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A word cloud of letters and characters in various colors and sizes, arranged in a circular pattern. The letters are in different fonts and colors, including black, red, blue, and green. The characters are scattered throughout the image, with some appearing more frequently than others. The overall shape is roughly circular, with the letters filling the space.

A photograph of a dense forest with many thin, vertical tree trunks. Sunlight filters through the green canopy, creating dappled light on the forest floor. The ground is covered with fallen leaves and some fallen branches.

Don't sit down in the middle of
the woods

How to get and keep momentum
in writing

Hjortshoj's analogy:

“Look, Carl. Writing is this little fire you tend, and your goal is to keep it going. Maybe you have to leave it briefly to get a few sticks, or a rabbit to cook, but just do that and hurry back before it goes out. You don't want to spend days collecting several cords of firewood or studying the principles of firebuilding. If you do, each time you come back you'll have nothing, but cold ashes.”

(Hjortshoj, 2001:84)



Carl's response:

“I think I’m the rabbit.”



Draw me a picture

- Draw an illustration of how you see yourself in relation to your research project now
- Compare your picture with that of someone sitting next to you
- How would your picture look ideally?



Why writers don't write



Why writers don't write

- Avoidance / fear
- Gestation / incubation
- “Productive procrastination”
- Perfectionism
- Waiting for the “right” time
- Waiting for inspiration
- Seeing writing as a product instead of a process



If you don't understand that writing is a process...

- You think you're doing something wrong when it's not perfect the first time
- You won't understand what your process involves
- You won't be able to change or develop your process



So how do you write?

- For ten minutes write about how you write. You can discuss anything you like (what you physically do, what your habits are, how you prepare for writing, when you write, etc.)
- Don't worry about spelling, grammar or punctuation
- **Only rule:** write without stopping or planning for the entire ten minutes



Feedback

- How did it feel to write this way?
- What is your process?
- Should anything change?



An expert's view

“So many scientists think that once they figure it out, that's all they have to do, and writing it up is just a chore. I never saw it that way; part of the art of any kind of total scholarship is to say it well.”

Stephen Jay Gould, *The Writer's Almanac*, 10
September, 2007



Some views on writing

- Writing is one continuous mistake
- Writing is never perfect
- Writing is a process that stops in an interesting place
- Writing is simple, but it isn't easy
- Writing is the art at which nobody ever becomes the master



Punctuated equilibrium

- Where evolutionary change occurs relatively rapidly, as compared to longer periods of relative evolutionary stability (with apologies to Stephen Jay Gould!)
- Do you have growth spurts when you write? Then you might write with punctuated equilibrium.



A key question

Evolution by jerks or evolution by creeps?



The Zen version

- First chop wood and draw water. Then enlightenment. Then chop wood and draw water.
- You're going to do a lot of chopping and drawing
- But you will also have enlightenment
- This might take longer than you expect



The Zen version



Phases of writing

- Prewriting
- Composing
- Revising
- Editing
- Release

(Hjortshoj, 2001)



The importance of rewriting

Meaning is not what you start out with – it is what you end up with.

Peter Elbow, *Writing without teachers* (1975:15)



Some tricks to get you going (I)

- Jump in!
- Begin where you feel most confident
- Set writing times
- Write a certain amount of words every day (instead of an amount of time)
- Set deadlines (and keep to them)



Some tricks to get you going (II)

- Decide to write for ten minutes
- Break your task into small pieces
- Develop a writing plan
- Promise yourself a reward for making progress
- Do away with perfectionism



If you're feeling lost...

Don't sit down in the middle of the woods. If you're lost in the plot or blocked, retrace your steps to where you went wrong. Then take the other road. And/or change the person. Change the tense. Change the opening page.

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A photograph of a forest path that splits into two directions. The path is covered in fallen leaves and is surrounded by tall, thin trees with green foliage. The lighting is soft, suggesting a dappled sunlight effect.

If you're feeling lost, remember:

Don't sit down in the middle of the woods. If you're lost in the plot or blocked, retrace your steps to where you went wrong. Then take the other road. And/or change the person. Change the tense. Change the opening page.

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Who can help?

- Writing Lab
 - One-to-one consultations (also via Skype)
 - Anne-Mari Lackay (amlackay@sun.ac.za / 021 808 2989)
 - Writing skills workshops
 - Selene Delport (selene@sun.ac.za / 021 808 2947)
- Language Services
 - Marguerite van der Waal (mvdewaal@sun.ac.za / 021 808 3096)
- Reading Lab
 - Marisca Coetzee (mcoetzee@sun.ac.za)

