

What's Your Writing Process?

Normally, I avoid doing any type of “writerly” blog posts because for most people, they’re a good substitute for sleeping pills.

But . . . chatting about the human writing process is a little different. Nearly all of us write, whether it’s fiction, poetry, essays, letters, reports for work, etc. And everyone has a different process.

When I chose my major in college, people were shocked when I did not wish to go into teaching creative writing. Seriously. I’ve never taught a creative writing course. I did my master’s degree in composition theory, and I teach essay writing. The reason behind this is that I don’t have the first clue how to teach someone else to write fiction. It’s something that I “do,” but I don’t really understand it. I have a firm grasp of how to teach someone how to write an essay. I also spent years studying what goes on inside our minds as we attempt to write.

When you hear the phrase “writing process,” it can mean several different things. For one, we all have a *personal* writing process—meaning in reference to the way our brains and habits function. There are perfect drafters, binge writers, over-planners . . . procrastinators, etc. The list goes on.

I’m a firm believer that deadlines play into this process.

For example, my husband and writing partner, J.C. suffers from being a perfect drafter. He’ll write a sentence and then stare at it. Something isn’t quite right with that sentence. He’ll change a few words--or maybe the order of the words--and then stare at the sentence again. Sometimes thirty minutes will go by, and he hasn’t moved on to the next sentence. This is a stressful way to write, and these folks tend to start projects early if they are to meet a deadline.

Then there are procrastinators. These writers let the ideas churn and swirl inside their heads. They have been given two to three weeks to write a six-page project, and the ideas are still swirling twenty-four hours before the project is due, but not a word has been written. Ten hours before the project is due, they start drinking coffee like it’s going out of style, and then they sit down and start hammering out words. They do get the project done, but they are often unhappy with it because it really needs to “cool” for a few days before quality revision can take place. But it’s due and needs to be submitted.

Then, there are the over-planners. These writers love to do research and outlining. They will come up with a grand idea that excites them, and they will begin research. They also have two to three weeks for a project, but they spend most of that time doing research, taking notes, and outlining. They are having a fabulous time until they realize the project is due, and they haven’t actually started writing yet.

I'm a "binge writer." I have a friend, another fiction writer named James Van Pelt, who is the complete opposite of me. He's capable of getting up every day and writing three pages of a novel or story and then saving his work, closing the file, and going to work (he's also a teacher).

I am soooooo jealous of him. I can't do that. With fiction, I have to become completely immersed (meaning "lost") in a project. As a result, I only write fiction on breaks between college terms. But within a few days of starting a novel, I do nothing besides write from dawn to dark. This is a little hard J.C. because I'm also the cook in our house, and during those writing binges, we eat a lot of cereal, tuna sandwiches, and pizza.

But a few days into starting a novel, I'm getting up at 4:30 in the morning, making coffee, and pounding on keys. *A Girl of White Winter* is just over 80,000 words, and I wrote it in three and a half weeks. What's more, I don't remember writing it. I read it afterward, and I was very caught up in the story. It's heart wrenching. Hah! But I don't remember writing it.

This is not unusual. I've woken up to emails from students that read, "Barb, I finished the first draft of my essay last night at midnight. It's on why Orca whales should not be kept in captivity. I got caught up in the topic, and I don't remember writing it. But I just read it, and I think it's pretty good. I've attached it here. Will you read it for me early and tell me what you think?"

I'm always glad to read projects early and give feedback, and I really understand what a student means when he or she says, "I don't remember writing this."

But the processes I list above are just several examples. What is your typical process? Think about this. Do you like your process? Or would you prefer to change it?