HOW WE WRITE
HOW WE WRITE

THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT A BLANK PAGE

EDITED BY
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Fig. 1. Hieronymus Bosch, Ship of Fools (1490-1500)
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This would be better if I had a co-author. Of course it would. This would mean a few things (ideally, and assuming that all went according to plan):

- We’d have had a conversation before starting to write, before outlining, about what the essay should look like, how it should be framed and organized, and what it might accomplish. As is, I’ve just had that conversation bouncing around in my head while trying to fall asleep for the last few nights. I think best in dialog, often only articulating for myself what I want to say when I try to explain it to someone else. Collaborative writing is a sustained conversation.

- Starting (again, this is my ideal scenario) with the first few pages—written by me, or by my imagined co-author—the essay would have a second set of eyes on it. We might use a shared Google Doc, and write simultaneously, watching one another’s words appear as if from the ghost in the machine, but that’s varsity-level collaboration, probably not to be tried the first time out. Here, my first round of feedback will come at the end, when the essay is already as long as need be, already framed and organized and written, and only then sent in to Suzanne Akbari. By then, substantive changes are so very hard. All the connective tissue, all the sinew must be torn apart to make even minor changes. From the start, while building, everything is easy.
– A co-author would necessitate that I fight my own impulses as a writer. This is a good thing for me, and I suspect it is for most writers. More below.

– Finally, and most importantly, I’d be thinking differently from the start, trying to think not only as and for myself, but also trying to think through and about the interests and concerns of my co-author, trying not to merely write “my half” of an essay, but to write a whole, in parts.

Like most academics in the humanities, I was trained in graduate school—really, in all of the schools I attended from kindergarten on through my PhD—to be a solitary writer. I was told to do my own work, to write my own essays, that “unauthorized collaboration” was an academic violation. In college and graduate school, I was never asked or assigned to write with a classmate, and I’m pretty sure, at that point, that I would not have wanted to. I was trained to (figuratively) head up to my lonely garret, where I’d find (in the cinematic retelling, with me played by George Clooney) a manual typewriter and a glass of scotch, and where, in the middle of the night, in furious bursts of energy, I’d hammer out my own (brilliant! genius!) ideas, inscribing and asserting my identity with every clattering keystroke. This Romantic nineteenth-century model of authorship still obtains in the early twenty-first, and I think it is high time to abandon it. There are some movements afoot to press toward more collaboration, including the Material Collective’s encouragement of co-written conference papers and publications. I don’t want to mandate this for everyone, of course, and collaboration is not the right path for every project. However, I’d like to see collaborative work become the guiding assumption and industry standard, rather than an unusual deviation from the solitary norm. In the last decade or so, I’ve been actively seeking out writing partners, and have co-written pieces of varied length (blog post to book) with about a dozen colleagues. Each one is better than what I’d have written on the subject, writing alone. This piece, too, would surely be better with a co-author.

How I Write When Writing Solo

If I am to write a piece without a collaborator, I generally revert to my training. I conceive an idea, read as much as I have time to, outline—at times, in obsessive detail, though working with some co-authors has gotten me to loosen up some in this regard—and then I write. I start at the introduction, write the body, and then add on a conclusion, generally writing in that orderly order. I add all my notes and apparatus as I write. It is all quite dull and unfit for cinematic portrayal. I compose pretty quickly, and generally (more or less) enjoy the process. My writing mantra is “fifteen minutes is enough time to get something written.” (Actually, we just finished an episode of Dr. Who, and while my wife is brushing her teeth, I’ve added a few lines, here. Plenty of time to accomplish something, especially since this essay is only supposed to be 2500–3000 words.) I don’t have a “zone,” never work late, and have never pulled an all-nighter, even in college. For me, writing is generally not a fraught exercise, not filled with angst or anxiety except as regards meeting deadlines, which I firmly believe in doing, every time.

I pace and drive my writing by committing to conference talks and other such speaking gigs. If I have agreed to speak for fifteen or forty-five minutes on a subject, I’d better have the requisite number of pages drafted and in reasonable shape by then. I also obsess over my images for talks, so that means I’ve got to have the thing written enough in advance to spend a few (several) hours polishing up my Keynote or Prezi (though half the time, the screen turns out to be tiny and crooked, or the projector dim, or the lighting in the room too bright for anyone to really appre-
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no idea. Surely, this would be better organized, and better written, if I had a co-author.

What (I Think) I Am Like as a Collaborator

Great! Prompt! Reasonable! Supportive! Patient! Oh, and very needy. I am a needy collaborator. I want to talk a lot. I might email you four times in a given day. Or five (half-joking subject lines read, for example, “Message 6 of 9 Today!”). And I’ll want to hear back from you often. I’ll worry about the deadline, and will really, really want to get our draft in by then, if not a bit before. I’ll want time to write and pass the essay to you, to think while you write and pass it back to me, and so on. It will be my guiding hope that we are doing more than each writing two separate halves and then stitching them together at the end. I want to write a cohesive piece that neither of us could have written on our own, not only because of disciplinary and subject area specialties but also because of personalities and writing voices and individual concerns. I want to be pressed and stretched.

Oh, and if you like, especially if you aren’t an art historian, I’ll offer to deal with the headache of permissions, and with putting together the final image files and whatnot. Of course, if you are an art historian (or other image-y person) and are willing to take half the stack of permissions requests, thank you! It really is the worst part of the writing process. Or I’ll make you a deal: I’ll do the permissions if you will proof the notes. That is even worse.

All of this collaboration is a lot of work. I suspect that I’ve written as many words in emails to my collaborators as in my writings with them. In the humanities, in my experience, hiring committees, tenure and promotion committees, and administrators often see collaborative writing as a lesser activity, and co-written pieces as soft additions to a CV. I once interviewed for a job listed as seeking a medieval art historian with a specialty...
in “interdisciplinary collaboration.” I thought I was perfect for it. In the interview, the chair of the committee asked me what I was working on. I spoke for a few minutes about my then-current collaborative, interdisciplinary book (Inconceivable Beasts: The Wonders of the East in the Beowulf Manuscript, co-authored with my long-term writing partner and dear friend, Susan Kim). The committee looked demonstratively bored, so I paused, and the second I did, the chair pointedly leaped in to ask, “What is your next solo project?” But in the ad you asked…Never mind. Thankfully, my colleagues at Chico are happy with my approach to publishing and other work, so this is no longer a concern, but it was quite apparent in my years on the job market.

There seems to be some sort of assumption that co-writing is easier and faster, is some sort of cheating. I was asked about the same project, in a different job interview, “Which half of the book did you write?” Which half? I wrote the whole bloody thing! As did Susan Kim. That’s what collaboration ideally is, as I see it. I stand by every word in the book, even (especially?) if I can spot, here and there, phrases that are characteristic of Susan’s writing, or ideas characteristic of her thought processes.

Part of signing on for a collaboration—maybe the most important and difficult part—is allowing another person to inhabit my words. I have a pretty strong voice, speaking and writing (shocking admission, I know). Friends have said that when they read my writing, they can’t help but hear me speaking the text in their heads. (Sorry about that, everyone.) It is a great act of trust and recognition to say, “Here are my words, my thoughts, my concerns and preoccupations. Do what you like with them.” I care passionately about the subjects on which I write. Why else do it? I’m tenured, and don’t get any particular reward at my university for publishing, at this point (though I am well-supported and feel appreciated). I write about what I want to write about, on the schedule I choose (though I really need to learn to say yes to fewer projects). The ability to choose my own intellectual life, only
For all of my careful planning and outlining, I often get off-script and down various rabbit holes and country lanes (mixing metaphors with wild abandon), and they are not always good routes to take. Waiting for a reply once I’ve sent a batch off to a co-author gives me time and space to think through my strategies. Why did I write that? Should I have written that? If I am writing solo, I generally just keep on going, and the first feedback I get will likely be at a conference, after I’ve given a piece of what is probably already a larger chapter that has therefore become much harder to edit than it would have been when it was three or five pages. A few paragraphs in, everything is as soft and malleable as wax. It is simple and painless to move, shift, transform, or delete. This is rather less the case when a chapter is written.

Our general working model in the humanities is to write in isolation—several friends actually set up writing retreats or drop offline or engage in other such quarantining practices, and I get it! It is hard to focus when the computer keeps pinging us to say that we have new messages and posts and all that. It is worth it to me, though, for the human contact, for the extended exchange on subjects of mutual interest. These conversations might last for the space of a blog post, or for a decade and counting.

To my collaborators and co-authors, past, present, and future, then, thank you for your great generosity in allowing me to inhabit your words, to dig into your ideas, to borrow your knowledge, and to share in your play with the wonderful objects, texts, and themes that drew us to work together in the first place. Thank you for shooting for grants with me (and sharing the rewards), for traveling and co-speaking and sitting side-by-side in gob-smacked awe of a thing that has managed to survive a thousand years, only to end up, for a day, in our tremulous hands. Thank you for thinking with me, and for replying to all my damned emails. I probably should have gotten one or two or ten of you to write this with me. It would be better if I had.