

## WARMING UP

The hardest thing to do is budge an object from a dead start, particularly if that object is your brain. Once you're in motion, momentum takes over, but sometimes just grunting out those first sentences takes all your strength.

How do you get going? Turn Off the Self-Criticism. Many people, when they begin to write, stop after the first line. "That isn't what I meant," they say, and fuss with a word or phrase. Meanwhile, a big blank page still waits. The temptation to edit before you write is strong, but you can train yourself to resist it. The rewards will be great if you do. Write now, revise later. They are separate steps in the process.

*Never* outline. Writing outlines at the beginning is like writing postcards home describing the scenery *before* you go on the trip. If you haven't been there yet, how do you know what it's going to be like? There may come a time, after you have written and rewritten, when an outline may help you organize your materials. But first you need some materials to organize.

In the early stages, write everything *fast*, without stopping. Don't worry about coherence yet, or about where to start—just get your thoughts out in whatever crazy pattern they occur. Start anywhere.

That's what professional writers do. Certainly don't worry about mechanics or correctness; you'll make cuts and additions later. This is just stage one. Good writing doesn't spring from people perfect and complete, like Athena from the forehead of Zeus. You'll need to make at least a few drafts to get it in shape. How long that takes varies from writer to writer. You'll get to know your own working schedule, but figure on roughly a few days per essay—at least.

### WHAT DO I HAVE TO SAY?

The answer, of course, is *plenty*. The first step is learning to recognize what you already know and experience every day, and to see it with new eyes. It is not an exaggeration to say that every day you gather material for another college essay.

### THE OBSESSION LIST

A writer needs a broad definition of what constitutes an obsession: anything you remember or that pops into your head for no good reason, that disturbs, elates, provokes, annoys, upsets, inspires, or pulls at you. In only three minutes or so, try to note at least one item in each category below. (I've added a stimulation here and there.) Nothing is too small. If you truly draw a blank in a category, just move on. No one needs to see this—it's just for you. But it's a great source of essays.

- a smell (new playing cards, your aunt's perfume, gasoline, neat's-foot oil)
- a word
- a day of the week
- a daily ritual
- a skill or talent you do *not* possess

- a particular sound
- a recurring dream
- a one-time dream
- something about your name
- a place that is too small, secret, or out-of-the-way to have a name (a hollow tree a quarter-mile off the road near the auction house in town, the patch of basil in your mother's garden)
- a small place that has a name (the French Quarter in New Orleans, the corner of Hollywood and Vine, Straus Park)
- a non-obvious body part (skin, freckles, your uncle's ear hair, your own thumbs)
- something a friend once said
- something you wish you had said but didn't
- something you said but wish you hadn't
- an ongoing or unresolved argument you have with someone in particular about something trivial (length of your hair, sister always burning milk in the saucepan)
- an ongoing or unresolved argument about something important (right and wrong, justice, courage, truth)
- your favorite (or least favorite) swear
- something in the natural world (ginko leaf, sparrow, acorn, quartz)
- a building or part of a building
- a human-made visual: an ad, a painting, graffiti
- an accident
- something you read
- a song; a few words from that song
- an image from the Internet
- a piece of dialogue from a movie
- an animal or something about an animal
- a deficit or weakness in yourself
- someone who scared you when you were young

- a metaphor that sticks with you, whether fresh and lively or clichéd
- a cliché
- something about money (Washington's ponytail on the quarter, the color of the ink on the Euro or the yen)
- something about your hair or the hair of others
- something you can't wait for
- a specific, very small moment (lasting no more than a minute) when you knew what love was
- something about elementary school
- something about food (persimmons, Hunan sauce, jawbreakers)
- a fear, small—spiders, multiple choice tests, gefilte fish
- a fear, medium—heights, low-flying planes, clowns
- a fear, jumbo—the expanding universe
- something you did or saw involving fire
- something very specific and particular about water (the tug of a trout at the end of your line, the stink of Tar Ponds in Cape Breton, being blinded by water when your mother doused your head in the tub when you were six)
- something you misunderstood or mispronounced for a long time
- a movie, or some moment in a movie
- a time you had a hand in killing or saving something

### THE NOTEBOOK

Use your obsession list to start a notebook of ideas and observations, pieces of conversation and events, and write something in it every day. (OK, twice a week.) It's just a document you can quickly open on a computer—you can even keep it on a cell phone. Keep to a minimum the diary diarrhea: "Saw *her* today. She does not know I exist. She's still going out with that dope," etc. Instead, an essay writer's notebook is a quarry filled with more substantial nuggets that find their way into polished pieces later:

Everything a big bore today. Sat in back row in French. Mr. J's voice like faraway buzzing of bees. Feels good to be almost asleep in class, like a velvet curtain about to come down. Danger, though.

\* \* \*

Went to a Mostly Mozart concert last night. Music the usual tinkling. Tiptoe stuff. Good exposure to culture, Mom says. I read somewhere a lot of people die of exposure each year, and I hope I'm not one of them. Slumped over my seat when the lights are turned up. But the hour before the concert is great, sitting on the fountain outside, the sun already gone but still light out. It's cool, and everybody's out, nobody pushing or shoving, just drifting. No rush. Everybody looks lighter.

\* \* \*

Someone sent me a chain letter! Fantastic. I don't quite get it, though—something about a South American priest who started it, and it's full of examples of what happens if you don't send it out to twenty friends. Some guy made a million dollars and then lost it the next day and jumped off a building, great stories like that. I wish I had it here. If I send it out I'll be rich soon, it said. Who thinks these things up?

A notebook is a gathering of acorns against an uninspired winter. You may want to show some parts of your notebook to your readers; the material in it can eventually form the backbone of your college essay. It is especially useful as a warm-up before you begin to write something else, but when you get in the habit you'll find yourself making notes at all hours, scribbling away on napkins, bits of newspaper, and other scraps; your muse may not wait for you to sit down at your desk with your Cross pen, but may attack on the bus on the way home, with only an ice cream wrapper handy. An oft-repeated story about Kurt Vonnegut, the novelist, has him beginning his day at work by describing in detail something he

saw or experienced that morning, even if only what he had for breakfast, the colors and tastes of something observed; like an appetizer, it gets the juices going.

Your notebook can be a good sounding board for the different voices you want to experiment with. Try imitating other writers. Write as if you were indeed writing to *her* (or *him*). What would you say? (No schmaltz.) Write down all your dreams. Write a full news story of your first memory. If you need more detail for such a story, do what a reporter would do—interview the other witnesses, like your parents, to flesh out the incident. Tell the whole story of your first school day or your first-grade year. Write dialogue: (a) conversations you had or (b) conversations you overheard. Describe your best friend to your worst enemy.

This is your substitute for outlining. Writing is traveling through uncharted territory—your mind. You are the first traveler, and your essays are the world's first maps. So you can't know in advance where you're going. That doesn't mean you don't have a *direction*. But sometimes the direction is marked only by a few big landmarks you can see from where you stand, and taken down in a shorthand like this:

1st dance cl. downtown—HUGE studio, big pipes in the ceiling. My pink warmers, ratty jazz shoes, torn sweatshirt OK. Everybody staring, checking out, is she real? Instr.—dark complexion, high cheekbones—goddess in plastic pants.

There's a difference between note-taking and indiscriminate scribbling. Make sure, in your note-taking, that you fill in enough of the sights and sounds and ideas to allow you to recapture your thoughts and see the images when you reread the entry, maybe long afterward. Whenever you can, make sentences.

To find good material for a college essay in your daily life, learn to notice the sometimes small surprises that interrupt the dull procession of

yesterdays that threaten to consume all our lives. But fiction sometimes pales in comparison to what's true. "If men would steadily observe realities only," wrote Henry David Thoreau, "and not allow themselves to be deluded, life, to compare it with such things as we know, would be like a fairy tale and the Arabian Nights' Entertainments." Sometimes to write, all you have to do is open your eyes.

## STRANGER THAN FICTION

Use your notebook to teach yourself to see. A diary is the record of routine, but the notebook of an essay writer is filled with truths that are Stranger than Fiction. These are the intersections where the remarkable and the ordinary cross paths for a moment. For instance, at the school where I taught we had a guitar teacher named Strum, a swimming coach named Kramp, and an English teacher named Reid. Not to mention a bald teacher named Bauld. All perfect notebook fodder.

Here are some Stranger than Fiction entries from different notebooks:

There's a guy every week who plays an upright piano under the arch in Washington Square Park. It has bright green keys and all the guts of it are exposed. When he finishes, he rolls it away over the cement.

\* \* \*

I saw a horse galloping down the middle of the road, without saddle or rider and with reins hanging from his chin. He turned a corner and came head to head with an oncoming car and both braked to a stop, the horse and car both skidding. Driver and horse stopped, looked at each other, and the horse took off in the direction it came, as fast as before.

\* \* \*

Today a pickup truck drove up Broadway carrying a huge black sleigh in the back.

Stranger than Fiction is one of the key elements in good essay writing, and the person who goes out with his eyes open for something unusual is likely to find it—again and again. Writing that satisfies keeps coming up with little surprises. But beware the fake surprise, like the observation of a Massachusetts girl that “one minute it was clear and blue, when suddenly the sky was growling and dark with rain clouds.” That’s not especially surprising in New England, where the weather can change minute by minute. Though “growling” is a nice touch, the surprise and drama of the moment that the writer wants to convey are false. The most common form of false surprise withholds information unnecessarily: “Mr. Pettifogge was walking down Columbus Avenue minding his own business when It Happened.” That’s just cheating a reader. Far better and more honest a surprise to write, “When Mr. Pettifogge was walking down Columbus Avenue minding his own business, a bread truck whipped around the corner and deposited a loaf of pumpernickel at his feet.”

## RAMBLING AND RANTING

Here’s another good warm-up:

### Rambling

In ten minutes, write 250 words about everything you’re thinking. Keep your reader—friend, brother, teacher—in mind, and write fast, without stopping, and don’t worry about shifting topics or ideas. Roam that inner landscape. If you get stuck, look around and write about what you see (sitting near a window is sometimes helpful—the outer landscape), or simply repeat your last line until something new comes to you. If it’s good, show it to your reader. If it’s disconnected, or boring, or bad, don’t

worry. This is batting practice. You’re just trying to make contact, not hit home runs.

We went to Boston (family) to see the bar mitzvah of a friend of ours. It was pretty interesting—first one I’ve ever been to. No chopped liver sculptures or anything. I sort of missed the eighth grade rush at school, arriving a wee bit late. We saw the Renoir exhibit in Boston. Lots of lovely long-haired ladies and blue-eyed children. He’s amazing with faces—he paints people I could stare at for hours. But when he sits a girl on a chair, it looks like she’s floating a millionth of an inch above it. He just can’t seem to get people to sit right in their armchairs. I’ve never seen so many people in a museum. In class today we talked about an essay I hadn’t read. Actually, I read the wrong one. We were talking about hedgehogs and foxes and I read about Tolstoy and the Enlightenment.

It’s rambling and fragmented, but there’s an honest voice here and sharp details. It’s alive. Any of the topics would be worth expanding later and could find their way into a college essay—the first bar mitzvah, reading the wrong essay, museums.

### Rambling 2

Try pointing ten minutes of writing toward one topic. If detours appear in your path, follow them, but try to stay generally on course. Write as fast as you can and *don’t stop*. Here’s a senior remembering an eighth-grade teacher:

Mr. Thompson carried a light tan leather briefcase with a slightly battered flap and he’d shuffle around in it until he got his papers organized, then he would snap shut the top and we’d see a pile of old yellow faded papers that looked as though they were from around

the period that he was discussing. Then his wrist-breaking lectures began. It's strange the way Mr. Thompson used and handled chalk. He always carried a bunch of colors to draw Greek battle plans with, and each one had a shiny chalk holder because he said he didn't want the chalk to dry out his fingers or make them purple or green. When Mr. Thompson was missing a holder he would never switch them because it would waste too much time. Instead he held the bare chalk with the tips of his fingers, with his pinky raised in the air. It looked like he was waiting for a bird to perch on it.

Here are good details—"wrist-breaking lectures"—and surprising and funny comparisons. Naturally, it's rough. For example, "strange" is a vague word, "make" is weak, "chalk" is overused, and "each one" could refer to battle plans or colors. A few sentences run on. But it's still a lively notebook piece.

You can tell a story in your free writing:

Buses were late this afternoon again. Our bus didn't show at 5:40. 6:00 still nothing. 6:30 Mr. Johnson comes out, tells us well, you see, the buses got stuck, another hour or two, etc. etc. Meanwhile it's Faculty-Trustee dinner night. So Gill and I saunter over and find Coach and Clayton. Mrs. Morris brought us some stuffed mushrooms. Mr. Glasser said, "Hey, no problem, join the party! Here, have something to drink." My respect for him rose rapidly. 7:34 the bus finally arrives. 7:53 around 180th Street, a guy starts running after us shouting, "Yo, yo, you're on fire, yo, you're on fire!!" Lance decides this a good enough reason to run around the bus screaming at the top of his fat little lungs. Bus driver stops, gets everyone off the bus, tries to see where the fire is. Decides he better call the company, but lo and behold, buses have no two-way radios. So he jumps on the bus and drives away, presumably to the nearest telephone, leaving forty of us

standing in a rather conspicuous group on the corner. Gill and I say Bleep this, take a few 9th graders with us and bum a ride on the city bus. Got home at 8:45. Mom was throwing fits.

Remember, this is just the raw material. But even in dull pieces, one or two lines will be vivid or memorable. Keep track of them with checks in the margins or by bracketing or underlining, and soon a higher percentage of good sections will begin to appear. You'll find yourself salvaging chunks of your ramblings and notebook entries for the foundation of your college essay.

### Free Association

This is more fun with a partner or a group. You both pick the same ordinary object—a dish, a book, a saw, an egg—and really look at it and think about it. Write the word at the top of a page. Then, in one minute, make a list of words and phrases the object brings to mind. Make the list as long as you can in one minute; don't leave anything out. Exchange lists. Did you have any of the same associations? Although you're bound to have some overlap, you'll also have wild differences. Each of us has a personal vocabulary of associations with even the most common things in our lives—a vocabulary that a writer frequently returns to for material.

Take one association or a series of them that seem connected, and write fast for fifteen minutes about the object. You might want to praise it, or attack it, or defend it from people who don't like it, or bring up something new about it that no one ever notices, or tell a story about it. Remember to write for your partner's entertainment.

That's a simple way to collect material to build an essay on—exploring what you already know. Try it with something that means a lot to you, like a bicycle or a favorite hat. You might remember how you got the hat, other hats you've had, why you like hats in general, why you like this hat in particular, what the point is of wearing a hat at all.

## Grousing

Read John Updike's "Beer Can" on page 149. In fifteen minutes, write about something that has changed for the worse during your life. Describe the way it used to be and compare it to the present. If you want, begin with "Consider the——." In a different piece, write about something that has changed for the better.

## Boring for Fun

Write fast for ten minutes about the dullest thing you do in the course of a day. Be as detailed as possible. A piece about boredom must be especially lively—don't try to show boredom by creating it. Make a reader feel, for instance, the exquisite torture of sitting through Mr. Snoozleman's lectures on the Punic Wars.

## Ranting

Write from anger for ten minutes. Work on one topic or jump around—just keep writing and stay angry.

Your college essay may be buried somewhere in one of these suggestions, waiting to be unearthed. Time to get shoveling.

## A FEW WORDS ON WRITER'S BLOCK

This mythic monster, which supposedly devours so much great work before it gets started, is not so ferocious as it is painted. I was tempted to say it doesn't exist at all, but then, in trying to show exactly how it doesn't exist, I got all tangled up and couldn't write a word.

But I'm still a writer's block agnostic; I doubt the existence of the old monster, which was always portrayed as kin to stage fright. I want to change the terms of the discussion. To begin to work, a writer needs to

feel the freedom to write badly. Writer's block is nothing more than the loss of this freedom. Somehow, it vanishes. What happens is this: first you start picking over whether to use "but" or "however," when you should be chasing your thoughts across the landscape of your mind; then, very soon—too soon—after you've begun, instead of plunging forward you are crossing out everything you've written that day. Suddenly every sentence you think of is so full of obvious faults that you can't bear even to write one down. The blank page stares at you stupidly, infuriatingly, a reproachful mirror of your own blank mind.

But good writing not only does spring from bad, it must. *Keep going forward*. You can always cross things out later. "I have rewritten—often several times—every word I have ever published," said Vladimir Nabokov, the great novelist. "My pencils outlast their erasers." Writers know they write badly at first. But because we rarely see what's in their wastebaskets, we sometimes forget how badly. Ernest Hemingway said he rewrote the end of *A Farewell to Arms* thirty-nine times.

I'll say it again: first write, no matter how badly; rewrite and edit later. If you feel stuck, use the Rambling device of repeating your last sentence. If that doesn't work, take a ten-minute break: eat an apple, take a shower, play pinball, do squat thrusts. Then come back to it.

Don't expect your first draft to be a masterpiece. In the next chapters you'll see how writing comes alive gradually in the rewriting.