What is Writing Practice (and How do I Do It)?

by Barbara Baig

Two musicians are walking down the street on the West Side of New York City. A little old lady approaches and asks them politely, “Could you gentlemen tell me how to get to Carnegie Hall?” The musicians look at each other and exchange knowing grins. Then one of them turns to her and says, “Practice! Practice!”

Everyone knows that aspiring musicians need to practice. They practice to learn their skills; they practice to keep those skills sharp. Vladimir Horowitz, the world-famous pianist, said, “I practice every day. If I don’t practice for one day, I know it. If I don’t practice for two days, the critics know it. If I don’t practice for three days, the audience knows it.”

Anyone who follows professional sports knows that athletes don’t just go out and play games; they practice for hours every day. Larry Bird, who became a star basketball player for the Boston Celtics, started out on his career in high school by going to the gym at 6 A.M. every day to practice; among other things, he took five hundred free throws a day. We all take for granted that a kid who wants to hit home runs like David Ortiz in his prime has to devote years to hitting practice, or that one who wants to play guitar like Eric Clapton has to put in a lot of hours with her instrument before she can play cosmic blues riffs.

But writers? Surely they don’t need to practice. After all, aren’t all good writers simply born with their talent?

Yes, some people are born with an aptitude for writing, just as some are born with an aptitude for playing the piano or hitting a fastball. But even people who have a talent for some activity must develop that talent. And when it comes to writing, many people who believe (or have been told) they can’t write are, in fact, perfectly capable of learning how.

This idea that only certain special people can write is one of the great myths about writing. If you have been paralyzed by that myth, I urge you to abandon it right now. Writing, like sports or music, is something just about anyone can learn how to do. The most important word in that last sentence is the word learn. If you are willing to put some time and energy into the work of learning to write, you can most definitely become a better writer.

And the key to this learning is the activity of practice.
WHY YOU’VE NEVER PRACTICED WRITING

Everyone accepts that athletes and musicians learn their skills and keep them honed through practice. Anyone who suggested that the Red Sox, for instance, should just go play games without ever practicing would be laughed at. The same goes for a musician who decided to rent Carnegie Hall to give a piano recital without ever practicing the pieces she planned to play. We accept that if someone is going to undertake a public performance—on an athletic field, or in a concert—she has to build her skills and prepare herself through practice.

A finished piece of writing, one that other people are going to read, is just as much a performance as a baseball game or a recital. You, like most adults in this culture, have turned out hundreds of such pieces, in school or at work. How much practice time were you given to develop your skills before you had to perform on the page?

Chances are very good that your answer is: “little or none.”

That’s because most of us who are now adults learned how to write in school, and that means our writing was done under performance conditions—it always counted. Every essay, every book report, every poem or story was graded, if not by itself, then as part of a portfolio of work. If you had a typical American education, you were expected to produce finished pieces of writing without ever having had an opportunity to do any practice writing.

Even if your writing education has taken place in creative writing workshops, you may also be a victim of the “performance” approach, for most workshops and creative writing classes are also performance-oriented. Here the performance demands are different from those students face in academic classes: The goal is not grades but publication. Participants in these workshops critique each other’s writing based on the (often unspoken) assumption that every piece must be—or become—of publishable quality, or it’s a failure.

There are serious consequences to this approach to writing instruction. First, as a result of this approach, many adults assume that writing is different from sports or music: Somehow we should be able to just do it. Either you’ve got the gift, we conclude, or you don’t. Even more important, it’s almost impossible to learn skills under performance conditions; we’re too anxious, too focused on the result. When we know our writing is going to be judged, we can’t relax as we write. And if we can’t relax, then we can’t truly learn.

And there’s one more reason why so many adults feel blocked or baffled or downright terrified when they sit down to write: They have no idea what they are supposed to be doing.
That’s because the writing instruction most adults got in school was focused on the characteristics of the finished product, rather than the skills needed to produce it. The minds of most adults are cluttered with instructions about what a finished piece of writing should look like—whether it’s “introduction-body-conclusion” or “avoid comma splices” or “show don’t tell”—and empty of any clear understanding of how to produce that piece of writing in the first place. No one has ever taken apart the activity of writing for them—the way a hitting coach, for instance, might take apart the activity of swinging at a baseball—and shown them its component skills. No one has ever given them an opportunity to practice those component skills so that, when they are in a performance situation of wanting to make a poem or a story (or having to produce a report at work) they have the training to do it.

Fortunately, the good news is that it’s never too late to learn writing skills through practice.

WHAT IS WRITING PRACTICE?
Writing practice, like batting practice or practicing scales, is the repetition of an activity over and over to develop certain skills. An athlete needs to develop hand-eye coordination, for example; a musician needs to develop her ear. Writers, as I’ve said, need to develop a wide range of skills, from coming up with content to finding the words to communicate what they have to say. When we do writing practice, we are training and building our brains in certain ways, just as athletes train their muscles. Then, when we are in a performance situation, we can rely on our skills to serve us.

Writing practice is not merely mindless repetition, though. When an aspiring baseball player practices hitting, he’s not just swinging the bat over and over; he’s swinging the bat and putting his attention into one thing at a time. He might, for instance, take a number of swings concentrating all his attention on gripping the bat properly; he might take more swings concentrating on keeping his eye on the ball. This same directing of attention to one thing at a time, when we practice putting words on paper, is also the essence of writing practice.

It’s essential to concentrate on one thing at a time when we practice because writing, like hitting a baseball, is a complex skill. When we devote all of our attention to one part of it—say, coming up with things to say—we strengthen the part of our minds that does that particular thing. Then, when we sit down to write a piece for others to read, we have trained writing muscles to make use of.

Writing practice is not difficult; anyone, no matter his or her level of
skill with writing, can do it. The most important thing to remember is that, in deciding to build your skills through practice, you are giving up having to be a performing writer. Instead, you are letting yourself be a practicing writer.

Here are some ways to do that.

**FORGET WHAT YOU’VE LEARNED**
If you are one of those people whose head has been stuffed full of rules about writing (many of them probably contradicting each other), then try to let go of them while you are practicing. They will only get in your way. Once you’ve established your skills, you can then revisit the rules and decide which ones you want to make use of.

If, as a result of writing under performance conditions, you find yourself getting tense as you approach practice, try to relax. It’s only practice!

**DON’T TREAT PRACTICE LIKE SCHOOL**
Many people automatically put themselves into the mind-set of being in school when they begin to do writing practices: They want to know whether they are doing everything “right.”

It’s not surprising that this should occur: We are used to thinking of being in school as the only possible way to learn. To engage in regular writing practice, though, is to step outside the confines of school learning, with its requirements and tests and grades, into a realm where you are free to learn in your own way. You can learn at your own pace, and you can decide what you want to be learning at any particular time.

**MAKE A SAFE PLACE FOR YOUR PRACTICE**
Becoming a practicing writer gives you the freedom to learn in your own way because writing practice is always private. When you write in school (or at work) your writing is always going to be read by someone: It’s public writing. But no one need ever see a word of your practice writing unless you choose to share it. This privacy gives you a safe place to learn: You can experiment and let yourself adventure in the world of writing. (One advantage to practicing writing rather than a musical instrument like the drums or the saxophone, or practicing a sport, is that no one can see or hear us while we practice!) While our ultimate goal as writers is communication, having the opportunity to practice in private gives us the opportunity to heal from bad experiences we may have had.

I am always amazed by the horror stories people tell me about their experiences with writing: I’ve heard about teachers who mock student writing in class and about bosses who literally rip to shreds a subordi-
nate's memo. One woman in a class I taught said that whenever she wrote a letter to her mother, her mother would send it back with all the grammatical errors circled in red. I thought that was a uniquely horrible experience—until other students told me the same thing had happened to them.

Far more people than you might imagine have had experiences like this. Such experiences hurt. Even worse, they undermine our confidence as writers. Worst of all, we internalize those negative responses to our writing and adopt a very judgmental attitude toward our own words on the page. Even people whose writing has been praised can adopt this judgmental attitude: This isn’t as good as what I wrote last time. I guess I don’t have it any more.

Many people find it hard, at first, to take in fully that the writing they do during practice sessions will not be judged by anyone; after years of writing in school, they retain a kind of inner teacher who lies in wait to pounce upon their writing and red-pencil all the mistakes. It can take a while to realize that when you are doing writing practice, there are no mistakes. It’s very difficult to do any of these practices wrong; they are designed to be open-ended and flexible so that when you do them you can learn something about writing or about yourself as a writer.

So, as you do the writing practices, let go of that judgmental part of your mind. You are learning new things here. Be kind and gentle and patient with yourself, as you would be with a child learning to walk. Give yourself lots of encouragement: I practiced today! That’s great!

GIVE YOURSELF TIME FOR PRACTICE

Practice is a way to learn that is very different from the kind of learning we must do in school or at work. There we must rush through every assignment, trying to get it in by the deadline. But in practice there are no deadlines; there is only getting up the next day and doing more practicing. Practice makes possible slow—and thorough—learning.

Remember, too, that it takes time to learn how to become a writer, or a better one; there’s a lot to learn, and not everyone learns in the same way, or at the same pace. Don’t push yourself to keep up with others.

In school we are often forced to move on to the next thing before we have fully understood what we are trying to learn now. That’s in part because there the path of learning is assumed to be a straight line: curricula, whether in elementary school or university, are planned to move students always forward, from elementary arithmetic to calculus, for instance, or from introductory sociology to advanced.

But when we undertake learning through practice, we are not walking
a linear path. Instead, we are engaging in what I like to call spiral learning.

**ENGAGE IN SPIRAL LEARNING**

Picture a straight line; then picture a spiral. Now imagine walking along that straight line, and then walking along the spiral. In both cases, you will be moving forward, but in the case of the spiral, your forward movement will depend on also continuously going around in a circle. It sounds like a paradox; but, in fact, it is the best possible way to learn—and it is the way of learning made possible through practice. When we do the same thing over and over in practice, we are essentially making a circle. But at the same time, every time we repeat a practice, we have the opportunity to learn something new, to move forward in our understanding of what we are doing.

Here’s an example: In the t’ai chi class I attend, we do “the form”—a series of connected movements designed by one of the twentieth-century t’ai chi masters. The form is always the same. We may do it in different ways to practice it differently, but the movements never change. I have been studying t’ai chi for ten years; my teacher, Peter Wayne, has been studying, and doing this same form, for over thirty. Almost every time I do the form, I learn something. Often it is something I learned at an earlier point in my study but have forgotten, or now understand in a new way.

The writing practices I present in this book have been inspired, in part, by what I have learned from t’ai chi. They provide you with an opportunity to learn by doing, to learn through experience. You can return to each of them, over and over, through years of becoming a writer, and you can learn more deeply and more fully what it has to teach you. So give yourself a chance to do the practices more than once—they are all designed to be repeated—and to come back to them again and again as you need to. You will find that every time you return to a practice and do it for a while, you will learn something new.

**LET GO OF EXPECTATIONS**

Practice is a tool for learning. Its goal is not to produce finished products. So when you practice, try to let go of the part of your mind that focuses on results. The improvements in your writing that will come to you through practice will not come all at once, and they won’t come at all if you are constantly putting pressure on yourself to produce a finished piece.

These practices are really just little games for grown-ups. Have fun
with them. Give up the judgmental attitude you probably learned in school: Is this any good? Instead, say to yourself: I wonder what will happen when I try THIS? Just notice what happens to come out onto the page this time when you do a particular exercise. Next time, something different may happen.

Taking note, without judgment, of what happens when you do a practice, is the best way I know to set your feet firmly on your own learning path as a writer. When you simply notice the words you have put on the page, rather than compare them to writing you imagine is better or worse, then you can decide what it is in those words, or in the way they came to you, that you like and want to spend more time with.

I also urge you not to come to your practice with the attitude of “I must do this,” or add writing practice to the long list of shoulds in your life. While you may find that, as with exercise, it takes a little while for you to establish the habit of practicing, let yourself sit down to write because you want to, because you enjoy doing it, because you want to fool around with ideas and images. Let your practice be your own private playground where you can swing or run or slide to your heart’s content.

LET YOURSELF PLAY!
Some of you may have negative associations with the word practice. Perhaps, as a child, you were forced into playing scales when you wanted to be outside; or perhaps you had to endure too many drills during football practices. But writing practice is not merely mindless repetition. Above all, writing practice is play!

To let yourself play as you do the practices initiates a process of learning through discovery: You will find out what you need to learn next, not what someone else thinks you should learn. Such self-directed learning is an adventure that can be as satisfying and thrilling as first learning to walk. And so, as I tell my students in class, if you need someone to give you permission to play, I give it to you now!

GIVE WRITING PRACTICE A TRY
Take a pen and a piece of paper. (If you prefer, use your computer.) Set a timer for ten minutes, or put a clock or a watch beside you so you can glance at it but not stare at it. Take a few deep breaths to relax yourself. Then pick up the pen and write. You can write anything. You don’t have to have a subject. If you happen to wander into a subject, you don’t have to stay there. You don’t have to be organized. You don’t have to compose coherent sentences and paragraphs. You don’t have to spell words correctly. You don’t even have to make sense. No one will ever see this.
You don’t even have to read it over if you don’t want to; you can just tear it up and throw it away.

The only thing you have to do is to keep the pen moving no matter what. That means no stopping to think, no going back to cross out or change a word. You can write the same thing over and over again, until your mind gives you something else. You can write, “This is so dumb! I can’t believe I’m doing this.” It doesn’t matter what you write. Just keep the pen moving.

You don’t have to write fast. And you don’t have to clutch the pen in a grip like a gorilla’s. (That will only make your hand hurt.)

Ready? Take those few deep, relaxing breaths. Go!

When your ten minutes (or more, if you like) are up, bring the writing to a close.

Congratulations! You are now a real writer.

My students always laugh when I say this after the first time they do this exercise (usually called freewriting). But then I go on to tell them that I’m not joking: A real writer is someone who really writes. Not someone who thinks about it. Not someone who talks about it. But someone who puts words on the page, one after another after another. At the most fundamental level, this is what it means to be a writer: putting words on the page is what writers do. You probably won’t want to show anyone these particular words. You may not even want to read them over yourself. That doesn’t matter. What matters is that, for the last ten minutes or so, you were practicing being a writer.

Now, take another few minutes—as long as you like—to reflect, on paper, about what happened as you did this exercise. What did you notice about the words that came to you, or how they came to you; what did you notice in yourself as you wrote?

There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Often beginning writers will comment on how free they felt as they wrote. Some will be amazed at how their minds kept giving them new things to write about. Others are equally surprised by how deeply they were able to go into one subject, often something they had been thinking about for some time. When I ask, “Is this different from what usually happens when you write?” most people will reply: “Yes!”