

El Saadawi, Nawal: "The Essential Nawal El Saadawi"  
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### How to Write and Why

It WAS MY MOTHER, Zaynab, who taught me how to speak, then how to put words on paper or how to write. The first word I uttered was *Mama*, my mother. The first word I put on paper was *Nawal*, my name. When I went to school the teacher asked me to write my name on my notebook. I wrote the word *Nawal*. The teacher said I should write my full name, not just my first name. So I wrote *Nawal Zaynab*. The teacher was angry; he erased my mother's name and ordered me to write my last name, El Saadawi. El Saadawi was a foreign name to me, the name of a grandfather who died before I was born.

I never liked the name El Saadawi; it was like a foreign body attached to me, but I had to write it all the time, on all my papers and books, until I was known as El Saadawi by everybody who knows me. However, deep inside me I never felt it was me or my real name.

From childhood I kept a secret diary on which I wrote my real name: Nawal Zaynab. I felt a strong urge to write. I wanted to erase the false name imposed on me. Writing is a human cultural activity to express the hidden truth, the hidden true self, the hidden language. Speaking and writing are similar and different. Both help self-expression and communication with others, but speaking is more ancient than writing. Speech is a human instinct wired into

our brains by many thousands of years of evolutionary selection. But writing is a recent cultural acquisition. Oral language evolved more than 100,000 years ago. Writing evolved less than 6,000 years ago.

Writing slows us down, makes us think, rethink, contemplate, connect different disconnected ideas. While we write we are not silent. We read silently what we write. An orator moves us more viscerally than our own silent reading. The music of speech is drained out of silent reading. While I write I add my imaginary inflections to the text. Reading silently is a relatively recent invention. Writing is a second language to be learned. It can be a visual language, a sign language.

Most often ideas come to me when I am alone, in complete silence. I hear ideas in my head moving. I love being alone to grasp my inner voice. This tendency has caused me trouble with people around me. My second husband became suspicious if I left our bed to be alone. When he saw me writing he wanted to read what I wrote. I had to hide my writing in a secret place. He thought I was in love with another man. I tried to convince him that I was writing fiction but he could not understand. At last he came to me and said, 'Me or your writing; you have to choose.'

I chose my writing and left him. The pleasure of writing to me is more than sexual pleasure, more than any pleasure. Writing is essential to my life, like breathing. I can live without a husband but I cannot live without writing. By writing I become one with the world and with myself. Writing is a physical and mental activity. Languages end up in the left hemisphere of the brain. In most people the left hemisphere is specialized for rapid sequence recognition, which it does better than the right hemisphere. Both coordinate creative thinking. In music perception the left hemisphere is better than the right hemisphere at recognizing rhythm, whereas the right hemisphere is better at recognizing melody.

Everywhere I go journalists ask me this question: 'How can you write fiction when you are a medical doctor?' Studying medicine helped me to write better fiction. To my mind, facts and fiction are inseparable, like body and mind. Through creative writing we undo the false opposition between emotion and reason, between

the irrational and rational, between the scientific and the literary or fictional. I write fiction to tell the truth. We grasp reality better through the imagination. To write we have to depend on technology, from the Gutenberg Press to the Internet. Creative writing of fiction and nonfiction has allowed us to achieve things our brain cells can hardly comprehend. I write to emerge from the dark to the light of knowledge, from the chaos of the unjust world to a new world of justice, freedom and love. I write to challenge the superpowers on earth and in heaven. Both are living on war, exploitation and deception. Both discriminate between people according to race, gender, class, religion and other traits. I write to change myself and the world for the better.

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