

The Magical Writer

Session 6 - The Alchemy of Editing

Legend tells how Jack Kerouac wrote *On the Road* on an endless spool of paper, spewing forth a masterpiece in one sustained writing binge. What the legend omits is that Kerouac did a good bit of rewriting and editing before the book was printed.

Many of us carry the internalized message that if our writing (or music, or painting...) is really any good, it will flow out perfectly formed. What takes effort must be second rate and uninspired.

But consider the lessons of alchemy. The *prima materia* comes from our vision, and our draft is produced by the heat of this initial inspiration — but we still have many refining transmutations left before we reach gold.

This alchemical purification requires not only diligent and focused effort, but also times of waiting, of letting the draft “percolate” for a while before reworking it.

Magical Support for Editing

One of the more painful aspects of editing is realizing my brilliant first draft is actually flawed — and by extension, my present editing might also fall short of perfection. Talk about a buzzkill!

Magic can cushion the disappointment in several ways:

- Invoke editing allies — ask support from a favorite writer, or perhaps the many unnamed editors (often women and younger writers) who prepared others' words for the press.
- Distancing — before editing, invoke the text and speak to it as another being, not as a piece of your heart. Thank it for existing, and assure it that it is valued even as it is critiqued and rewritten. Ask the text's support in its own rewrite. Call forth its dreams.
- Visioning — take a moment before and after editing to close your eyes and envision the excellent work that you are producing. Breathe into the process of creation.
- Honor yourself. Create a short ritual to thank yourself and the creative spark of the universe for your work. I like drawing a few tarot cards as a gift to myself.

Show, Don't Tell

Imagine teaching someone about magic by having them sit and listen to a description of how it works. Why not just do it? One spell is worth a thousand words.

In editing parlance, the mantra is: “Show, don't tell.” It sounds straightforward, but it's about as simple as peeling onions. There's always another layer, and you can only do so much before you need a break.

“Show, don't tell” is an ideal to pursue, not a goal we reach. If we succeeded in showing everything, we wouldn't have a book, we'd have a guided tour of reality.

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A Writing Intensive
in the Reclaiming Tradition

With George Franklin and Guest Teachers

Want to write a novel, memoir, or other narrative? Want to jump-start your writing, regardless of the style? Let Reclaiming magic help!

We'll look at the craft of writing and the emotional blocks that keep us from reaching our full artistic potential.

We'll meet in sacred space, share writing and support over the web, and gain understanding and skill from working with others. Writing can be an isolating practice • we'll use magic to weave a web of support and encouragement.

With magical tools such as circle-casting, ancestor invocations, trances, and spell-work, we'll free our expressive gifts and strengthen our belief in ourselves as artists.

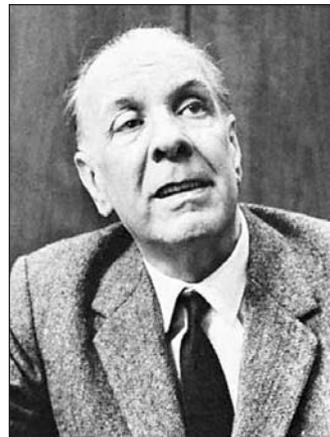
We will also work on writing that expresses our unique voice, creating plot-structures, developing characters, and other aspects of the writers' craft. Each class includes directed writing time.

Class is suitable for those working on writing projects who want a supportive circle and new inspiration, and those looking to begin the process. Although you'll determine your own work-pace, be prepared to dedicate time to your writing, and to write for at least ten minutes each day.

For more information, contact George, <george@directaction.org>

George Franklin is a Reclaiming teacher and co-editor of Reclaiming Quarterly. He has written several novels and published one (visit directaction.org), and helped edit work by writers such as Cynthia Lamb, T. Thorn Coyle, and Starhawk. Magic is a key part of his creative process.

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Magical Writing Ancestor — Jorge Luis Borges. Crafter of literary gems. D. 1986.

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Exercises — Session 6

From Telling to Showing

Mark Twain says, “Don’t tell us that the old lady screamed – bring her onstage and let her scream.”

“Telling” — the narrator stating what happened, versus showing characters in action — is a convenient shorthand. “They argued about it, but didn’t reach agreement.” This is fine for a first draft.

But in the editing process, we have a chance to enliven our writing by depicting this bit of interpersonal conflict.

Here are ways we can edit our writing to make it more vivid:

- Eliminate adverbs. Adverbs are fine in first drafts, but later eliminate as many as possible. Describe body language instead of using an adverb. Show someone being petulant or infantile — don’t tell us.
- Illustrate a point with an anecdote rather than delivering information as the narrator (or having a character give a speech).
- Within the anecdote, show us what happens — don’t simply tell us the story.
- Cut unnecessary explication. Hunter S. Thompson doesn’t identify Las Vegas as Hell. He sticks to his story and lets the analogy emerge on its own.

Contrast an early novelist like Balzac, who appends moralizing summaries to his scenes to make sure we don’t miss his points. It works, but later writers have been more trusting of readers’ abilities to draw their own lessons.

Look through your writing – including nonfiction – and ask what explanations can be cut or altered so the point is made by “showing.”

Magical Editing

Try editing within magical space, invoking allies, etc. Make an offering to your Inner Critic and ask support.

Invoke your text as if it is a distinct being. Ask the draft’s support in its own rewrite.

Visioning — do a trance and envision the amazing work you are producing. Breathe into your process of creation.

Elements of Editing

Here are ideas for more magical editing:

- Set a draft aside for a while. You might enjoy reworking it once the flush of creation has passed.
- Practice editing someone else’s writing. A writers’ group can provide an opportunity for compassionate criticism. The judgment I direct at others’ writing is what I am likely to apply to my own (I think Jesus said that).
- When critiquing your own or others’ writing, use a pleasant-colored pen. Red ink looks like you are shouting. Purple is relaxing.
- Keep your comments easy to read and understand. Include a summary note at the end saying a few things you liked, and a few things to work on.
- Note positives as well as negatives. Smiley faces and exclamation points can balance critical feedback.
- When editing your own drafts, print out a clean copy. Give it wide margins, a crisp font, etc. Make it a pleasure to look at the page. Get away from your desk and enjoy reading the draft – and the opportunity to make it sharper.

Editing Exercises

Edit your Emails

Email editing is a great exercise. Short, clear emails are more likely to get read — and less likely to be misunderstood.

Editing Incipits and Finales

Put double effort into the opening and closing of scenes, essays, poems, etc.

See “Incipits” handout for opening ideas.

At scene endings, Hollywood teaches us to make quick cuts, and not to waste time wrapping up one scene before launching the next.

If you have written scenes for a novel or sections of a nonfiction book, try deleting the final sentences and see what is lost.

Cut whatever deflates the energy: characters winding down their day, wrapping up conversations, saying goodbye, etc.

If you’ve ended a scene with a joke, cut it. Nothing deflates narrative tension faster than a joke.

Cliffhangers

Where possible, end scenes with a cliffhanger: conflictual dialog, a sudden interruption, a door opening unexpectedly, etc – anything that compels the reader to read on.

Cliffhangers work for nonfiction, too. How can a chapter end in such a way that the reader must read the opening of the next chapter? What questions can be raised to intrigue the reader with the next material you are offering? What mysteries can be mined for suspense?