

Briefs

Betty S. Flowers Madman, Architect, Carpenter, Judge: Roles and the Writing Process

"What's the hardest part of writing?" I ask on the first day of class.

"Getting started," someone offers, groaning.

"No, it's not getting started," a voice in the back corrects. "It's keeping on once you do get started. I can always write a sentence or two—but then I get stuck."

"Why?" I ask.

"I don't know. I'm writing along, and all of a sudden I realize how awful it is, and I tear it up. Then I start over again, and after two sentences, the same thing happens."

"Let me suggest something which might help," I say. Turning to the board, I write four words: "madman," "architect," "carpenter," "judge." Then I explain:

"What happens when you get stuck is that two competing energies are locked horn to horn, pushing against each other. One is the energy of what I'll call your 'madman.' He's full of ideas, writes crazily and perhaps rather sloppily, gets carried away by enthusiasm or anger, and if really let loose, could turn out ten pages an hour.

"The second is a kind of critical energy—what I'll call the 'judge.' He's been educated and knows a sentence fragment when he sees one. He peers over your shoulder and says "That's trash!" with such authority that the madman loses his crazy confidence and shrivels up. You know the judge is right—after all, he speaks with the voice of your most imperious English teacher. But for all his sharpness of eye, he can't create anything.

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"So you're stuck. Every time your madman starts to write, your judge pounces on him.

"Of course this is to over-dramatize the writing process—but not entirely. Writing is so complex, involves so many skills of heart, mind and eye, that sitting down to a fresh sheet of paper can sometimes seem like 'the hardest work among those not impossible,' as Yeats put it. Whatever joy there is in the writing process can come only when the energies are flowing freely—when you're not stuck.

"And the trick to not getting stuck involves separating the energies. If you let the judge with his intimidating carping come too close to the madman and his playful, creative energies, the ideas which form the basis for your writing will never have a chance to surface. But you can't simply throw out the judge. The subjective, personal outpourings of your madman must be balanced by the objective, impersonal vision of the educated critic within you. Writing is not just self-expression; it is communication as well.

"So start by promising your judge that you'll get around to asking his opinion—but not now. And then let the madman energy flow. Find what interests you in the topic, the question or emotion that it raises in you, and respond as you might to a friend—or an enemy. Talk on paper, page after page, and don't stop to judge or correct sentences. Then, after a set amount of time, perhaps, stop and gather the paper up and wait a day.

"The next morning, ask your 'architect' to enter. She will read the wild scribblings saved from the night before and pick out maybe a tenth of the jottings as relevant or interesting. (You can see immediately that the architect is not sentimental about what the madman wrote; she's not going to save every crumb for posterity.) Her job is simply to select large chunks of material and to arrange them in a pattern that might form an argument. The thinking here is large, organizational, paragraph-level thinking—the architect doesn't worry about sentence structure.

"No, sentence structure is left for the 'carpenter' who enters after the essay has been hewn into large chunks of related ideas. The carpenter nails these ideas together in a logical sequence, making sure each sentence is clearly written, contributes to the argument of the paragraph, and leads logically and gracefully to the next sentence. When the carpenter finishes, the essay should be smooth and watertight.

"And then the judge comes around to inspect. Punctuation, spelling, grammar, tone—all the details which result in a polished essay become important only in this last stage. These details are not the concern of the madman who's come up with the ideas, or the architect who's organized them, or the carpenter who's nailed the ideas together, sentence by sentence. Save details for the judge."

The Advantages of Roles

Why all this dramatization of the writing process? What advantages does such an artificial scheme offer?

At least eight, I think:

1. It's easy to remember.
2. It stresses the sequential nature of the writing process—that you're likely to

get better results if you work through the madman stage first rather than going back to the idea stage after you've spent three hours crafting sentences.

3. It dramatizes the need for rewriting and gives a sense of individual purpose to every draft.

4. It breaks the writing task down into manageable stages and allows the enjoyment of each stage. In other words, it shows a student how to do one thing at a time.

5. It defuses the child-parent conflict which often arises when a student tries to write for an authority figure. The dutiful child will sometimes offer up dry, technically correct prose devoid of any individual creative spark. The more rebellious student, meanwhile, will spill all over the page with a childish indifference to details.

6. It offers a way to deal with the self-image problems that sometimes interfere with the writing process. For example, one year I taught two brothers: the older wrote polished, mechanical prose; the younger wrote zany, funny, first-draft prose. The older had never allowed himself to be "irresponsible"; the younger had never been expected to assume responsibility. The first task for each was to assume the role that the other brother had claimed. To continue to correct the grammatical errors and spelling mistakes of the younger man's writing would have done little to change his habits since change would appear alien to his cherished self-image of "creator." But asking him to assume the "critical editor/judge" as one of four roles allowed him a non-threatening way to pay attention to detail and to separate resistance from mere laziness.

7. It gives a new language for correcting papers, one that doesn't shove the teacher so far into the "judge" language that most grading marks reflect. You can use the language of play for the madman, the language of design for the architect, the language of integrity for the carpenter, and the traditional language of proof-readers' marks for the judge.

8. It allows the teacher to make clear to the student what can be taught about writing—and what can't. The madman stage, being intensely subjective, must be encouraged, but then left almost exclusively to the writer. The judge role, meanwhile, can be taught adequately from good writing texts. But in those "adult" stages of the architect and the carpenter, where the students are least experienced and usually least trained, the teacher can be very helpful indeed. In the terminology of this role-playing scheme, my role as helper is to "give permission" to the child/madman to play, to teach the writer how to assume the adult responsibilities of architect and carpenter (resisting the student's tendency to go directly from child to judge), and to defuse the power of the judge without losing his useful services.

More Playing with Roles

Madman	Architect	Carpenter	Judge
ideas	paragraphs	sentences	mechanics
author	argument	craft	audience
feeling	thinking	acting	seeing
energy	intuition	integrity	critical intellect
child	soul	adult	parent
subjective-personal	subjective-impersonal	objective-personal	objective-impersonal
eternality	space	time	immortality
air (free-flying)	earth (firm grounding)	water (smooth sailing)	fire (thorough cooking)