

5. What does Prior mean when he argues that to trace process you have to trace the *structure of participation* in the text? What sorts of participation in creating the text does he include?
6. If you were to trace the network of texts that stand behind a text whose process you're investigating, what kinds of texts would you have to look for? (To help you, you might read or revisit Kevin Roozen's article in Chapter 1 [p. 157].)
7. Summarize the strengths and weaknesses of the several kinds of writer accounts Prior discusses (concurrent, retrospective, naturalistic, process logs, and semi-structured and stimulated-elicitation interviewing). In reading about them, do you find you have a favorite?
8. To record observations of writing, Prior suggests video-recording. What other ways can you think of to observe how you or someone else writes?
9. Prior offers the suggestion of integrating multiple sources of research on process, which is also known as triangulation. A reason for his suggestion is that research that tells you *what* a writer did may not tell you *why* the writer did what she did. Which of the research methods Prior reviews here seem more suited to showing *what* happened to a text, and which seem better suited to explaining *why*?

### Applying and Exploring Ideas

1. Suppose you were given the task of comparing the writing processes of two different writers who were working on the same kind of writing task. Create a short research plan that describes what methods you would use to conduct this analysis and explain your plan.
2. Describe a writing situation in which composition and inscription seem inextricably mixed together. Do you think such mixing happens often?
3. Think of the last big writing project you worked on for school (you can decide what counts as "big") and do an intertextual tracing of it—what were its initiating text(s), source texts, draft series, and other texts it touches? (Again, if you read Roozen in Chapter 1 [p. 157], you already have some ideas for how to start this.)
4. Make a drawing of your writing process on that "last big writing project" from the preceding question. If you can't remember it in enough detail, make a drawing of a writing process a friend describes to you.
5. Suppose you wanted to interview another writer on his or her writing process. Draft a list of questions that would solicit the information you are seeking about how the writer composes texts.
6. While Prior's chapter provides ideas for studying *others'* writing processes, consider the value of using some of the same methods to study your own. What aspects of your process would you benefit from being more aware of or having more control over?

#### Meta Moment

Are you thinking differently now about how writing happens than you were before reading this selection? If so, how? And how can thinking about and consciously studying writing



## Shitty First Drafts

ANNE LAMOTT

- Lamott, Anne. "Shitty First Drafts." *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. New York: Anchor, 1994. 21–27. Print.

### Framing the Reading

Anne Lamott is most people's idea and, perhaps, stereotype of a successful writer. She has published fourteen novels and nonfiction books since 1980, probably the best known of which is the book this excerpt comes from, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. She is known for her self-deprecating humor and openness (much of her writing touches on subjects such as alcoholism, depression, spirituality and faith, and motherhood). This piece is no exception. Characteristically, Lamott's advice in "Shitty First Drafts" draws extensively on her personal experience with writing (it was her sixth book). And you'll probably find it makes its arguments not only reasonably, but entertainingly. Not many writers would disagree with either her overall point or her descriptions in making it. Thus, it's become one of the most widely anthologized pieces of contemporary advice on writing process.

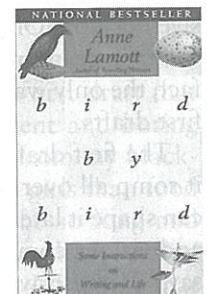
### Getting Ready to Read

Before you read, do at least one of the following activities:

- Think back through your writing experiences and education, and make a list of the times you've been told it's okay to write badly, and who told you.
- What advice would you typically give someone who's having a hard time getting started writing?

As you read, considering the following questions:

- Can you imagine what the shitty first draft of *this piece itself* looked like? Reading the finished prose, can you make any guesses about what the second and third drafts changed from the first?
- How does this piece make you feel about writing?



Now, practically even better news than that of short assignments is the idea of shitty first drafts. All good writers write them. This is how they end up with good second drafts and terrific third drafts. People tend to look at successful writers, writers who are getting their books published and maybe even doing well financially, and think that they sit down at their desks every morning feeling like a million dollars, feeling great about who they are and how much talent they have and what a great story they have to tell; that they take in a few deep breaths, push back their sleeves, roll their necks a few times to get all the cricks out, and dive in, typing fully formed passages as fast as

*I know some very great writers, writers you love who write beautifully and have made a great deal of money, and not one of them sits down routinely feeling wildly enthusiastic and confident.*

a court reporter. But this is just the fantasy of the uninitiated. I know some very great writers, writers you love who write beautifully and have made a great deal of money, and not *one* of them sits down routinely feeling wildly enthusiastic and confident. Not one of them writes elegant first drafts. All right, one of them does, but we do not like her very much. We do not think that she has a rich inner life or that God likes her or can even stand her. (Although when I mentioned this to my priest friend Tom, he said you can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.)

Very few writers really know what they are doing until they've done it. Nor do they go about their business feeling dewy and thrilled. They do not type a few stiff warm-up sentences and then find themselves bounding along like huskies across the snow. One writer I know tells me that he sits down every morning and says to himself nicely, "It's not like you don't have a choice, because you do—you can either type or kill yourself." We all often feel like we are pulling teeth, even those writers whose prose ends up being the most natural and fluid. The right words and sentences just do not come pouring out like ticker tape most of the time. Now, Muriel Spark is said to have felt that she was taking dictation from God every morning—sitting there, one supposes, plugged into a Dictaphone, typing away, humming. But this is a very hostile and aggressive position. One might hope for bad things to rain down on a person like this.

For me and most of the other writers I know, writing is not rapturous. In fact, the only way I can get anything written at all is to write really, really shitty first drafts.

The first draft is the child's draft, where you let it all pour out and then let it romp all over the place, knowing that no one is going to see it and that you can shape it later. You just let this childlike part of you channel whatever voices and visions come through and onto the page. If one of the characters wants to say, "Well, so what, Mr. Poopy Pants?" you let her. No one is going to see it. If the kid wants to get into really sentimental, weepy, emotional territory, you let him. Just get it all down on paper, because there may be something great in

grown-up means. There may be something in the very last line of the very last paragraph on page six that you just love, that is so beautiful or wild that you now know what you're supposed to be writing about, more or less, or in what direction you might go—but there was no way to get to this without first getting through the first five and a half pages.

I used to write food reviews for *California* magazine before it folded. (My writing food reviews had nothing to do with the magazine folding, although every single review did cause a couple of canceled subscriptions. Some readers took umbrage at my comparing mounds of vegetable puree with various ex-presidents' brains.) These reviews always took two days to write. First I'd go to a restaurant several times with a few opinionated, articulate friends in tow. I'd sit there writing down everything anyone said that was at all interesting or funny. Then on the following Monday I'd sit down at my desk with my notes, and try to write the review. Even after I'd been doing this for years, panic would set in. I'd try to write a lead, but instead I'd write a couple of dreadful sentences, xx them out, try again, xx everything out, and then feel despair and worry settle on my chest like an x-ray apron. It's over, I'd think, calmly. I'm not going to be able to get the magic to work this time. I'm ruined. I'm through. I'm toast. Maybe, I'd think, I can get my old job back as a clerk-typist. But probably not. I'd get up and study my teeth in the mirror for a while. Then I'd stop, remember to breathe, make a few phone calls, hit the kitchen and chow down. Eventually I'd go back and sit down at my desk, and sigh for the next ten minutes. Finally I would pick up my one-inch picture frame, stare into it as if for the answer, and every time the answer would come: All I had to do was to write a really shitty first draft of, say, the opening paragraph. And no one was going to see it.

So I'd start writing without reining myself in. It was almost just typing, just making my fingers move. And the writing would be *terrible*. I'd write a lead paragraph that was a whole page, even though the entire review could only be three pages long, and then I'd start writing up descriptions of the food, one dish at a time, bird by bird, and the critics would be sitting on my shoulders, commenting like cartoon characters. They'd be pretending to snore, or rolling their eyes at my overwrought descriptions, no matter how hard I tried to tone those descriptions down, no matter how conscious I was of what a friend said to me gently in my early days of restaurant reviewing. "Annie," she said, "it is just a piece of *chicken*. It is just a bit of *cake*."

But because by then I had been writing for so long, I would eventually let myself trust the process—sort of, more or less. I'd write a first draft that was maybe twice as long as it should be, with a self-indulgent and boring beginning, stupefying descriptions of the meal, lots of quotes from my black-humored friends that made them sound more like the Manson girls than food lovers, and no ending to speak of. The whole thing would be so long and incoherent and hideous that for the rest of the day I'd obsess about getting creamed by a car before I could write a decent second draft. I'd worry that people would read what I'd written and believe that the accident had really been a suicide, that I had panicked because my talent was waning and my

The next day, though, I'd sit down, go through it all with a colored pen, take out everything I possibly could, find a new lead somewhere on the second page, figure out a kinky place to end it, and then write a second draft. It always turned out fine, sometimes even funny and weird and helpful. I'd go over it one more time and mail it in.

Then, a month later, when it was time for another review, the whole process would start again, complete with the fears that people would find my first draft before I could rewrite it.

Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts. You need to start somewhere. Start by getting something—anything—down on paper. A friend of mine says that the first draft is the down draft—you just get it down. The second draft is the up draft—you fix it up. You try to say what you have to say more accurately. And the third draft is the dental draft, where you check every tooth, to see if it's loose or cramped or decayed, or even, God help us, healthy.

What I've learned to do when I sit down to work on a shitty first draft is to quiet the voices in my head. First there's the vinegar-lipped Reader Lady, who says primly, "Well, *that's* not very interesting, is it?" And there's the emaciated German male who writes these Orwellian memos detailing your thought crimes. And there are your parents, agonizing over your lack of loyalty and discretion; and there's William Burroughs, dozing off or shooting up because he finds you as bold and articulate as a houseplant; and so on. And there are also the dogs: let's not forget the dogs, the dogs in their pen who will surely hurtle and snarl their way out if you ever *stop* writing, because writing is, for some of us, the latch that keeps the door of the pen closed, keeps those crazy ravenous dogs contained.

Quieting these voices is at least half the battle I fight daily. But this is better than it used to be. It used to be 87 percent. Left to its own devices, my mind spends much of its time having conversations with people who aren't there. I walk along defending myself to people, or exchanging repartee with them, or rationalizing my behavior, or seducing them with gossip, or pretending I'm on their TV talk show or whatever. I speed or run an aging yellow light or don't come to a full stop, and one nanosecond later am explaining to imaginary cops exactly why I had to do what I did, or insisting that I did not in fact do it.

I happened to mention this to a hypnotist I saw many years ago, and he looked at me very nicely. At first I thought he was feeling around on the floor for the silent alarm button, but then he gave me the following exercise, which I still use to this day.

Close your eyes and get quiet for a minute, until the chatter starts up. Then isolate one of the voices and imagine the person speaking as a mouse. Pick it up by the tail and drop it into a mason jar. Then isolate another voice, pick it up by the tail, drop it in the jar. And so on. Drop in any high-maintenance parental units, drop in any contractors, lawyers, colleagues, children, anyone who is whining in your head. Then put the lid on, and watch all these mouse people clawing at the glass, jabbering away, trying to make you feel like shit because

successful, won't see them more often. Then imagine that there is a volume-control button on the bottle. Turn it all the way up for a minute, and listen to the stream of angry, neglected, guilt-mongering voices. Then turn it all the way down and watch the frantic mice lunge at the glass, trying to get to you. Leave it down, and get back to your shitty first draft.

A writer friend of mine suggests opening the jar and shooting them all in the head. But I think he's a little angry, and I'm sure nothing like this would ever occur to you.

### Questions for Discussion and Journaling

1. Why is it so hard for many people (maybe you) to knowingly put bad writing on paper?
2. What are your own "coping strategies" for getting started on a piece of writing? Do you have particular strategies for making yourself sit down and start writing?
3. What would you say is the funniest line in this piece? Why did it make you laugh?
4. Most readers find that Lamott sounds very down-to-earth and approachable in this piece. What is she doing with language and words themselves to give this impression?
5. Lamott talks, toward the end of this piece, about all the critical voices that play in her mind when she's trying to write. Most, maybe all, writers have something similar. What are yours?

### Applying and Exploring Ideas

1. Lamott obviously knows well what the weaknesses in her SFDs are likely to be. Are you aware yet of any patterns in your first-draft writing—places or ways in which you simply expect that the writing will need work once you actually have words on paper?
2. As you read other "process" pieces in this chapter, what do you find makes Lamott different (from, say, Elbow or Rose or Sommers)? What is she saying (or how is she saying it) that others don't—or what does she not say that others do?
3. The introduction to this chapter uses a "driving with headlights" analogy to say what Lamott says this way: "There may be something on the very last line of page six that you just love . . . but there was no way to get to this without first getting through the first five and a half pages" (para. 4). Make your own metaphor or analogy to explain this phenomenon.

### Meta Moment

Lamott gives you permission to write badly in order to write well. What else would you like permission to do with/in your writing?