

Writing and Tutorial Center

Loving the Writing Process

Many artists and designers hate writing. It could be because we may have learned writing in school as a collection of restrictive rules and guidelines. It could be because articulating ideas and finding the right words to express them can, admittedly, be challenging. Most human beings, though, have some sort of affectionate relationship with language: we play with words, we revel in our dialects, we take pleasure in wordplay and inspiring sayings, and we are surrounded by language, both spoken and textual, during our waking hours as well as in our dreams.

Given the omnipresence of language in and around us, how can we cultivate or discover a greater love of writing?

The great linguist, social critic, and philosopher Noam Chomsky spoke about “the creative aspect of language use—the distinctive human capacity to construct in our minds an infinite number of thoughts expressed in language and to use them to reveal our thoughts to others in ways that are appropriate to circumstances. And we could add: to bring them to our own consciousness sometimes and our own understanding.” It might be helpful to keep his notion of creativity foremost in your mind when you write.

Since you are an artist, or an architect, or designer, you are familiar with the feeling and process of creativity; the key for you is to recognize that composing sentences and paragraphs is analogous to any other creative act, whether it is making a painting or designing a chair, a building, a game, or a dress. Making and writing involve the same two basic actions: selection and combination. These actions are empowering! You get to choose what the elements are and how they are organized. Also, notice that the power to select and combine involves a kind of adventure. It’s not just about doing what someone tells you to do.

There isn’t any one formula for making or writing things “the right way,” but it is important to be observant of rules and principles that depend on the context, the user, the audience, and the function. That is, your dress needs to stay on the wearer and cover up/reveal the important bits; your building is not generally designed to fall down. Any piece of writing needs to match its intended context. If it’s just for you, you don’t need to follow any rules at all. If it’s for a product description, the writing needs to be clear and persuasive. Academic writing asks for a set of requirements that will vary depending on the discipline, the course, and professor. Make sure you are clear on those requirements before starting a writing project, and also inquire whether there are any rules you might be allowed to break.

It’s also really helpful, when approaching an assignment of any kind, to find your genuine motivation for doing it. If your motivation is just to “fulfill an assignment,” that listlessness and lack of curiosity will be evident in what you make or write.

If you're ever really struggling or find yourself spent, staring at the blinking cursor in your Google Doc at 2am, maybe it's time to take a step back for a bit. Trying to force creativity almost never works as well as when it flows out of you organically—let the sparks of inspiration dictate which projects you tackle first. There's nothing wrong with setting one thing down and picking up a different one that you're more excited about at the moment, you can always go back again afterwards. And who knows, maybe new ideas for that original piece will emerge in the meantime, or working on it later might be less stressful once you've crossed a few other things off your list.

Of course, that also means you should start writing sooner rather than later... Working on a serious time crunch doesn't leave you any time to truly let those ideas cook!

CONCRETE ACTIONS YOU CAN TAKE TO CULTIVATE A LOVE OF WRITING

Find writing tools that give you pleasure to use. If you like composing on your laptop, that's fine, but try out different kinds of pens on different kinds of paper. You may find you love the sensation of a chisel-tip marker pen on narrow-ruled paper (I know I do), or that writing with a white gel pen on black paper is more your groove.

Find or create spaces for your writing, whether that involves a private notebook, social media posts, letters or emails to a friend, or annotations in books (make sure they are your own books).

Find other people who are interested in either a) sharing writing in a group, b) doing a group writing project like a zine or blog, c) corresponding with you on topics of mutual interest. Seek feedback and critiques for your writing just as you would for your art and design work. Don't forget you are always welcome to meet with Writing Center tutor!

When you read something that interests you, make a mental (or actual) note of the qualities of that writing that attracted you. Don't be afraid to copy styles and strategies. You are still learning what kind of writer you are.

I mentioned a private notebook above, but I want to reiterate the brilliance of keeping a reflective journal. They can help you puzzle over your experiences and lead you to greater insights, and they can help you shape your goals, your future, your creative processes, and your convictions. Give it a try!

NOTE

All of these strategies involve some degree of self-discipline; that can't be helped, I'm afraid. Most things that are worth doing involve effort, or even some struggle. You will almost certainly come out the other side a much better writer, though!