, and numerous essays about writing and teaching. His most recent book is *Writing For—Not Against: Essays on Writing and the Teaching of Writing*.

He has taught at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Franconia College, Evergreen State College, and the State University of New York at Stony Brook—where for five years he directed the Writing Program. He served for four years on the Executive Council of the Modern Language Association and was a member of the Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. He has given talks and workshops at many colleges and universities.

He attended Williams College and Harvard University and has an M.A. from Exeter College, Oxford University, and a Ph.D. from Brandeis University.

Pat Belanoff

Pat Belanoff is Associate Professor of English at the State University of New York–Stony Brook. She has been both president of the SUNY Council on Writing and a member of the College Steering Committee of NCTE. Pat is a coauthor (with Betsy Rorschach and Mia Oberlink) of *The Right Handbook*, now in its second edition. She has also coedited (with Marcia Dickson) *Portfolios: Process and Product* and (with Peter Elbow and Sheryl Fontaine) *Nothing Begins With an N: New Investigations of Freewriting*. Pat has a doctorate in medieval literature from New York University and continues to teach and publish in this area, too.

We have written *A Community of Writers* for first-year college students in a one-semester writing course.* We've made our book as practical as we can, with lots of hands-on workshop activities. But we don't hide our interest in theory; our book reflects much recent scholarship in composition. And we push students to become thoughtful about their writing process through regular entries in a writing process diary.

We have structured this third edition of our book into 16 *workshops*, each consisting of a set of activities and a writing assignment designed to illustrate an important feature of the writing process (and designed to occupy one or two weeks). The workshops are arranged in a coherent order that provides plenty of direction for teachers who want to follow our lead. (And we've written an extensive instructor's manual for teachers to consult.) But we've also given teachers great latitude by including far too many workshops for one semester and by making each workshop self-contained—so that teachers can completely rearrange the order to suit their own approaches or priorities.

Here's one possible default sequence for a single-semester (12–14 week) course:

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------|
| 1: An Introduction to the Variety of Writing Processes | 9: The Essay |
| 2: From Private Writing to Public Writing | 10: Persuasion |
| 5: Voice | 11: Argument |
| 6: Drafting and Revising | 12: Research |
| 7: Revision through Purpose and Audience: Writing as Doing Things to People | 16: Autobiography and Portfolio |

For a 10-week course, the sequence might be “edited” as follows:

- | | |
|--|---------------------------------|
| 1: An Introduction to the Variety of Writing Processes | 6: Drafting and Revising |
| 2: From Private Writing to Public Writing | 10: Persuasion |
| 5: Voice | 11: Argument |
| | 16: Autobiography and Portfolio |

* The book is also appropriate for a one- or two-quarter course—and perhaps for a full-year course if supplemented with additional readings. *A Community of Writers* will also be useful for high school seniors or college sophomores or juniors—for we haven't much differentiated our audience in terms of age or skill level. That is, when we work with unskilled or reluctant students, we find they benefit from working on the same interesting, substantive, and sometimes difficult writing tasks we ask of our most skilled students—so long as we explain clearly what we are asking and why we are asking it, and give lots of support. On the other hand, even when we are working with very skilled and experienced students, we give lots of encouragement and take the informal, non-technical stance you see here. The core of our book is a series of writing activities that we have found appropriate whether we're working with young children or college faculty.

For instructors who prefer more emphasis on process:

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1: An Introduction to the Variety of Writing Processes | 10: Persuasion |
| 2: From Private Writing to Public Writing | 11: Argument |
| 3: Collaborative Writing: Dialogue, Loop Writing, and the Collage | 13: Interpretation as Response: Reading as the Creation of Meaning |
| 5: Voice | 16: Autobiography and Portfolio |
| 6: Drafting and Revising | |
| 7: Revision through Purpose and Audience: Writing as Doing Things to People | |

For more emphasis on genre:

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1: An Introduction to the Variety of Writing Processes | 8: Writing in the World: An Interview about Writing |
| 3: Collaborative Writing: Dialogue, Loop Writing, and the Collage | 9: The Essay |
| 6: Drafting and Revising | 10: Persuasion |
| 7: Revision through Purpose and Audience: Writing as Doing Things to People | 11: Argument |
| | 15: Listening, Reading, and Writing in the Disciplines |
| | 16: Autobiography and Portfolio |

For more emphasis on academic writing:

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1: An Introduction to the Variety of Writing Processes | 10: Persuasion |
| 2: From Private Writing to Public Writing | 11: Argument |
| 6: Drafting and Revising | 12: Research |
| 7: Revision through Purpose and Audience: Writing as Doing Things to People | 14: Text Analysis through Examining Figurative Language |
| 9: The Essay | 15: Listening, Reading, and Writing in the Disciplines |

For more emphasis on literature:

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1: An Introduction to the Variety of Writing Processes | 9: The Essay |
| 2: From Private Writing to Public Writing | 11: Argument |
| 4: Getting Experience into Words: Image and Story | 13: Interpretation as Response: Reading as the Creation of Meaning |
| 5: Voice | 14: Text Analysis through Examining Figurative Language |
| 6: Drafting and Revising | |
| 7: Revision through Purpose and Audience: Writing as Doing Things to People | |

In addition to the main workshops, there are 12 *mini-workshops*—short pieces each devoted to a smaller feature of writing or usage and suitable to be assigned as outside reading or used for a single class meeting.

We've made some changes from the second edition, but the basic orienta-

tion and underlying philosophy have not changed. In this revision, we've emphasized research—especially electronic research—drafting, and public forms of writing more than we did in the second edition. These emphases grow out of our own teaching interests which, in turn, grow out of what we continue to learn from other researchers and scholars in the field of composition and rhetoric.

The final section of our textbook, "Sharing and Responding," is an unusual feature we're particularly proud of: a series of graduated activities designed to help students learn to respond usefully to each other's writing. ("Sharing and Responding" is also available separately.) We've met many teachers who say, "Peer feedback doesn't work." We believe it's really a matter of giving students more guidance; that's what this final section of our book aims to do.

We've tried above all to make a book that is *writerly*. Our overriding principle is that we all learn writing best by writing: writing a great deal, in various modes, to various audiences, and with lots of feedback from diverse readers. This book is not a handbook that lays out rules of grammar or guidelines for good usage—nor even principles of good writing. It is a book of writing activities.

Yet in taking this writerly—even idealistic—approach we have been mindful of the constraints of the classroom setting: grading, time cut up artificially into 50-minute blocks and into semesters or quarters, and the sometimes vexed authority relationships that grow out of teaching a course which, at many schools, is the only one absolutely required of all students.

We spent over a year revising the book for this third edition. We and a number of our colleagues tried out drafts of much of the material in our classrooms, and we have been able to include samples of student writing derived from these trials or sent to us by teachers who used the second edition. We do not intend these samples as models of excellence to imitate or illustrations of pitfalls to avoid, but simply as *examples*: a range of what students have written in response to these tasks. We like these pieces, just as we also like the examples of professional writing that we include with them in the readings. We have purposely mingled the student and professional writing together without differentiation in order to emphasize that we don't think there is anything *different in kind* that distinguishes student writing from professional writing.

The hardest part about this revision was deciding what to throw out from the second edition. We knew we wanted to add some new things, but adding meant leaving out some of what was in the second edition. Otherwise the text would be unmanageable. To keep that from happening, we combined some of the workshops. Some things we simply discarded.

We think this edition is a better book than the second edition. The addition of material on research strikes us as particularly significant: We know that research is becoming more and more important in schools as well as in the business and work world and that the nature of research is changing radically, thanks to new technologies. These new technologies make the pool of resources for research bigger than ever, and the risk of losing one's way correspondingly greater; the mini-workshop on Internet research therefore provides exercises to help students learn to *evaluate* the sources available

there in addition to introducing them to the basics of searching and re-searching.

We've expanded our coverage of drafting, as both teachers and students told us we needed to do more in helping writers with this critical stage of the process. We've added a mini-workshop on writing under pressure, to address a major practical concern student writers have. Finally, in "Sharing and Responding," we're excited with the improvements we've made by changing the two sample student essays and getting new samples of student responses to these essays.

But we didn't follow all the feedback we got. Some teachers wanted us to include more on current cultural and political issues and do less with personal writing. We did add some readings on current social issues, but we did not cut back on personal, exploratory writing because we think that such writing helps us connect to subjects—even social, cultural, and political subjects. Some students told us they wanted us to be more directive, to give more clear-cut assignments, and to devote more space to issues of grammar and form. We did tighten up some of the assignments, but we left most of them pretty open-ended because we think that deciding on an exact topic is part of the whole writing process. We think you need to wrestle with it.

There are many in the fields of writing, teaching writing, and rhetoric who think that all writing should occur in subject-area classes, that no classes should be specifically devoted to writing as a subject. We disagree. In our way of seeing it, students need space and time to work directly on writing: to think about how you go about writing; to try out—with some degree of safety—new approaches, new styles, new forms; and to spend time on sharing and responding to writing.

It is a point of principle with us to treat students as writers: people who deserve to be in charge of what they write, who already know a lot about discourse (even if it sometimes doesn't look like it)—and whose greatest need is *readers*. Feeling ourselves speaking to students as other writers, we have tried to speak honestly about our own writing in a series of "Exploring the Writing Process" boxes scattered throughout the book—excerpts from our own process writing diaries. We've also collected apt pieces of students' and professionals' process writing for these boxes.

Although each workshop is self-contained, we encourage linkage between them, particularly because we want to emphasize revision. After all, most writers can wait a few weeks or even months before revising something they care about. Thus we have designed many workshops in such a way that students can fulfill the assignment by revising or transforming a piece they did for an earlier workshop (see especially Workshops 5, 6, and 7).

About "Sharing and Responding"

When Peter Elbow published *Writing Without Teachers* in 1973, peer response groups were little known and the idea of students working by themselves to give feedback to each other's writing tended to be dismissed as "the

blind leading the blind.” Since that time, however, peer response has come to be accepted by most writing teachers and theorists as useful and important to the teaching of writing. Yet even now textbooks don’t give much specific and detailed help to students for engaging in this complex activity. And students sometimes think of peer feedback as merely an idiosyncratic, experimental activity that their particular teacher happens to like.

Countless teachers have learned that it’s no good saying blithely, “OK. Now get into groups and give feedback to each other.” Trying it this way—without preparation and sustained help—has led many teachers to announce, “I tried peer response groups and they just don’t work!”

We’ve written the “Sharing and Responding” section to remedy this problem. Students can give each other remarkably useful and productive feedback on their writing. But most of them need substantive help and instruction. And they usually take the process more seriously and do a better job when they see this help laid out carefully in a published book, not just in teacher hand-outs and oral instructions.

In this section of our text, then, we have gathered together a full and detailed sequence of suggestions for students to use in sharing their writing with each other and giving and receiving useful feedback. We’ve learned that teachers with the widest range of diverse styles and approaches to the teaching of writing often want their students to learn to use peer response.

We found that our first and second editions tempted some teachers, who had been reluctant to do so or had had unfortunate experiences with it, to try peer responding. For there is often something messy and potentially chaotic about using peer groups. One is always trying to shout one last suggestion while students are moving into pairs or groups, and chairs are scraping, and the hubbub of talk is taking over. “*Oh yes, and don’t forget. . .*”—but they don’t hear. And one is always running to the photocopy machine at the last minute to copy directions and suggestions. Of course nothing will ever make peer response groups tidy and quiet (we wouldn’t want to), but these published suggestions are a good way to give students more specific help: explanations, examples, guidelines, and principles for the complex feedback process. In particular, we like being able to ask students to read about a feedback process *for homework* before we practice it in class.

“Sharing and Responding” contains many more techniques than a student or teacher could use all the time. Our principle in writing the book (and in our teaching) is this: Students need to *try out* a wide spectrum of ways to respond to a text in order to end up finally in the best position to *choose*, on any particular occasion, what kind of feedback to ask for or to give. Different kinds of response are suitable for different writers, different kinds of writing, and for different audience situations.

When we use these techniques for peer responding, we sometimes ask students to work in pairs, sometimes in small groups. We sometimes change groups during the course term; often we stick with stable pairs or groups so that students can build up safety by coming to trust each other. We sometimes try for both goals by keeping permanent pairs throughout the school term, yet sometimes shifting the *pairings* of pairs to make new groups of four.

Before sending students into pairs or groups for peer response, we tend to illustrate and practice each response technique in the whole class on one or two sample texts.

Acknowledgments

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*Peter Elbow
Pat Belanoff*

To the Student

Dear Student:

Our goal in this book is to help you write better. This main goal breaks down into several smaller goals: to show you a variety of *ways* to get writing done, to get you to do a variety of *kinds* of writing, and to give you a bit of background theory to help you understand that writing can *produce* ideas and experiences as well as record them. But our main subsidiary goal—in fact, it's almost synonymous with our main goal—is to help you see that writing can be enjoyable as well as useful, fun as well as frustrating.

We enjoyed writing the first edition of this book and revising it for the second and third editions. Our collaboration started when we were both teaching and directing a writing program at the same school (State University of New York at Stony Brook). As we worked together and talked through classroom activities and theories about them, we found ourselves agreeing. In particular, we discovered that both of us wanted some way to make peer feedback and interaction more official and more integral to our classrooms. What was most exciting, though, was our growing recognition that our talk and sharing was leading us to ideas neither of us would have come to alone. When one of us moved to another school (University of Massachusetts at Amherst), our collaboration continued in visits, at conferences, and in hours of e-mail and phone conversations. Both of the revised editions came about that way.

But writing and revising this book was also frustrating and difficult at times. Deadlines to meet. Ideas that just wouldn't come out as good on paper as they seemed in our conversations. Struggling to get our words to sound right to us. Getting fed up with the whole project and how much time it was taking. Proofreading to do. Decisions on readings and on the order of workshops. Little things such as deciding on size of type and where Exploring the Writing Process boxes should go. But it was a pleasure to see the first and second editions finished and printed with all our writing between their covers. We are now looking forward to the same pleasure at soon seeing the third edition.

One thing we have not changed is the title of our textbook: *A Community of Writers: A Workshop Course in Writing*. That title expressed then and continues to express now some of our major thoughts about writing and teaching writing. The key words in it for us are *community*, *workshop*, and *writer*. Here's why:

Community Language is social and socializing. It's possible for us to write just for ourselves and throw it away—in fact, we're going to try to get you to

do that at times in this book. But if you had never had anyone to *talk* to, you would never have developed any language at all, and therefore wouldn't be able to talk or write even to yourself. And the benefits of social language continue throughout our lives. The more we experience the pleasure that comes from communication—listening to others, reading to them, writing to them, talking to them—the better we get at all these skills.

Workshop The only way to learn to write is by writing. Teachers can't teach you directly how to write; they can only create situations in which you learn for yourself from what you're doing. Our book asks for a classroom where students do things under the guidance of a teacher who is a master at writing because he or she has done more of it and thought more about it than students. But your teacher isn't a person who does it in some special, magical way any more than a master carpenter works in a magical way.

Thus the heart of this book is a series of writing situations and assignments. We know that if you can enter into them, you will teach yourself writing. We believe that deep down, most students want to work on their writing, though some of them will resent being made to do so; on many campuses, freshman writing is a required course. If you're resentful, we ask you to put your resentment on the back burner and enter into our assignments. Give us a chance. We think we can help you teach yourself. In truth, the most important piece you'll write in this course may well be the biography of yourself-as-writer which comes at the end of the book. It should contain *what you've learned* and *how you've learned it*. It will be a useful document, particularly if you include advice for yourself for future writing: almost a little individualized textbook.

Writer We assume that all students, including you, will profit from being treated as writers. A writer isn't some peculiar absent-minded genius who goes into a trance and magically produces good writing. A writer is someone who writes a lot and who cares a lot about it. The best writers struggle. You may well already *be* a writer. If not, we can help you become one in this non-magical sense of the word—someone who enjoys writing, cares about writing, and struggles but gets satisfaction from the struggle. Our first step is to start right off *treating* you like a writer.

Here are the things we assume when we treat you like a writer:

- Like all writers, you have lots of words and ideas in you. If it feels as though you don't, that's just a sign that you haven't put down enough words and ideas yet. You may be surprised to discover that the more you put down, the more you'll have left. We'll get you started.
- Like all writers, you own your writing. Only you can know when your words fulfill your intentions. Others—your classmates, friends, teacher, tutors in your school's writing center—can help you see how your words work, but it is you who must decide what suggestions are important and what changes to make (if any).
- Like all writers, you need to share your writing with others. Only by sharing your writing and getting the feeling of what it's like to have an audience by actually reading to one will you begin to know what it means to com-

municate through writing. Part of the problem in schools and colleges is that you often write only for a teacher—writing about topics the teacher knows more about than you do and writing only for a grade. We can't totally eliminate these problems, but we can get you to write for more people than your teacher. After all, writers don't write for just one person. They learn that different people have different reactions to the same piece of writing. That's something you'll discover too from listening to classmates' reactions to your writing. You may even learn that the teacher's comment and grade on the paper is not as valuable in the long run as the reactions of these other readers.

- Like all writers, you're already a sophisticated user of your native language. When you speak, you don't consciously think about words; you think about meaning and the words tend to come out correctly. Unless you are scared, subjects and verbs usually agree, sentence structures work, vocabulary is appropriate. In addition to that, you also react almost intuitively to your social situation—where you are and whom you're talking to. Therefore when you concentrate on your meaning as you write, all these natural language abilities will function in the same way to produce mostly correct language. This natural language ability will also help you make judgments about your writing and the writing of your classmates. You may need to put more trust in these natural abilities.

But it's just as well to acknowledge a difficulty on this score. We say we want you to *own* your writing and to take responsibility for your own choices. But here is a book full of “orders” for you to follow, used in a course where your teacher will also give you “orders.” It's easy to feel like you are just doing “our” writing or “your teacher's” writing.

It might seem as though the definition of a good student is someone who's good at following orders. But that's not quite right. The definition of a good student is someone who can *learn the most*, and what makes you learn the most is the ability to *own* even what you are stuck with. Sometimes in order to learn to own, you need to be able to resist. Thus it might happen that we tell you to do X, and your teacher compounds it by requiring Y in addition, but you realize that you will learn the most if you do Z. If you get a lower mark for it, well, you decide that's worth the price—because it's your learning.

About the Structure of this Book

There are three separate sections: the workshops, the mini-workshops, and “Sharing and Responding.”

Workshops

The workshops make up the main part of the book. They contain the main activities and writing assignments (one major assignment per workshop). We believe that most of the learning will come from these activities and assignments, not from any ideas or information we give. We assume that most

teachers will spend at least a week on each workshop (sometimes longer). There are too many workshops for one semester, so teachers will have to leave some out. Many of the workshops ask you to write something that builds upon what you wrote for an earlier one, but despite these potential sequences, all the workshops can stand on their own. Thus teachers can use the workshops in whatever order suits them. However your teacher arranges the workshops, you'll want to keep all your writing for possible later use.

At the end of most workshops, we have included a section titled "Exploring Theory." In these sections we share some of the thinking we've done that lies behind the workshop. We are wrapped up in these explorations; we think the issues are important. But we have no doubt that the main way you learn is by doing the workshop's activities, not by reading theory. So if you don't feel that these explorations are helping you, skip them (unless your teacher says otherwise).

At the end of every workshop we offer a collection of readings that echo, elaborate, or otherwise comment on that workshop's primary focus. Unless otherwise stated, all readings are student-authored. The large number of such readings and excerpts in our book reflects our belief that they provide the best models for student writers at work. Each of the students whose work is represented in the text actually developed as a writer using the techniques we describe in this book; we hope you'll agree that their results justify our confidence in the techniques.

Mini-Workshops

These short sections can be read or studied on your own or used as the basis of single class sessions. Mini-workshops seldom involve writing assignments.

Sharing and Responding

We've put into one section all the good methods we know for getting feedback from classmates on your writing. You can use these in pairs or in small groups. The ability to give responses to your classmates' writing and to get their responses to your own writing may be the most important thing you learn from this book. You can use it for all writing tasks, in school and out. We talk more about it in a separate introduction to that section. ("Sharing and Responding" is also available as a separate booklet.)

We would like feedback on our book. Sometimes we fear we get too preachy. Sometimes we get carried away with our own ideas. Sometimes we go on about them too long. We want to sound like we're issuing invitations to write rather than orders to write. But we may not always get that tone exactly right. We welcome your feedback about all this as well as about individual workshops and assignments. Maybe someday we'll revise this book again, but our main feeling now is one we're sure you often feel about a writing task: relief at calling it done—at least for now.

*Peter Elbow
Pat Belanoff*

This book has two main messages: Writing is hard. Writing is easy. It's no secret that writing is hard—or at least that writing *well* is hard. But it will help to explore the nature of that difficulty.

Imagine you are having a relaxed, interesting conversation with your best friend. You're in a comfortable room where you both feel right at home. You are both talking away and having a wonderful time. You find you have lots to say because you like talking to this person who likes you and is interested in what you have to say.

Then someone else comes into the room and starts listening to the conversation. A friend. But quickly you feel that something is peculiar because this friend doesn't say anything, doesn't join in, only listens. It makes you feel a little funny, but you keep up the conversation.

Then more people start coming in. Some of them are strangers and they don't say anything either: They just listen.

Then your friend stops talking altogether and asks you to do all the talking yourself.

Then someone pulls out a tape recorder and starts recording what you say.

Finally your friend, even though she won't join in the conversation, starts quizzing you as you are talking and asks:

- “Are you really sure that what you are saying is interesting?”
- “Are you sure that what you are saying is right?”
- “Are you sure you understand what you are saying?”

And she doesn't just ask questions, she gives “helpful suggestions”:

- “Make sure that what you say is well organized.”
- “Think carefully about who is listening. Are you speaking in a way that suits these listeners?”
- “Watch your language; don't make any mistakes in grammar; don't sound dumb.”

This is an allegory of writing. In writing, you must keep on putting out words, but no one answers or responds. You are putting out words for an audience but you don't know how they are reacting. You may know who the intended reader is (probably someone who will *grade* it), but you don't really know who else *might* read it, who any reader might show it to, or who might find it lying around. You are trying to get your thinking right, your organiza-

tion right, and your language right—all at the same time. And there's spelling and punctuation to worry about too.

No wonder writing is hard.

But we have another message: Writing is easy. Writing is easier than talking because it's safer than talking. For you can "say" something on paper and no one has to see it. If you've ever blurted out something wrong to the wrong person and wanted to bite your tongue off as soon as the words came out of your mouth, you know that you can never undo what you've spoken. But in writing you can blurt out anything and see what it looks like on paper and no one need ever see it. You can even keep yourself from ever seeing it again. In short, writing can be safer than talking.

People expect you to make some sort of sense when you talk; otherwise, they'll stop listening or think you're odd. But you don't have to make any sense when you write. You can go on and on forever when you write; you can't do that in speech because people will stop listening after a while no matter how much they like you.

Writing lets you "talk" about any topic at all, even if you don't know anyone who is interested enough to listen. And there are certain things it's hard to talk to anyone about. Writing lets you "talk" to anyone and tell them anything—and you can decide later whether to show it to them.

Admittedly, in describing how easy writing is, we're talking about writing in itself, not about *good* writing. It gets harder when "good" enters the picture or when you're writing for a tough reader, particularly a tough reader who will judge the writing. But even when your goal is to produce good writing for a harsh judge, you can *start out* this way, just writing for yourself. Afterwards it turns out to be much easier to make it good than you might have thought. For one thing, when you do all that easy writing, surprising amounts of it are already pretty good. Those parts that are potentially good but badly written are often easy to fix up once you've got them down in one form or another. What's really hard about writing is unnecessary: trying to get it right the *first time*.

Behind what we've just said is the fact that writing requires two mental abilities that are so different that they usually conflict with each other: the ability to *create* an abundance of words and ideas; and the ability to *criticize* and discard words and ideas. To write well we need to be both generative and cutthroat. We all know the awful feeling of trying to use both "muscles" at once: trying to come up with words and ideas and at the same time seeing how none of them is good enough. We get stuck. But we can get unstuck by separating the mental processes; we can think of more words and ideas if we hold off all criticism (as in brainstorming); and we can be more critical and tough-minded if we have already piled up more material than we need.

In short, even though writing gets most of us into the pickle of trying to use two muscles that get in each other's way, it is writing that creates the ideal ground for using those muscles one at a time.