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2005

WRW FAMILY NEWS

PERMISSION DENIED

by Jason Sitzes



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In a previous draft of this article I had just written the line 'give yourself permission' when someone walked by and said, "You're writing one of those give yourself permission articles, huh?"

Well, I was.

It's daunting to write an article about writing when you wonder how to say something familiar in a new way. Especially when popular writing magazines place five or six varied issues on the shelf at the same time every month: 'Learn Better Dialogue,' 'Dialogue Made Better,' 'How Your Characters Speak,' 'Groundbreaking Research on the Communication Habits of Fictional Characters.'

Dozens of books fill bookstore and library shelves teaching how to approach the craft, how to motive yourself, how to motivate those who don't support you, how to support yourself when others won't motivate you. It's even cliché to write about how much information and instruction is available.

What to do with all this stuff out there for writers?

I've met dozens of successful writers, agents, and instructors. It seems the answer is: read them. Perhaps even devour them. It goes without saying that fiction writers should read fiction, but do we read enough about our craft? Doing so keeps us fresh, even if we digest the instruction and disagree with every letter. The most refined political and social minds are those who can argue the finest points of their adversary and still disagree with them to the core. Writers do the same. Hemingway said there are no masters of this craft. Some write in such a way we read their work in awe, others treat us to a nice afternoon escape, and some remove us from our world for hours on end until we refuse to read the last three pages for fear we'll be released from the spell.

Don't judge those books you haven't read because of their genre or their subject matter. Sure, we scoff when a book "written" by Pamela Anderson hits the shelves and makes scads of money. That's not our problem, though. That's a legacy for an editor and publisher to deal with. The industry would not survive on fluff fiction. But James Joyce, Dickens, Updike, Cather, Welty, and others too numerous to mention change our lives, our worldview, and will exist forever. Commercial and literary novelists alike willingly provide

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their opinions on how to get published. Many have written articles on craft. You may have heard of some of them or you may not. Dig in, anyway. You can't go wrong as long as you judge their contribution against your own convictions.

WRW pulls together writers and instructors from all backgrounds to offer invaluable feedback, inspiration, and support. At our ten day workshop or our smaller retreats you'll find a family behind you regardless of your genre or goals for writing. We limit the number we accept, but we don't limit our potential for diversity. Our co-founder Gary Provost was one of the nation's leading writing instructors. His book 100 Ways To Improve Your Writing still sells briskly. It's in his spirit that we keep building this community. Each staff member has a resume of work, but an

unwritten resume of goals to reach alongside each participant. It should be understood that no book or workshop or degree takes the place of actual writing. There is no better teacher than you putting these varied experiences and bits of knowledge into your own work.

And by the way, do give yourself permission. At WRW last year author Jennifer Crusie challenged us into the 'dark places.' This year Ralph Keyes will challenge us to write about what makes us uncomfortable. To do these things you must give yourself permission. You have to give yourself permission to diet, have triple stuffed pizza, or to covet thy neighbor's wife. I don't apologize for asking that you give yourself permission. If you don't, you'll miss out on answers to your characters' and your own innermost questions.

MESSAGE FROM THE MAJOR

Expand Your Vocabulary

Gary Provost, from 100 Ways To Improve Your Writing

Everybody has heard tips for improving vocabulary. Learn a new word in the morning, use it three times before sunset, and it's yours, etc. There are many books that will help you stretch your vocabulary. The best known one is *Thirty Days to a More Powerful Vocabulary* by Wilfred Funk and Norman Lewis. Read that book or one like it.

But the most important vocabulary for the writer is not the one that will take in uxorious tomorrow and soubrette the next day. It's the one he or she already has. For the writer of average intelligence and education, learning new words is much less important than learning to use easily the words he or she already knows.

Think for a minute. How many synonyms can you come up with for the noun plan? There are program, itinerary, scheme, design, agenda, outline, and blueprint. If you concentrated for a minute, you might have come up with ten words that you already knew. But how many of them would have come easily to mind while you were writing a letter to the boss about your potentially lucrative new... uh... plan?

The only way to make your vocabulary more accessible is to use it. If you want all those short but interesting words waiting at the front of your brain when you need them, you must move them to the front of your brain before you need them.

Stop to think about other word possibilities when you write, and eventually they will come so quickly that you won't have to stop. Pause before you speak. Then insert some of those good but neglected words.

And when you drive home from work at night, pick out an object along the road and see how many synonyms you can think of before you pass it. There's a house over there. But it's also a dwelling, an abode, a building, a bungalow, perhaps, or maybe a cottage. It's a home for somebody, it's headquarters for a family, and it's a shelter and a structure, too.

CHEERS & KUIDOS

CONGRATULATIONS

TO ALL WRW FOLKS WHO FOUND SUCCESS THIS YEAR!



KEITH ABLOW's sixth Clevenger novel, *THE ARCHITECT* will be published in July, 2005 by St. Martin's Press. Ablow has sold rights to his books in Japan, Spain, England, Italy, France, Germany, Great Britain, and the Netherlands. "I tell people it all started with [Gary's] *THE AUDIO NOVEL WORKSHOP*."

CHUCK AVERY's sixth collection of essays, including NPR commentaries, was published December 2004. He was featured in the Muncie (Indiana) Star-Press for this collection, "Lessons from Home . . . Lessons from School."

SUSAN BAKER's nonfiction titles *HEART OF DIVORCE* and *MURDERED JUDGES OF THE 20TH CENTURY* were published in 2004 by Eakin Press. Her mystery novel, *DEATH OF A PRINCE*, will be published by Five Star Mysteries in April.

CHRISTINE GOFF's Berkeley mystery novel, *A NEST IN THE ASHES* sold into the UK, and her fourth book, *DEATH TAKES A GANDER* (December 2004), hit #4 on the Denver Post local paperback bestseller list.

SUSAN GOODWILL has found representation with one of last year's visiting agents, Grace Morgan.

RALPH KEYES (author of *Courage to Write* and WRW 05 guest) released *THE POST-TRUTH ERA: DISHONESTY AND DECEPTION IN CONTEMPORARY LIFE* in October to rave reviews.

TRISH (TJ) MACGREGOR's latest novel, *TOTAL SILENCE*, was published in October and the sequel, *CATEGORY 5*, will arrive in bookstores October 2005 (published by Pinnacle Books).

GREGORY MCDONALD is reviving his character Fletch with a re-release of the title *FLETCH'S MOXIE* (July 2005) and a new Fletch movie slated for late year production with director Kevin Smith.

LINDA MOORE ESPY's nonfiction book, *RELEASE FROM POWERLESSNESS: TAKING CHARGE OF YOUR LIFE*, will be revised and re-released by Kendall Hunt Publishers this spring.

MICHAEL PALMER announces, after twenty-five years and eleven NY Times bestsellers with Bantam Books, that he has moved to St Martin's Press. His latest book, *THE SOCIETY*, was published in August.

LEISSA SHAHRAK's story, *THE JIHAD OF AGHA-YE RAHIMI* was a "New Voice" selection in the Winter 2004 *DEL SOL REVIEW*.

PHILIP SHARP has acquired representation for his mystery novel from UK literary agent Vanessa Holt.

JOHN SHIVERS signed a six-book deal with CRM Books for his inspirational fiction. His first book is titled *HEAR MY CRY*.

JEAN STONE's novels, *OFF SEASON*, *TRUST FUND BABIES*, and *TIDES OF THE HEART* were published by Bantam books. Coming out soon: *ONCE UPON A BRIDE*, and in March: *TWICE UPON A WEDDING*.

JANE TESH signed with Barbara Peters, editor of Poisoned Pen Press for a mystery novel. She and John Shivers have been writing to one another since they met at WRW, 1990.

SHEILA WILLIAMS (WRW 05 guest) third book, *ON THE RIGHT SIDE OF A DREAM*, will be released April 12, 2005.



I decided to give WRW a whirl because I was stuck. Full stop, quicksand, ain't-been-goin'-nowhere-for-a-long-time, stuck. I needed to find out if I was a real writer or (horror of horrors) if I really was one of those annoying people who likes to talk about writing more than they love to write.

They made me a real writer on the very first day of the workshop. In usual WRW fashion, we gathered in a circle, wearing itchy black robes. After passing around the bejeweled chalice filled with sacrificial goat's blood (which I thought tasted very much like cranberry cocktail, but I wasn't going to say anything because I can be as symbolic as the best of them), we blew out the sixty-six candles, bathed ourselves in the white smoke and rolled up our sleeves so that the elders could tattoo us with the mark of a real writer: a question mark above a smiley face. Then the technical classes started right after lunch. It was explained to us, for example, that we should write in the active voice and that we should never start a sentence with the word 'it.' There was also advice on never starting a sentence with the word 'there.'

The classes covered a lot of ground on everything from publishing to writing technicalities. But the real pots of gold were the midnight brainstorming sessions that went something like this: 1:30 AM, I'm wide-awake and I need a break from wrangling with my plotline. So I sneak down to the cafeteria to get a cup of joe from the perpetually full coffee pots. While I'm rummaging through the fridge looking for a snack, another WRW'er comes in, looking wide-eyed and in need of caffeine. We decide to sit and drink our coffee together and talk over our writing challenges. The door opens and another person grabs a cup of tea and joins our conversation. Then another person appears with a pot of peanut butter. Someone digs up a carton of crackers, and another person raids the fridge and brings out the leftover cheesecake from dinner. By now there are eleven people talking, laughing, eating, drinking, discussing the finer points of honesty, justice, language, human nature, techniques for bringing characters to life and whether or not we believe in ghosts.

At nearly 3 AM the group disperses. But outside in the lounge area, two more students sit on rocking chairs, huddled under hand-crocheted afghans and working on a plot graph. I'm not quite ready for bed, so I refill my coffee, grab my own quilt and join the discussion. I go to bed at 4 AM. At 7 AM, I'm sitting in the early bird writing session. These events are repeated every single night.

Even though tornadoes raged in the near-distance, Brood X cicadas buzzed in biblical proportions, and a war raged overseas in an election year, the conversation swirled steadfastly around writing. I have to admit that I didn't even know most people's last names, what they did for a living or where they came from, because quite honestly, the subject never came up. We were so thirsty to talk about writing to other writers that it wasn't until the last day that we learned we had been cohabitating and mingling with an amazing cross-section of people, including lawyers, doctors, psychologists, medical miracles and one (possibly two) suspected psychopaths. But for ten blissful days in the spring of 2004 we were full-time writers. Smart, funny, serious, complex, real writers. And I have the tattoo to prove it.

THOUGHTS FROM A FIRST-TIMER by Gabriella Papic



They made me

a real writer

on the very first day

of the workshop.

Scene from DEATH OF AN IDIOT BOSS

By 2005 GARY PROVOST SCHOLARSHIP recipient,
Janice Croom

A glass wall divided the room with me on one side and Earl on the other. Six guns were lined up on the counter in front of him. Earl picked up the first gun, took aim at a target of a man that hung about fifteen feet away and made a hole in the dead center of the paper target's heart. Within minutes, he'd emptied five of his six guns through that same hole.

When he reached the sixth gun, he sprayed a straight line of bullet holes across the target's neck. With the last shot, the neck snapped off, and the target fluttered to the floor. Earl stuck the gun in the back waistband of his pants.

He walked in the observation room at exactly two o' clock, took his headphones off, then pulled off mine. "Won't need those," he said.

The next shooter took his place behind the firing line. Earl turned his attention from me to him. The shooter was young, blonde, dressed in army fatigues, and a black tee shirt with the sleeves rolled up to show-off his Nazi-swastika tattoo. He assumed the position, squeezed off a rapid succession of shots, and failed to hit the target once. So much for white supremacy.

"He's an embarrassment," Earl said.

The shooter re-loaded and let off another six rounds. My pulse surged with every shot. Sans headphones, my ears rang like a fire alarm. "Is there somewhere quiet we could talk?"

Earl glanced at his watch. "Got twenty minutes now, or we could do this next week."

"No, this will be fine." I was shouting and could barely hear, but we needed to talk today. Next week, I could be in jail.

Earl laid his gun on the table. "What you wanna know?"

My most immediate questions became: Had he put in a new clip, and could I outrun a bullet? I stared at the gun.

"This bothering you?" Earl slid the gun off the table, took aim at the Nazi, and squeezed the trigger. My scream stuck in my throat. The glass didn't break. The Nazi missed again, oblivious to how close he'd come to being a statistic.

Earl grinned and laid the gun on the table. "What you wanna know?"

Maybe now we could get down to business. "'I'm trying to find out who killed Winston."

"Smart money's on you."

"Why do you think I killed him?"

"You know why." Earl spun the gun around and watched it like a ball on a roulette wheel. When it stopped, the barrel pointed to the Nazi who was too busy trying to move the target closer to notice. After a few false starts, he figured out what to do and reeled the target in.

"Guy's a wuss. That close, my granny who's blind in one eye, can't see out the other, could hit it." Earl knocked on the glass. "Be a man."

Earl turned back. "Thing is, it was a chicken shit way to kill him." Earl twirled the gun again. This time the barrel pointed to me.

"Bang," Earl said.

MAKING ROOM FOR THE READER by Lorin Oberweger

In our quirky, highly variable way, writers are colossal overachievers. After all, we're regularly engaged in attempts to set right the injustices of the world, comment pithily on every aspect of the human condition, provide something both entertaining and resonant, and, while we're at it, arrange for our work to live forever.

So, it never surprises me when, in my work as an independent book editor, I come across writers who give just a bit TOO generously on the page. This can take many different forms—from an overabundance of exposition to overblown descriptions so detailed one learns just HOW MANY drops of condensation appear on a water glass to divulging the murderer in the prologue. What it reveals, to me at least, is a lack of confidence on the part of the writer, both in his or her own skills and in the intelligence and insightfulness of the reader.

Consider this excerpt from Hemingway's story, "HILLS LIKE WHITE ELEPHANTS:"

The warm wind blew the bead curtain against the table.

"The beer's nice and cool," the man said.

"It's lovely," the girl said.

"It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig," the man said. "It's not really an operation at all."

The girl looked at the ground the table legs rested on.

"I know you wouldn't mind it, Jig. It's really not anything. It's just to let the air in."

The girl did not say anything.

"I'll go with you and I'll stay with you all the time. They just let the air in and then it's all perfectly natural."

"Then what will we do afterward?"

"We'll be fine afterward. Just like we were before."

This passage occurs only a few sentences into the story. We've been given no real "information" about the man, the woman, their location, or their conflict. And yet these lines of dialogue, when read thoughtfully, reveal much. Even better, they prompt us to ask questions, to fill in the areas left intentionally blank by the author.

It's been said that every novel, no matter its genre, is a mystery at its core. Whether we're writing about what Faulkner called, "the human heart in conflict

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Scene from SPIRIT OF NINE DRAGONS DELTA

by 2004 Robin Hardy Scholarship Recipient,
Brian Roesch

Smells of fish sauce hung in the market stall's hot air. Mai clenched her lifelong girlfriend's hand. With strong shoulders, she yanked Thuy around and raced for the stream, barefoot over hard-packed earth. Bamboo market shops slid by like straw on a river. Wind tumbled her wide-brimmed hat to the back, chin strap tugging her throat.

She glanced around. Beyond the market, soldiers swarmed in light brown uniforms and round, white hats. The French army, yelling strange words.

Mai flew like typhoon wind. The stream bank came fast. Smashing a knee on hard earth, she shoved a shoulder against her boat's front, the painted eye. It slid into water. Thuy splashed in and shoved the front around, toward the stream's middle. Thuy rolled over the rail then Mai dove aboard. She saw Thuy crawling low to the front.

In the back end, a wooden post on each rail held an oar. Facing the direction of travel, Mai grabbed an oar handle in each hand. She pushed. The boat crept forward.

"Stop," a Viet voice yelled.

Mai whirled. Long hair flew over her eyes. "We don't live here." A quick brush of hair. The soldier was far away, running with a rifle.

"Row fast," whispered Thuy.

"They'll shoot."

"Get to deep water. We'll swim underwater."

Her muscled shoulders and arms slammed the oar blades into water. The boat spurted. Up and out, the oar blades swung back, chunked down. She heaved. Water roiled in tight swirls. The boat skimmed fast. The swishing sound burst a primeval jolt in her, and she flung her whole body at the plunging oars. The boat leapt.

A rifle roared like a dragon. Water exploded by the rail.

Thuy yelled, "Hit it again."

Mai's oars smashed water. She hurled her body at the handles. Bam. Bam. Bullets exploded a rail. Wood bits flew, stinging like bees. Hands shaking, she dropped the oars.

Thuy was leaning, crying, splashing water. "Row, our only chance."

"They're too close."

"Then dive. Follow me."

A whiz snapped past Mai's ear. Thuy's hat flew off. Thuy's hand went to her head. It came up bloody. She screamed. Mai screamed. Thuy backed away from the rail and crept toward Mai, like a low cat in tall grass.

Quivering, Mai clung to her. Pulling one oar, she swung the boat around. Soldiers lined the bank.

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with itself" or tensions of a more external variety, what keeps the reader pinned to the story are the questions, large and small. This is as true of literary fiction as it is of more "high-concept" fare. When a writer attempts to put EVERYTHING on the page, he or she runs the risk of crowding the reader out entirely.

Consider, with my profound apologies to Hemingway, the following "revision."

The warm wind blew the bead curtain against the table.

"The beer's nice and cool," the man said. He didn't know why he said such vacuous things. It was just that he was nervous and tired and wanted more than anything to talk to his girlfriend about her pregnancy. But he knew she'd be angry, so he waited.

"It's lovely," the girl said. She was far younger than him, and he knew she had romantic notions about being married, having a baby, but clearly that would be a disaster. Time to plunge in.

"It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig," the man said. "It's not really an operation at all." Neither of them had uttered the word "abortion" and he had no intention of doing so.

The girl looked at the ground the table legs rested on.

He took a deep breath and decided to press the matter. "I know you wouldn't mind it, Jig. It's really not anything. It's just to let the air in." Of course, it was far more than that, and they both knew it, but it was all he could think to say right now.

And so on.

Pretty awful, I know, and obviously overloaded for the purposes of this piece. But if you pay attention when you read both passages, you'll no doubt find that, silly writing aside, the second version is off-putting because it gives too much, "tells" far too much, walks you through every nuance of plot and emotion. It forces you into a passive rather than an active experience, which is the very antithesis of good art.

So, my "assignment" for you, friends, is to create a mystery in EVERYTHING you write. Examine what you have on the page and ask yourself how you can turn answers back into questions...at least for a while. Eventually, you'll want to supply the answers, but not all at once, and perhaps not ALL of them. You want the reader to be satiated but never stuffed full.

Remember to make room for your readers, to trust them, leave a welcome space for their presence, their dreams, thoughts, opinions. Give readers the gift of mysteries and they'll come back time after time for answers.

It's not a new concept, the idea that our books are our babies. As the analogy goes, we give birth to them, endure the blissful agony until a story emerges, complete with, we hope, the equivalent of ten perfect fingers and toes. But once the celebrations and congratulations roll to a halt, we discover that our beautiful creation is hardly finished and requires more of us than we ever thought a human being could muster.

Think about it. In the beginning, when your book is still a dewy pink bundle that does a little grunting and crying and a lot of sleeping, the writing life is pretty appealing. You totally get into it; make your own baby food, use cloth diapers and create motivational flash cards so your child will surpass all the rest.

Then, as the days blur into weeks and months, that story evolves into a demanding, tedious, puzzling monster. The baby has become a child and that child is restless. Nothing is good enough. The urge to break free and explore does battle with fear and frustration and, man-oh-man, are those growing pains excruciating.

In my case, those early years snowballed into a big, fuzzy mess of exhilaration and angst. I wanted to run out on that book more times than I can tell you, but, as a loving parent, it was really never an option. I had to be there at the end of the day to tuck that child into bed and whisper promises for tomorrow. So, I muddled and I researched and I failed and I pressed on. And, finally, a glorious day arrived.

School. My baby went off to school; a little place

called WRW. I got to go too, which offered unexpected pleasures—some of which had nothing to do with writing. And, in the most miraculous turn of events, my story and I started learning how to live together, fully and cooperatively. I learned how to listen to my child and my child learned how to cross the street and ride a bike without my help. It was magic.

The thing about magic, however, is that it doesn't automatically solve every problem. It might erase a difficulty or two, or ease things in general, but a tremendous amount of work remains after magic lights the path. Entire worlds are illuminated: new stories, bigger stories, better stories. Suddenly, a writer is up to her crinkly forehead in plot complications and scene goals. It's a lot to absorb.

Of course, elated first-timer that I was, I didn't understand the scope of my education. I didn't understand that enchantment burns out after a while, once you're back home and the kid is telling a whopper of a lie or tracking sludge through your lemon-freshened house. When the story won't bend the way you remember hearing it should. When your baby looks like a stranger because you haven't had dinner together in days. We lose our way. It's a fact of life.

Which is why I end up back at WRW every year. With the same child. Or a new child. Or both. Sometimes, I'm an optimistic new parent, and other times I've got a cranky three-year-old or a sullen pre-teen in tow. But it all works itself out. With children, it's the showing up that matters.

A BOOK ONLY A MOTHER (OR FATHER!) COULD LOVE

by Brenda Klettke

