

Invitation to the Writer

I just realize that we start out in these very awkward ways,
and we do look a little stupid as we draft, and that's all
right . . . You have to be willing to go into the chaos and
bring back the beauties.

Tess Gallagher

You . . .

You started learning to write—at the latest—as soon as you were born. You learned within hours to recognize an “audience,” and within a few days that expressing yourself would elicit a response. Your basic desires created the fundamental form of story—I want, *I want*, I WANT!—with its end in gratification (comedy) or denial (tragedy). Within a year you had begun to understand the structure of sentences and to learn rules of immense subtlety and complexity, so that for no precisely understood reason you would always say “little red wagon” rather than “red little wagon.” You responded to rhythm and rhyme (*One, two. Buckle my shoe*). You matched images and explained their meanings (*This is a giraffe. Dog is hungry*). You invented metaphors (*My toes are soldiers*). By the time you could speak you were putting together personal essays about what you had done and what had happened to you and forecasting fantasies of your future exploits. By the time you started school, you had (mostly thanks to television) watched more drama than the nobility of the Renaissance and you understood a good deal about how a character is developed, how a joke is structured, how a narrative expectation is met, and how dramatic exposition, recognition, and reversal are achieved. You understood the unspoken rules of specific traditions—that Bugs Bunny may change costume but the Road Runner may not, that the lovers will marry, that the villain must die.

You are, in fact, a literary sophisticate. You have every right to write.

This needs saying emphatically and often, because writing is one of those things—like public speaking, flying, and garden snakes—that often calls up unnecessary panic. Such fear is both normal (a high percentage of people feel it) and irrational (statistically, the chances of disaster are pretty low). It is true that some speakers do humiliate themselves, some planes do crash, some snakes are poisonous. Nevertheless, people do learn to speak, fly, and garden. And people learn to shrug at their dread and write.

. . . and writing . . .

All writing is imaginative. The translation of experience or thought into words is of itself an imaginative process. Although there is certainly such a thing as truth in writing, and we can spot falsity when we encounter it in print, these qualities are hard to define, hard to describe, and do not always depend on factual accuracy or inaccuracy. Often what is *most* original, that is, imaginative, is precisely what “rings true.”

Aristotle said that when you change the form of a thing you change its purpose. For example, the purpose of an algebra class is to teach algebra. But if you take a photo of the class, the purpose of the photo *cannot* be to teach algebra. The picture would probably serve the purpose of commemorating the class and the people in it. On the other hand, if you wrote a short story about that class, its purpose might be (not to teach algebra or to commemorate the class, but) to reveal something about the emotional undertow, the conflict in or between students, the hidden relationships in that apparently staid atmosphere.

It's impossible to tell *the truth*, *the whole truth*, and *nothing but the truth* in words, because words are of a different form than experience, and their choice is determined by the vast array of cultural and personal influences. Writers learn very quickly that a written incident is not necessarily credible because it “really happened,” and that convincing writing is in the writing and not in the facts. When you write about an experience, you put it in a new form and therefore furnish it with a new purpose. Part of the hard work and the pleasure of writing is discovering what that purpose is. You will never exactly “catch” an experience you have lived, but you may both discover and reveal new insights in the recasting of that experience.

All writing is autobiographical as well as invented. Just as it's impossible to write the whole and literal truth about any experience, so it's also impossible to invent without drawing on your own experience, which has furnished your brain. Your view of yourself, the place you live, the people you know, the institutions you live with, your view of nature and God or the gods will inform not only your dreams and daydreams, what you say, wear, think, and do, but also everything you write. What you write will inevitably reveal to a certain extent both what you think the world is like and what you think it *should* be like.