

WRITING WITH POWER

**Techniques for Mastering
the Writing Process**

Second Edition

Peter Elbow

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Breathing Experience into Words

Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine, or to the bamboo if you want to learn about the bamboo. And in doing so, you must leave your subjective preoccupation with yourself. Otherwise you impose yourself on the object and do not learn. Your poetry issues of its own accord when you and the object have become one. . . .*

“Leave your subjective preoccupation with yourself.” I’ve been talking so much about *self, self, self* in the chapters on voice. What if that’s all wrong: incorrect; immoral. I don’t think it is, but since what I am seeking in this section of the book is a central mystery—life or power or magic in words—there is probably more than one path to it. I pursue now another approach, another line of attack, a different set of terms.

Reading and Really Reading

Writing is hard, mysterious work. Of course. That’s what this book is all about. But if we stop shaking our finger at the writer for a moment and stress instead what a hard and mysterious job the reader has, we will end up learning something important about writing.

To get meaning out of a set of words, a reader must build mean-

* From *Basho. The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Sketches*, Nobuyuki Yuasa, ed. (New York, 1966), p. 33. Quoted by John Balaban in his “South of Pompeii the Helmsman Balked,” *College English*, vol. 39, no. 4, December 1977.

ing in. When you come to a word you don’t know in your reading, you may have to look it up in the dictionary and then try out the different definitions to see which one is intended here. This is much more work than you usually have to do when you read, but it serves to illustrate a basic fact about reading: for everything you read, you must *bring* meanings to the words, not take meanings from them. Meanings are in readers, not in words. When the page says *chat*, English readers bring thoughts of a cozy conversation; French readers bring thoughts about cats. Readers build meanings; words just sit there.

Think what this means for you as a writer. You have these thoughts you want to communicate, but you can’t just give them to readers, you must get readers to construct them. You must walk up to readers and say, “Let’s go for a ride. You pedal, I’ll steer.” You are saying, “Here’s a beautiful sculpture for you,” but it is just a pile of limp balloons intricately arranged on a rack. In order to see the sculpture, readers first must blow them up—and blow them up right, too. They must provide *pneuma*—breath-spirit. “Here’s a lovely painting,” you say, but it’s just lines and numbers and readers must paint in the colors. You don’t even supply the key which tells which color is designated by which number. Readers must bring that knowledge: that’s what it means to know how to read.

You can’t give readers a finished product no matter how much you want to—any more than a playwright can actually send a live play through the mail. She can only send the script—a set of directions for producing a play. The best you can do is make sure you have overhauled the bicycle so that the pedalling isn’t harder than necessary. You can promise not to go up unnecessary hills. You can make sure there aren’t any holes in the balloons or misprints in the paint-by-numbers picture that would make the tree come out purple—unless you want it purple. But no matter how good a job you do of *preparing* the piece of writing, still the reader has to do all the work of pedalling, blowing, or painting-by-numbers.

If that makes reading sound like a lot of work, there’s worse to come. For I’ve only been talking about getting *meaning* out of words. But the real topic here is power in language. That means we must talk about readers getting an *experience* out of words, not just a meaning.

I remember the occasion when I first realized that the reader

has this second layer of work to do if the words are going to have power. I was reading a novel and I came to this sentence:

Now this night the sun had left the sky in a cascade of magenta over pale blue, and the autumn moon nearly full had begun to illuminate the huge dark clouds piling on the horizon.

It stopped me. I had been having some difficulty or resistance since the beginning, but I'd sort of pushed it away from consciousness and kept on reading. With this sentence I suddenly realized that I couldn't *see* that sky—and that there'd been lots I hadn't been seeing all along.

Now perhaps I would have seen the sky without any effort if the writing had been clearer. One gets a bit mixed up about where the moon and sun and clouds are in relation to each other. Or perhaps I would have seen the sky if it hadn't been the creation of a student, for credit, and therefore constituted required reading for me when I felt like doing something else. Or perhaps the image might have jumped into my head if I hadn't been irritated with the student. For I guess I better admit that I was already annoyed with her even before I started reading her words—for reasons that had nothing to do with her writing.

But however ample these explanations might be for my failure to see her sky, they do not in the slightest undermine what I suddenly realized: that no matter how good the writing, no matter how freely I am reading, no matter how well liked the writer, the fact remains that whenever I actually *see* or *experience* something in a set of words, I must consent to do so, and I must in addition supply the imaginative or psychic energy that is required to form that image in my head. (I am talking in this chapter, by the way, about descriptive and narrative writing. I will consider expository writing in the following chapter.)

Whenever in the past I had stopped reading because of this kind of frustration, I had tended to describe it as a case of the writing "not working." For the first time I now realized that beneath most cases of words not working lies an act of refusal by the reader. (There are, I admit, some cases where the reader doesn't refuse and tries as hard as she can and still gets no meaning or experience. But readers usually refuse to try any more long before they've really given their all.)

Of course, I'd many times previously been aware of an *out and*

out refusal: refusal to read altogether, refusal to pedal at all, refusal to keep on reading or go any further. But this was different. I kept on reading that novel. It was, in this case, my paid duty. I kept on understanding what she was saying in virtually every sentence and, to a large extent, recognizing the skill and experience and sophistication she often displayed (for the sentence I quoted above was one of the least skillful of all). And I was able to make judgments about one passage or phrase being stronger than another, and so on and so on. I kept right on and performed what must be called a conscientious job of reading—going on afterwards to make some written comments to the student.

What emerged finally was this distinction which now seems so important to me: I allowed that writer access to my *mind*, but I didn't allow her access to my *experience*. It's as though I were a musician reading the score for a symphony on paper in silence. I was looking at it, seeing what key it was in, seeing what kinds of melodies and harmonies it uses, how it blends winds and brass, seeing where it is loud, dramatic, quiet, and so on—all without hearing any sounds in my head. I was doing a competent job of reading the directions for the production of music, but it would have taken an extra piece of effort, an additional investment of self—however automatic or subliminal that effort might be for a good musician who enjoys what she is reading—actually to *hear* the sounds, to *experience* the music. If I content myself with merely reading I can usually make judgments—"Yes, that is a well-formed melody; yes, that is a clever alternation of strings and brass; no, that is an ungainly harmonic progression"—based on my past experience with music. These may be astute judgments or not, but they are made without hearing the music. Perhaps, then, my comments to this student were sound or perhaps not, but the fact remains that I made them without experiencing her words—only understanding them.

The crucial fact about reading, then, is that the reader is engaged at every moment in making a choice of whether to invest the energy required to *have* the actual experience implied in the words, or merely to *read the directions* for constructing an experience. It may not feel as though I am making that choice or investing that extra effort when I am reading something I find powerful. It feels as though I am just sitting back and letting the writer do it to me—as though she is *giving me* experience. It feels as though I

can just relax and purr and say "Yes, I love it, do it to me again." But that feeling is misleading. Really I had to supply both the consent and the energy. What the writer gave me was the kind of directions that made it seem fun and easy. I guess the reason it doesn't feel like work to construct experiences from good writing is that we never do it unless we want to. They can't make us do something that internal. They can make us read, but they can't make us experience. (Thus, my act of refusal came to my attention in a piece of required reading.)

Another example from required reading. Teachers are always complaining that students don't "follow directions" even though the students did read and understand those directions perfectly well. Or employers require us to read memos or instructions, and we do so, yet we go on to act as though we hadn't read them: following the wrong procedure, breaking equipment, forgetting the essential step. The answer is that we read, but we didn't really read. If we were given a straight-forward test on our understanding of what we had read, we would probably pass the test. We did understand; we can recall. It's just that we didn't have the *experience* it would have taken to make a dent on our unself-conscious behavior.

Even our failure to assemble a toy or appliance according to its "simple instructions" is illuminated by this question of whether we build an experience out of words—whether we hear music as we silently read. It's not usually that we didn't comprehend the directions, but rather that we didn't *remember* to put in that damn bolt or bend that strut over to the left even though at the moment of reading those words we understood them. That piece of advice simply passed through us because there was so utterly little sense of *experiencing, visualizing, hearing* what the words were saying. The writer failed utterly to get us to *participate* in any feeling of what it would be like to put that bolt on or bend that strut over.

Since I've come to notice how the reader must supply both the consent and the energy for any powerful writing, I see more clearly what often really happens when I am not satisfied with a novel or poem or story. Instead of just saying, "Oh, the writing doesn't work," or "I guess I'm not interested enough in that subject"—and those judgments may be correct—now I often notice something else: I don't *trust* the writer enough and I'm damned if I'm going to have the experiences she wants me to have. There are

lots of experiences that I won't let writers persuade me to create for myself till I trust them. No one can make me feel terrified or make me cry unless somehow she wins my trust. Thus, a piece of writing is likely to fail with me if someone tries to put an intensely scary or sad scene right at the beginning. I simply won't row if she steers me toward that waterfall. I won't let her play with my feelings. Yet, often the very experience I refuse to create for myself in the opening page or two is one that I am willing to have later on, after I have become involved—which is the same as saying after I have come to trust the writer.

The kinds of experiences I am willing to have at the start of a piece of writing are milder. I'll let the writer tell me an interesting idea or start a narrative going (as long as it's not too strange). I'm open to hearing the sound of a voice talking or a mind working; to seeing a view of a house or room or landscape. I suspect this is one of the reasons why stories and novels so often start with description: it's not that we need to start with images—plenty of writing succeeds without much description at all—but that description is a good way for the writer to show the texture of her mind so we can build up some trust.

This tells me more about the writer's task. The writer steers, sitting in the stern, facing forward; the reader does all the work, rowing and also facing backwards without even knowing where she is going till she gets there. To change metaphors yet again, as writer you must say to your reader, "Why don't you take off your clothes and let me play with your body." Is it any less of an invasion to play with peoples' minds than to play with their bodies? Yes, perhaps they will *read* what you write—if they have to or if they are curious—but they won't *really* read you, they won't expend the additional energy required to have the experience you are trying to convey unless they trust you.

How, then, do you win a reader's trust or permission? I think that writers win my trust when they are completely focused on the experience they want me to have. I'm not talking about getting me to *believe* them. That is really less important. I'm talking about the ability to get me to experience what they are talking about.

When writers fail to win my trust or consent, it is often because I sense them trying to manipulate me, or at least I feel some of their energy and attention not on the experience, but on what they want to do to me. That's what I feel in the magenta sunset piece.

“Manipulative” is too strong a word, but you can feel some of the writer’s attention taken away from the image itself and given over to the fanciness of her language and the impressive effect it is intended to have.

Here is a milder example:

The sun shone through all the tiny driplets of water clinging to the trees as though each one was a tiny prism and surrounded us with sparks. We were really glad to see the sun after our long wait, and what a beautiful reward it was.

The first sentence wins my trust and makes me at least begin to see the image, but there is a letdown in the second sentence, particularly the last half of it, because the writer stopped being wrapped up in the experience itself and started trying, as it were, to urge me to have it.

Another way writers try to gain our trust is by coming on all sincere and honest—proclaiming by their manner, “Trust me, I’m a nice person, I’ll be straight with you.” With some readers this works, but, in the long run, they wonder, “Why is she *trying* so hard to be honest? What is she hiding or trying to sell?” If someone is trying too hard to be honest, she probably doesn’t trust herself—at some level. One of the qualities that distinguishes people we trust is simply that they really do trust themselves. They trust that what they have to say *is* important and that you will listen. It’s a quality that undamaged children have, and it rivets the attention of a listener. When a writer is too worried about whether you will listen, whether what she is saying is really right or important, this lack of trust takes the form of a fine cloud of fog or static in the air. Sometimes it makes you feel faintly uncomfortable, the way you feel at a party when the person you are talking to is nervous or wonders if she is okay or wishes she could move on to talk to someone else: you *feel* her leakage of attention away from what she is actually saying off into her distracting inner thoughts and feelings. A good talker believes fully in what she is saying and can put *all* her attention into her words, even when the situation is distracting. That second sentence above, “What a beautiful reward it was to see the sun,” is really a piece of insecurity on the writer’s part.

Sometimes, of course, it seems as though a writer *overpowers* us. We don’t happily consent to row while she steers, we have our breath taken away and feel we have no choice. But really the

writer has wrung a genuine consent from us: the same kind of consent we grant when someone tricks us or “commands” us through sheer tone of voice. Sometimes the writer gains unwilling consent by dangling a taboo subject that secretly fascinates, such as sex or torture. (Thus, the power of taboo subjects usually declines after awhile—after we enjoy it enough that it isn’t so taboo—and so we become bored with what used to tingle us. Writers must constantly escalate sensationalism to recapture bored readers.) More often, writers overpower us simply by their *authority*: pervasive confidence in themselves, utter conviction about what they are saying, complete command over their craft. But even though we may *feel* overwhelmed, the truth is that we are really consenting to put ourselves in such powerful hands. Besides, it’s just reading, after all, not real life. We can afford to let someone snatch us completely into her power in books, even if we have learned to resist it in real life.

Some readers are more likely to be overwhelmed than others. Children, for example, may be more prey to this authority than adults, more apt to go along. That is why we tend to be more sympathetic to the idea of shielding children from certain kinds of reading. They seem more “impressionable,” literally, in that they seem more likely to create the impression or experience in themselves. Children seem more apt to have nightmares about something they have read or seen than adults. In a sense, then, they are better readers: they subject themselves more completely to the words.

But as children get older and more sophisticated, they get better at making the kind of *refusal* to experience that most adults are good at. At a certain age—often adolescence—we see a child working overtime to strengthen these refusal muscles. The child takes a delight in deflating all experience from that romantic or scary movie scene: she sees the special artificial lights shining on the faces, imagines the big cameras and dollies moving around, notices the special effects, and sees *through* the mysterious moonlight with clouds scudding across the sky to a broad sunny day of filming with the camera lens stopped down. It may be many years before that adolescent will actually let herself feel deeply thrilled or scared by what’s on the screen. And some people, of course, stay numbed. (I wonder if the taste for sensationalist books and movies might not be a healthy, if misguided, attempt on the part of

numbered people to prove themselves alive enough to breathe experience into words.)

It is this mysterious event, then, this difference between reading and really reading, this breathing of life into words, this construction of an experience out of our own materials by someone else's blueprint, this thing we do that we don't usually notice ourselves doing—not just reading the notes, but hearing the music in our heads: this is what I am trying to explore in this chapter. But however mysterious or unconscious the event is, we can often hear it easily. Most everyone has heard it, especially as a child. When someone is reading out loud to us and breathing experience into the words, we can usually hear their investment. It's especially audible to us when that reader, while reading out loud, suddenly stops hearing the music in what she is reading:

What happened? I was there in the forest. It was happening to me. There was no bed, no crack in the ceiling, no wallpaper stripes, no mommy reading to me. I didn't have to go to bed. Now I'm listening to mommy read me the story. Now I have to go to bed. She still reads with all that expression in her voice, she reads just like she was reading before, but now she's thinking about daddy or about having a fight or about going downstairs to do the dishes. We were there in the forest. Then she stopped trying and we fell back here.

The Writer's Job

I emphasize the complexity of reading because I think that what you must do as writer, if you want power in your words, is equally complex, mysterious, and hard to define. But it's simple to say. My entire advice for this chapter—though I will spell it out more fully and practically at the end—can be boiled down to this: if you want readers to breathe life into your writing so that they get a powerful experience from it, then you must breathe experience into your words as you write. I don't know why it should be the case that if you experience what you are writing about—if you go to the bamboo—it increases the chances of the reader's experiencing the bamboo. But that's the way it seems to work. The more you try out this hypothesis about reading and writing, the more you will see it confirmed.

I can illustrate the process most vividly with a workshop game

where you try to tell images so that others actually see them.* What often happens is that the student describes something, perhaps a maple tree in the middle of the front lawn with flowers growing around the trunk. But it doesn't quite work. It doesn't make me *see* it. I say, "Wait. I can't see it. *You* must not have seen it. Close your eyes and wait till you really see it. Stop looking for words, look for the vision itself. Don't hurry." And we wait a bit while the speaker closes her eyes and tries to see the image clearly, and then she says, "I can see it now, but it's a little bit different now." And she tells her image, but the tree isn't in the middle of the lawn. It's really near the sidewalk. And it doesn't have flowers around it, it has long strands of scraggly grass that the lawnmower didn't get. And as she tells it, it *does* work, we all see it clearly. It's as though her first image was an imperfect or distorted view of the "real" image, the second one. The first time she was trying to see it through a poor telescope so she had to invent some details. When I push, she focuses the lens better and can finally see the image clearly.

Of course there is no reason, theoretically, why the speaker couldn't *see* the original image of the tree in the middle of the lawn with flowers around it. And it's a perfectly good image. That's what characterizes a good writer: the ability to see anything. But this inexperienced writer needed to put all her efforts into having an experience instead of trying to stick with any particular image, and when she did so, she got more experience into her words, but the tree moved near to the sidewalk and the flowers changed to scraggly grass. Probably that first image was "constructed" on the basis of a half-remembered scene while the improved image goes back and taps that memory itself. Or perhaps neither image is an exact memory, but the second one makes more use of memory fragments than the first one did. The first one was too much of an idea or conception, not enough of an experience.

I seem to be saying that if you could actually *go* to the bamboo and stand there looking at it—if you could suddenly be transported back to your old childhood bedroom which you are trying to write about now—your words would automatically have more power. And, of course, they probably would. But I can get closer to the

* Part of an approach called "Story Workshop" developed by John Schultz and his associates. See "The Story Workshop Method: Writing from Start to Finish," *College English*, vol. 39, no. 4, December, 1977.