

THE WRITING PROCESS: POSSIBILITIES

English 125.068

The writing process is often described as a universal, monolithic set of tactics that should be applied to any writing task. It might go something like this: first, select a topic. Then jot down ideas on that topic without pausing to separate the good from the bad. Next, sort those ideas into loose categories. Take those categories, organize them to fit your topic, and select the strongest or most important ideas from them. Use these ideas to construct a rough draft of your paper. Finally, revise and edit that paper until you are satisfied it says what you want it to say.

This system is immensely comforting. It provides a structure that tames anxiety and disciplines the chaotic process of creation. Certainly, the above process does this, but there is a problem: *it is not the writing process. Why? Because there is no writing process.* There are only possibilities.

As a plan for writing goes, the above isn't bad. It just doesn't work for everyone. Faulkner, for instance, had a different process entirely: first, live an interesting and varied life, replete with experiences. Second, find yourself someplace quiet. Third, get lordly drunk. Finally, produce works whose genius is matched by their complexity. This process certainly did fine by Faulkner. As witnesses I call *Light in August* and *As I Lay Dying*. The prosecution rests.

The point here is both that the writing process varies from person to person, and that it varies from genre to genre. Faulkner's process differs both because he is Faulkner and because he is a novelist. Would Faulkner's whiskey throughput be the same if he were writing an essay on Shakespeare?

The best advice I can offer is this: find what works for you and stick to it. Some writers work best by following a strict regimen. They cover pages and pages with lists, associated and free, crumpled and torn. Some writers don't work so visibly. They ponder and mope for days, occasionally accosting their friends with odd remarks, never writing a word until the day when they lock themselves up for hours before emerging with a draft. Both of these types have gone through a process of generating and organizing ideas, each in their own way: the first would likely find it impossible to stay organized without covering page after page with notes, while the second would be so exhausted by writing down every little detail that he or she would have no energy left to create a paper.

Faulkner couldn't work well sober. One writer I know can't get down a word if her house is dirty. Another works only in libraries, and is rendered useless by an open window. I write in gigantic slugs of effort punctuated by long dry spells, and I almost never write a decent line of poetry before the sun sets. Gauge your energy, watch your thought process. Find your fit – the wrong process is as destructive as the right one is helpful. Do whatever gets the words out.