

## Sharing Our Vulnerabilities as Writers: Writing and Revising Even When You Don't Want To

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Reflect on your own writing instruction for a minute. How often do you open up about the doubt you still have as a writer? The doubt that, if we're honest with ourselves, never completely goes away. If you listen to professional writers long enough, they reveal that they have these same doubts, too. David Sedaris muses in his early journals that his greatest fear once he became a writing teacher was that he'd be found out for the fraud he was (Sedaris, 2017). Winning awards should build confidence, right? But just after being nominated for the National Book Award for *The Thing about Jellyfish*, middle grade author Ali Benjamin confided in me that the nomination actually exacted a pressure that didn't exist in her previous writing. "Now when I write, I feel like it has to be good."

As our students produce writing and, in that process, share themselves, they open themselves up to these same doubts. The moment they pick up a pen and scratch down their thoughts is the moment they become real writers. As real writers ourselves, we are called to share our writing processes with them, including our own vulnerabilities, so they can, in turn, embrace theirs and move their growth forward. Telling students why we write is important, but it's just as valuable to explore why we sometimes avoid it. We're quick to talk to student writers about the value of putting their work out there, but why we sometimes avoid doing so is just as crucial

for them to understand.

As we model successful and effective writing and revision strategies, how often do we share our own doubts as writers, our own fears, our own problems, and our own failures? When we shield students from the darker side of writing, we rob them of a significant part of the actual process, the part that builds the very resilience every writer will need. When we edit out our own writing struggles, we leave out a critical piece: the continual overcoming and becoming that is inherent in the process of writing.

When I first became a middle grade teacher, at the age of twenty-one, I experienced a not-so-subtle crisis of sorts. I wondered about the example I'd be setting. Did my signature need to match the handwriting guide that hung above the chalk tray? Could I no longer use my mixture of print and cursive? As a teacher, I worried I needed to be right all the time and only show my students the purest glowing example of a writer, somehow rising above error, doubt, frustration, and humanness.

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But the truth is, if we're really reaching, experimenting, striving as writers, it's quite often a big mess. Expect the mess. Show the mess. We are called to be our whole selves as writers in front of students, exposing our vulnerabilities to the sanitizing light. I am not suggesting we make the writing workshop all about us, but certainly as part of the other best practices we share—mentor texts,

flexible writing processes, revision strategies—it only makes sense that we'd also uncover how we work through the mess. Go through the mess in front of your students, beside them. And be vulnerable. It's scary, but it's the truth of how we progress through the writing process.

I've built my career around being a writer, and I still struggle with this. Even with my fifth book for teachers, there were times I wanted to give up. Writing this article along with writing my third Zack Delacruz middle grade novel, I faced the dark side of doubt. Criticizing my self-criticism, I asked myself repeatedly, "Shouldn't I be over this crisis of confidence by now?"

Shouldn't the young writers in our classrooms know that all of us have these moments of doubt and fear? We must normalize doubt and fear as part of the creative endeavor by sharing our own struggles and asking others to share theirs. How do we deal with or live with or stifle doubt? What was our most painful rejection, and how did we find resilience after that? What are we really afraid of as writers? As we share our fears about and our triumphs over these dips of confidence, we show students that there are gifts hidden in our doubts because they drive us to re-enter our writing, refine our words, and grow from our wounds.

The slivers of success that effervesce eventually after coming through these experiences can be had by anyone. That's right. Writers keep pushing all the way through and then, at some point, surrender their writing to an audience. It will never be perfect, but it can be the best we can share in that moment. To complete its course, its transaction, writing needs to go out to the world, not stay hidden away. An important part of our work is to encourage young writers to push through their doubts, as vulnerable as it may feel, and remind them that only they can tell their story, explore their thoughts in an essay, and have their particular point of view. Only they can figure out for themselves what they think. Only they can share their truth with a world that needs to hear it (Brown, 2017).

### *Embrace the Adventure of the White Space*

Every time we face the blank screen or page, we rediscover more deeply who we are. And sometimes that feels like a lot of pressure. Sometimes, as they often do in life, doubts keep us on the precipice of moving forward, waiting.

The reasons why are endless—an unsuccessful

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attempt, an instructor's over reliance on correctness, or just plain fear that it won't be good enough. When we take on the journey of writing a piece—an essay, a novel, a poem—an internal journey begins as well, paralleling our own self-transformation. In other words, as our writing transforms, so do we (Alderson, 2011). How many fearful young writers are missing the joy of making something out of

nothing, of discovering what they think, what they know and don't know? These joys only arise in the mess of pushing all the way through to the end. The most painful truth is that some don't know the ecstatic propulsion of ideas that can be unleashed in listing, timed writings, and free-writes. These strategies mine our brains and our insides for substance.

We can't give up before we write.

Pre-writing time is play time, explore time, talk time, list time, keep an open file on your desk time, collecting time, starting and restarting time, coming to structure time.

### *Keep Entering the In-Between*

While putting together a jigsaw puzzle, in the beginning, you identify the bright pieces and edge pieces easily. They start falling into place. But after those pieces, the others are less clear, less vivid, grayer, with no more edges; just the middle. To me that's how writing works; in the beginning, it is often easy. Once I'm in the middle of writing, the doubt monster really rears its head. Deep into revision, deep into cutting and reorganizing for coherence and consistency, I often want to give up.

"This is too much work."

"There's too much to fix."

"Isn't this good enough? No, wait, it's too awful."

When I'm feeling uncomfortable as a writer, I can easily avoid facing the mess. But I've discovered the value of leaning into avoidance for a short time. Take a walk. Talk to another writer. Stop writing for a minute. But always go back. Always return before you want to. And don't lean in too often.

Usually, the best remedy for quieting the doubt is to suit up and show up. So much that is good for me to do is easy to avoid: staying in the discomfort zone, wrapping myself in the safety or fear of the past, standing back, avoiding growth. I first wrote about the idea of motion in my book *10 Things Every Writer Needs to Know* (Stenhouse, 2011). The need to keep moving is important throughout the writing process—at all stages.

As a writer of nonfiction and fiction, I find this still to be the greatest truth that I learned from my early mentors—Betty Sue Flowers, Natalie Goldberg, and Anne Lamott. Jump in. Don't wait. Waiting is painful; moving forward can be too, but it gets us on the other side of it rather than rotting in our own self-doubt.

Sometimes we need to appreciate what it means to overcome the harshest critic most of us face—ourselves—because, in the end, doing so is about so much more than writing. Writing has the power to teach us the importance of connecting, sticking to something, and moving all the way through. Taking those lessons to heart, in turn, teaches us how to live.

## Make Friends with the Fear of Finishing

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It's not going to be perfect.

It's not supposed to be perfect.

Give yourself the gift of finishing, if only so you can move on to the next thing that will be part of your writing trajectory. You will never reach the top of Doubt Mountain. You're always climbing. But you must keep moving, because when you stop writing and revising, you crystallize, freeze in place. And that isn't natural. We are beings who become.

Someone may judge or disagree with our words or word choice. Almost without exception, someone will criticize your work. But others will most assuredly like it. Just look at how many classic books of literature and books you love that also have one-star reviews on Amazon or GoodReads or other sites that allow customer reviews. We need to teach writers that they don't write for approval. When we do, it's fraught with disappointment. We aim to write with clarity, with beauty perhaps, but not for praise. That's a futile pursuit. Share your fears about this with the writers you teach. Be vulnerable, but most importantly put it out there and be willing to take the risk.

## Failure Is Necessary to Grow

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Failure is part of the process. But vulnerable people know this, share their fears with other writers, and continue to face the page by writing, by talking, by reading, and by being vulnerable. There is only one time to start—now!

As you progress through your writing, these doubts will continue to nag. But it will be new things at new

levels. Don't fight the gift. Re-enter for 10 minutes. Reread what you have so far and take a walk. Ask yourself a question and take a nap. Plowing through self-doubt harvests lessons and benefits.

Real writers write. And if you haven't figured it out yet, the real writer is *you*. Write and share; then your students will too.

## Tips for Continuing to Face the Page

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### *Be a Hyper Collector*

Collect inspiration on Pinterest, save it on your phone notes, or jot it in a notebook. Show your kids how you do it. Invite them to share their collection methods. Scraps of paper are okay, but have a place to collect them or take pictures of them with your phone and create a folder. Find a way that works for you to collect and help your students do the same. That's what writers do. This collection and clarification and exploration continues throughout drafting and revising and can often get us unstuck when doubt is bogging us down.

### *Write or Revise in Small Bursts*

When you read Anne Lamott saying that she, as a professional writer, avoids writing and overcomes this by pretending all she has to do is fill a 2-by-3 frame, you don't think she's a nut. You think, *Yes! I need that*. The same is true of your kids; they need to know that writing teachers and professional writers still have doubts, still worry their writing will not be good enough; they have moments in which they feel, "I can't make this better. It's impossible. I should throw it away." But also share with students that these writers don't give in to the critic. Sometimes they do take a walk, step away from the page for a while. But, always, they return to the writing.

Your students can, too. Have them read and revise for just five minutes. Get their thoughts moving. Sometimes it's the five-minute revision that cracks open the whole piece of writing. Teach them to approach writing in bite-sized chunks until they're finished.

### *Print It Out*

Students should be encouraged to write digitally all they want. This is part of their emerging culture. But at some

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point, impart to young writers that if they want their writing to be the best it can be, they have to print it out. Writing is chemically changed when it is printed, frozen on a page rather than floating in a lit screen. Writers will see things on the page that they would've never seen on the screen. Share this truth with writers. Show them—with your own writing or with theirs. They will be more daring and move things with ease, without the fear of losing their work. In your writing community, be bold. Print it out.

### *Keep a Notepad Beside Your Bed*

Explain to writers that their brains relax as they fall asleep: ideas synthesize, clarity solidifies, examples surface, and metaphors arise. Advise them to scratch these pre-sleep ideas down on the notepad. They don't even have to turn on the light. This relaxation phenomenon happens for humans as they transition into wakefulness as well. At these sleep transition times, we

think differently; we're more relaxed, less afraid. I find these jottings to be of great significance. If we don't write down our thoughts, they vanish into the ether.

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## NCTE Promising Researcher Award Competition in Recognition of Bernard O'Donnell

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The 2018 Promising Researcher Award Competition is open to individuals who have completed dissertations, theses, or initial, independent studies after their dissertations **between December 1, 2015, and January 31, 2018**. Studies entered into competition should be related to the teaching of English or the language arts (e.g., language development, literature, composition, teacher education/professional development, linguistics, etc.), and should have employed a recognized research approach (e.g., historical, ethnographic, interpretive, experimental, etc.). In recognition of the fact that the field has changed in recent years, the Standing Committee on Research invites entries from a variety of scholarly perspectives.

Candidates must submit a manuscript based on their research. Manuscripts should be written in a format, style, and length appropriate for submission to a research journal such as *Research in the Teaching of English*, *College Composition and Communication*, *Curriculum Inquiry*, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, or *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*. Manuscripts normally range between 25 and 50 double-spaced pages.

Manuscripts can be sent to NCTE, Promising Researcher Award Competition, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1010, Attention: Linda Walters-Moore, or can be emailed to [researchfoundation@ncte.org](mailto:researchfoundation@ncte.org). Manuscripts **must** be received on or before **March 1, 2018**.

For more complete information on manuscript preparation and submission, please visit <http://www.ncte.org/second/awards/pr>.

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