

Joan Bolker, "Some Useful Maxims"

- You own your writing.
- We write in order to think, not only think in order to write.
- When writing, first make a mess, then clean it up. (W. G. Perry, Jr.)
- Write "to discover what you have to say." (B. F. Skinner)
- Positive reinforcement works much better than beating yourself up.
- Only set goals you can meet. Then up the ante, very slowly.
- Write down everything that's in your head, including static.
- Revise, revise, revise. And then revise some more.
- Write at least 10 minutes everyday.
- Write first.
- You can write scared.
- You can't get a personality transplant; you have to write as who you are.
- If your method works, don't try to fix it.
- Believe it or not, you're the expert on your topic.
- The best paper is a finished paper, not a perfect one (there is no such thing).



Joan Bolker, "Some Strategies for Revising"

- There is no magical method. Revising means rethinking, looking at your work from different angles ("seeing again" is its literal meaning), and rewriting, again, and again, until you feel you've gotten it right.
- Consider leaving the revision of both your introduction and your conclusion until last.
- When you're unsure of your argument, try making an outline of what you have. On a smaller scale, reduce each paragraph to one sentence. Problems will show up much more clearly in outline form, and you'll discover what's not working, as well as whether your argument flows.
- Leave editing at the individual word level for last (unless something catches your eye along the way and it's easy to fix).
- Keep a thesaurus, a dictionary, and a style manual at hand. Consider owning a good general writing manual like The Chicago Manual of Style. When you look for a thesaurus, don't get the dictionary kind--find one that makes you look up the word you want a synonym for at the end, and then refers you to the group of words it's like--they're much more fun, and much more useful.
- Use your ear: read your text aloud. Use your eyes: it matters how your work looks on the page. Very long paragraphs are daunting for readers. Use your breath: to figure out where commas do and don't belong (they belong at the spots where you need to stop to breathe as you read aloud).
- Watch out for your individual quirks: overusing particular words or punctuations Vary the shapes of your sentences.
- Remember the saddest rule of editing: Less is more. Delete any word that isn't necessary (especially adjectives), and you'll strengthen your argument.
- Have someone else read your work for phrases that you've overused, or arguments that are repetitive, or places where you've contradicted yourself.
- Remember that you can afford to cut words because there are more where those came from.
- When you think you're through editing, reread again. And again. You'll still find things that can be fixed.
- But, paradoxically, know that you'll never get your piece of writing perfect, and that at some point you'll need to stop fiddling with it, and call it finished.

THE WATCHER AT THE GATE

by Gail Godwin

I first realized I was not the only writer who had a restraining critic who lived inside me and sapped the juice from green inspirations when I was leafing through Freud's "Interpretation of Dreams" a few years ago. Ironically, it was my "inner critic" who had sent me to Freud. I was writing a novel, and my heroine was in the middle of a dream, and then I lost faith in my own invention and rushed to "an authority" to check whether she could have such a dream. In the chapter on dream interpretation, I came upon the following passage that has helped me free myself, in some measure, from my critic and has led to many pleasant and interesting exchanges with other writers.

Freud quotes Schiller, who is writing a letter to a friend. The friend complains of his lack of creative power. Schiller replies with an allegory. He says it is not good if the intellect examines too closely the ideas pouring in at the gates. "In isolation, an idea may be quite insignificant, and venturesome in the extreme, but it may acquire importance from an idea which follows it. . . . In the case of a creative mind, it seems to me, the intellect has withdrawn its watchers from the gates, and the ideas rush in pell-mell, and only then does it review and inspect the multitude. You are ashamed or afraid of the momentary and passing madness which is found in all real creators, the longer or shorter duration of which distinguishes the thinking artist from the dreamer. . . . You reject too soon and discriminate too severely."

So that's what I had: a Watcher at the Gates. I decided to get to know him better. I discussed him with other writers, who told me some of the quirks and habits of their Watchers, each of whom was as individual as his host, and all of whom seemed passionately dedicated to one goal: rejecting too soon and discriminating too severely.

It is amazing the lengths a Watcher will go to keep you from pursuing the flow of your imagination. Watchers are notorious pencil sharpeners, ribbon changers, plant waterers, home repairers and abhorers of messy rooms or messy pages. They are compulsive looker-uppers. They are superstitious scaredy-cats. They cultivate self-important eccentricities they think are suitable for "writers." And they'd rather die (and kill your inspiration with them) than risk making a fool of themselves.

My Watcher has a wasteful penchant for 20 pound bond paper above and below the carbon of the first draft. "What's the good of writing out a whole page," he whispers begrudgingly, "if you just have to write it over again later? Get it perfect the first time!" My Watcher adores stopping in the middle of a morning's work to drive down to the library to check on the name of a flower or a World War II battle or a line of metaphysical poetry. "You can't possibly go on till you've got this right!" he admonishes. I go and get the car keys.

Other Watchers have informed their writers that:

"Whenever you get a really good sentence you should stop in the middle of it and go on tomorrow. Otherwise you might run dry."

"Don't try and continue with your book till your dental appointment is over. When you're worried about your teeth, you can't think about art."

Another Watcher makes his owner pin his finished pages to a clothesline and read them through binoculars "to see how they look from a distance." Countless other Watchers demand "bribes" for taking the day off: lethal doses of caffeine, alcoholic doses of Scotch or vodka or wine.

There are various ways to outsmart, pacify, or coexist with your Watcher. Here are some I have tried, or my writer friends have tried, with success:

Look for situations when he's likely to be off-guard. Write too fast for him in an unexpected place, at an unexpected time. (Virginia Woolf captured the "diamonds in the dust heap" by writing at a "rapid haphazard gallop" in her diary.) Write when very tired. Write in purple ink on the back of a Master Charge statement. Write whatever comes into your mind while the kettle is boiling and make the steam whistle your deadline. (Deadlines are a great way to outdistance the Watcher.)

Disguise what you are writing. If your Watcher refuses to let you get on with your story or novel, write a "letter" instead, telling your "correspondent" what you are going to write in your story or chapter. Dash off a "review" of your own unfinished opus. It will stand up like a bully to your Watcher the next time he throws obstacles in your path. If you write yourself a good one.

Get to know your Watcher. He's yours. Do a drawing of him (or her). Pin it to the wall of your study and turn it gently to the wall when necessary. Let your Watcher feel needed. Watchers are excellent critics after inspiration has been captured; they are dependable, sharp-eyed readers of things already set down. Keep your Watcher in shape and he'll have less time to keep you from shaping. If he's really ruining your whole working day, sit down, as Jung did with his personal demons, and write him a letter. "Dear Watcher," I wrote, "What is it you're so afraid I'll do?" Then I held his pen for him, and he replied instantly with a candor that has kept me from truly despising him.

"Fail," he wrote back.



Samples from *The Writer's Home Companion*

"Writing is a solitary sport, but none of us can do it without good company....The authors of the pieces collected here share honestly, and often humorously, their thoughts and feelings about writing and the writer's life, and can provide you with the good company you need to get on with your own work." (from the Introduction)



"At Darwin's, the newspaper-and-coffee store closest to my Cambridge office, this sign hangs on the wall: 'Cambridge 02138 -- the most opinionated zip code in America'; you can walk to Harvard Square from here in about five minutes. It was my good fortune to live in this part of the world during a revolution in the theory of writing. Much of the material in this book grew out of this revolution." (from the Introduction)



"Becoming a poet is not a casual accident. Nor is it a sudden ascension into heaven on the wings of sheer inspiration." (from "Climbing the Jacob's Ladder" by Ruth Whitman)



"The stunning realization that the Harvard Faculty will often accept, as evidence of knowledge, the celebrations of a student who has little data at his disposal, confronts every student with an ethical dilemma." (from "Examsmanship and the Liberal Arts: An Epistemological Inquiry, by William G. Perry, Jr.)



"Write something to be made into confetti, and something about the person you'd throw it at."

"You are asleep now, and everything around you is a dream. Wake up. Write about it for 10 minutes."

"Write as if you owned the language./Write as if you had rented the language./Write as if you had stolen the language."

(from "Getting Started : Writing Suggestions," by Patricia Cumming)



"You are ashamed or afraid of the momentary and passing madness which is found in all real creators, the longer or shorter duration of which distinguishes the thinking artist from the dreamer...you reject too soon and discriminate too severely." (Freud quoting Schiller, from Gail Godwin's "The Watcher at the Gates")



"Of course I wish I had had more to say and that I had said it better, and I wish I could tell you more clearly what I have learned about saying it, but it would be impossible to tell you all you need to know. No two people are alike; your personal histories will lead you to respond in different ways. You will have to work out your own rules." (from B.F.Skinner's "How to Discover What You Have to Say")



"I'm never sure, until I've begun putting words on the page, and they suddenly start pulling me along, where before I'd been pushing them, that it's going to work this time, that it's going to catch fire..." (from "Not Just Writing, Really Writing" by Joan Bolker)

