



How I Write by Natalya

The Elements

There are only three things I consider essential when I write – courage, kindness, and making peace with uncertainty. Actually, even making friends with it.

I need the courage to stand up for what I believe and to say what I have to say, regardless of consequences. I need to be kind to my audience by expressing myself as clearly as I can, so that they are able to follow my ideas with ease. I also have to be kind to myself and not edit as I write. My creativity can only flourish in the atmosphere of kindness and support, so it's crucial to give myself both kindness and support during the creative process. I can always edit my writing later. And finally, I need to cultivate the ability to accept uncertainty because it's at the very core of the writing process; there's just no way around that.

The Process

For me, writing is far from being linear. I love starting from the centre by writing about any point that has fire in it, the point I feel strongly about, and spiraling out to less important ideas. Whatever evokes a passionate response in my gut – positive or negative – is a powerful place to start from, so I capture it first in very simple words, phrases, sentences, or bullet points.

Once I get my main point down on paper, I like freewriting on the topic without any concern for the form yet. This involves freewriting through any questions I ask about the topic, things I'm curious about and would love to learn about from literature, some concerns I might have, or paradoxes and contradictions I anticipate. Then I select a few central concepts from the freewriting piece and start drawing (literally, pen on paper) relationships among them because I find a big part of writing is about identifying and articulating connections. I might end up with a couple of lines or with a complete mind-map for the paper at hand.

When I'm ready to tackle my first draft, I always start by writing down the same seven words, "The purpose of this paper is to ...". Writing this down forces me to look for a precise verb to express my goal. Am I trying to describe something? To convince someone? To compare? Contrast? Redefine? Articulate? Undermine? Establish? Contextualize? This sentence may or may not go into the final draft, but it helps me focus my efforts by determining what it is that I'm trying to do in this piece of writing. And if I'm not clear about my purpose, how can I expect my reader to be?

The Invisible Stage

One of the biggest oversights I've made as a writer is to go directly from reading to writing. I have discovered that an incredibly rich and potent stage is hiding in between. I think of it as invisible as it doesn't make it into the final draft, but being invisible doesn't make it less powerful. On the contrary. This is the stage where I carefully collect my responses to the reading, my first spontaneous gut responses and reactions to the new ideas I've just been exposed to. I ask questions of the text and its author, be it an article, a painting, or a film I'm responding to. This stage is for noticing my thoughts and gut reactions. I write down everything I notice about the text, including the argument, the language and the approach. I notice how I feel and react first and substantiate my thoughts and reactions later by looking for textual evidence. It's a very relaxed and care-free stage that involves no self-criticism or editing.

The Messy Stage

In the beginning, I am usually inspired. Towards the end, I'm feeling the joy of completion, but I find that the middle of the writing process is a messy stage. All you do there is go in circles and get frustrated by the inability to articulate exactly what you want to say. Stay with it. It's necessary. The only things required at this stage are patience and faith. If you know your writing process well, then you probably know that it's the darkest before the dawn. If you are feeling that you cannot stand another minute of this, the breakthrough is just around the corner. Take a short break if you need to, but have faith that you are onto something and work through it.

The Never-Ending Stage

You guessed it. Revisions. For me, there can never be too many revisions. I only stop revising when the deadline makes me. The beauty of this final stage is that now I get to focus on the writing craft itself. After making sure the argument has no holes in it, and the structure works, I focus on finding just the right words to convey precisely what I had in mind, and more importantly, I mercilessly eliminate unnecessary words, sentences, or better yet, unnecessary paragraphs. This way, the writing inevitably becomes more elegant and transparent, so that the reader can be touched by my ideas directly, without any unnecessary language obstructing the way.

Perhaps, the most important part of writing for me is to discover and accept all parts of my own process, the pain and the joy of it, the messiness and the clarity, and trust that I will find my way through it and learn something new about myself along the way.