

## **The Art of History**

### **How Writing Leads to Thinking**

Lynn Hunt, February 2010

*The Art of History* is a new series of articles by senior scholars who are willing to share their thoughts on, and offer advice about, some aspect of the art and craft of historical research and writing, drawing upon their own experiences in particular. The series began with Caroline Walker Bynum's article "[Teaching Scholarship](#)".

Writing is stressful. Sitting in my computer chair my neck and shoulder muscles almost immediately tense up as I dig around in my brain for the best phrase or even any coherent string of words, whether I am writing an essay like this one, a book chapter, a letter of recommendation, or an email message to a friend. Writing is time-consuming. It's a great way to pass the time on a long airplane flight because you lose track of the passage of time altogether. It's even better, from that point of view exclusively, than watching an episode of *Mad Men* on your laptop. Writing means many different things to me but one thing it is not: writing is not the transcription of thoughts already consciously present in my mind. Writing is a magical and mysterious process that makes it possible to think differently.

Because writing is an act that is far from completely accessible to our conscious minds, recommendations about how to write history may well be irrelevant. And yet they are not useless, if they can make writing seem less like scaling a Himalayan peak after having spent a lifetime as a couch potato. I know that is how I felt when I confronted the task of writing my dissertation. Doing research seemed so much easier, even those days in French archives when the archivist seemed not to comprehend a word I was saying, or those nights when I lay awake wondering which two French cities of 1789 I should compare out of what seemed an endless array of choices. Notecards with city names—Amiens, Blois, Caen, Dieppe and so on—turned over in my dreams, which is an awful waste of dreamscapes. But no, there is nothing quite like the terror of the blank page or the empty computer screen in front of you.

My first rule, in such a situation, is not to look at notes. In the era of digitized databases, digital photographs of manuscripts and archives, and digital copies of notes taken of books and archives, such a rule is yet more imperative. Even when I was preparing my dissertation, when my handwritten notes could fit into a carry-on suitcase (it was blue with a flowery pattern and more or less joined to me at the hip when traveling), the rereading of notes posed a serious menace. Some of my fellow dissertators spent months going over their notes hoping for manna from heaven, a eureka moment, or just enough inspiration to get started. Reorganizing your notes is a form of house cleaning; it might make you feel good about yourself as a tidy person, but it will not produce a chapter—or even a page. Only writing can do that.

I say this in part, I confess, because I have always been and will always be, I hope, a terrible note taker. Before the computer revolution—that is, for my dissertation and my first two books—I took notes longhand on yellow legal pads, had no filing system, and in any case, once I started writing, I discovered, as many do, that I had taken notes on the wrong parts of books or documents or had not written down something crucial such as the page number or the exact French wording.

Documents that have turned out to be vital to my argument, which I only discovered sometimes after writing the draft of a chapter, usually required multiple consultations, which makes having copies handy, to be sure, but it is usually impractical to copy everything, even if you knew what that everything was. Taking notes, and even more so, ordering microfilms, photocopying or digitally photographing documents, will not get you to the heart of the problem. At least while taking notes you have done some thinking, but in general, your thoughts will remain stalled in the fog of infinite possibilities until you start writing them, not as notes, but as prose arguments.

My second rule, when looking at the blank screen, is called the “radish rule” in honor of my grandmother, who never published anything but did produce many radishes in her garden. Every day in the summer she would call my mother and inform her of the number of radishes in her garden at that moment, a number that grew steadily over time until the end of the season. You want the number of your pages to increase steadily over time, culminating in the completion of a

first draft. Whether you use an outline or not (I jot down bullet points in no particular order as a way of starting), what really counts is momentum, not momentum as in a jet racing forward to the completion of its route but rather momentum as in three steps forward, two steps back, two or three pages written (maybe even five!), then revised the next day while another one, two or three are added, and so on. If you are tearing up all your pages and throwing them away day after day, if you are changing your tack every day you sit down, if you are waiting for inspiration to come before writing the next page, your problem is not intellectual, it is most likely psychological, painfully so.

Admittedly, momentum requires a certain tunnel vision. This is one of the dirtiest of the dirty little secrets about writing. Everything about history and life itself is potentially infinite (except one's life span, unfortunately). There is always another document that could have been consulted, just as there is always another fact about a friend or partner that if you knew would make you understand her or him better. But life is short and if you want to write more than a dissertation or one book or two books and so on, you have to limit yourself to what can be done in a certain time frame. You cannot accumulate pages if you constantly second guess yourself. You have to second guess yourself just enough to make constant revision productive and not debilitating. You have to believe that clarity is going to come, not all at once, and certainly not before you write, but eventually, if you work at it hard enough, it will come. Thought does emerge from writing. Something ineffable happens when you write down a thought. You think something you did not know you could or would think and it leads you to another thought almost unbidden.

What is that something ineffable and how do I know this? I do not belong to some kind of occult organization with special séances on the magic of writing, unless you want to so describe, with some reason, the guild of scholars more generally. Everyone who has written at any substantial length, whether prose or poetry, knows that the process of writing itself leads to previously unthought thoughts. Or to be more precise, writing crystallizes previously half-formulated or unformulated thoughts, gives them form, and extends chains of thoughts in new directions. Neuroscience has shown that 95 percent of brain activity is unconscious. My guess about what

happens is that by physically writing—whether by hand, by computer, or by voice activation (though I have no experience of the latter)—you set a process literally into motion, a kind of shifting series of triangulations between fingers, blank pages or screens, letters and words, eyes, synapses or other “neural instantiations,” not to mention guts and bladders. By writing, in other words, you are literally firing up your brain and therefore stirring up your conscious thoughts and something new emerges. You are not, or at least not always, transcribing something already present in your conscious thoughts. Is it any wonder that your neck gets stiff?

Even as your pages proliferate like my grandmother’s radishes, they must be weeded and thinned out if they are to grow to an optimal size. Nothing is more important to writing than the weeding, thinning, mulching, and watering that is known as revision. Sometimes another eye provides the added sunlight needed for new growth. I have picked up countless tips about writing from the editors assigned the thankless task of improving my prose, whether in a scholarly book or a textbook. You can only really figure out what you think if you first put it on paper and then develop some distance from it. It has to be a part of yourself, but a part that you are willing to release from yourself. Most problems in writing come from the anxiety caused by the unconscious realization that what you write is you and has to be held out for others to see. You are naked and shivering out on that limb that seems likely to break off and bring you tumbling down into the ignominy of being accused of inadequate research, muddy unoriginal analysis, and clumsy writing. So you hide yourself behind jargon, opacity, circuitousness, the passive voice, and a seeming reluctance to get to the point. It is so much safer there in the foliage that blocks the reader’s comprehension, but in the end so unsatisfying. No one cares because they cannot figure out what you mean to say. How much better it is to stand up before the firing line and discover that no one ordered your execution. The most the critics want is an intense fencing match, and you are more than up to the challenge because you have honed the edges of your research and said forthrightly what you thought.

You do not need to believe me, because professional help is always around the corner. The best advice about writing that I ever got was many years ago from the poet and prose writer Donald

Hall. His book *Writing Well* was then in an early, if not a first, edition (it is now in its ninth), but he also generously read the pages of those of us who were junior fellows in the Michigan Society of Fellows. He was a senior fellow, and I knew that my dissertation needed serious work. From him I learned that writing requires an unending effort at something resembling authenticity. Most mistakes come from not being yourself, not saying what you think, or being afraid to figure out what you really think. His approach was not at all solipsistic, for he also recommended a different kind of attention to others who write. When you are reading a book that grabs you, consider how the author accomplishes that effect. What is it that draws you in? What makes you think it beautiful or forceful or astute? Which quality do you cherish most? What can you learn about writing from it? Assistance is available close at hand but you have to know where to look for it.

In short, one is not born a writer but rather becomes one. Learning to write well is a lifelong endeavor. Graduate programs tend to assume that students come with already acquired writing skills that simply need to be polished. History instructors only rarely if ever give courses in writing; we assume that graduate students learn by osmosis, by imitation, and by correction of flagrant errors. We have begun to pay more attention to teaching as a learnable skill. We should do the same with writing. Even if there is no one way to do it well and no recipes to follow, we all might benefit from more attention to writing. I know I always can.

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## **The Art of History**

### **Wise Choices**

Jane Caplan, April 2011

How do graduates choose a dissertation project? And how should they? This is not quite the same as the question “Why become a historian?” on which the AHA has published an engaging pamphlet of short essays, even if some contributors link the two questions into an explanation of what motivated them to become a particular type of historian. At one point long ago, at least in Britain, graduate students would have been advised to work outward from the documents: find an unused deposit and let it generate its own questions and tell you its story. There was also a tradition of supervisors dishing out topics, perhaps more common in Germany than in the Anglophone academy, although I remember my surprise at meeting one U.S. student in the archives in the 1960s who was simply working on what had been assigned to him, with little enthusiasm or commitment. Bad old days, no doubt. Nowadays students are exposed as undergraduates to an enormous range of possible fields and types of history, and as graduates are likely to be marched off to the archives equipped with a scaffolding of questions and theories and concepts within which to construct their project. Indeed, they might not even be admitted to graduate programs in the first place without a pretty clear idea to sell to a prospective supervisor. But if you can’t mentally compose a sentence beginning: “I really want to do this research because ...,” you might as well not bother to start.

Enthusiasm alone, however, is not enough. A pleasure in the past may be a necessary motivation, but it is not sufficient to launch graduate research, however elegantly it is articulated. Undergraduates heading to graduate school often need some prodding to grasp this and detach themselves from the subjective expressions of fascination with the past and their grandparents’ stories that powered their college applications. They must learn how to locate these pleasures and motivations in the collective intellectual endeavours they are about to join, which is also the first step towards seeing themselves as writers of history, not just consumers.

Choosing a dissertation topic is more weighty than any subsequent research decision, because it is the means by which graduate students will try out whether life as a historian suits them. And whatever decision is made will accompany them for the next five to ten years of their lives as either welcome partner or intolerable incubus—and it had better be the former. To be sure, the

heavy hand of disciplinary reproduction is at work here, claiming initiates as they cross the threshold into the profession. The constraints on imagination that this can impose also need to be resisted by the freshness and intellectual curiosity of new recruits that will help to remake the intellectual agenda.

On the other hand, research is not like a marriage or civil partnership. You have to be committed to your project, but you don't have to love it. The field I work in, the history of Nazi Germany, is certainly not a fit love-object, and is not the only one of which this could be said. The elusive desire that David Harlan wrote about in his contribution to this series (in the November 2010 *Perspectives on History*) is also deeply suspect, as Saul Friedländer and Susan Sontag warn; historians need to run a mile from the dubious fascinations of fascism. In any case, negative passion has its own dynamics, and distance is a more productive historical instrument than empathy. But it's also undeniably more painful. The history of Nazi Germany seems irredeemable, an ultimate negation of Hegelian rationality, a monstrous redundancy stuck at the centre of modern experience and consciousness. In an act of patent and quasi-parental bad faith, I find myself wanting to warn my students away from it even as I remain trapped in its magnetic field.

Graduate research projects are contingent on financial support, especially if they involve long periods of research in foreign archives. I'm not sure I have ever come across anyone who made a calculation about the likelihood of funding into the sole criterion for choosing a particular project, but following the money would not be the worst way to make a decision: we remain the creatures of our research proposals and the beneficiaries of public and private purses, and economic necessity is a powerful driver. I'm writing this essay as I sit in Berlin on sabbatical—one of numerous research visits to Germany over the years, and many of them funded, like this one, by the generosity of German academic foundations. Not for the first time since I started working on German history in the late 1960s, I ponder the breadth of vision of an academic and political establishment that has provided successive generations of foreign historians with the wherewithal to conduct research into this most catastrophic period of German history. And it wasn't just a

question of the money the foundations provided, but a wider sense of intellectual openness that solicited the contributions we might make to a painful postwar project of national self-examination.

Of course all scholarship is international, even if not all national governments are keen to pay foreigners to unearth their murky pasts. But perhaps there are similarly generous funds dedicated to helping foreign scholars probe other difficult national histories—colonialism and slavery on the American continent, or pre-1989 histories in Russia and eastern Europe. It's scarcely imaginable that the writing of history could be confined within national boundaries; any bookshelf obviously bears this out, as do all the seminars and conferences and congresses that hurtle scholars across one another's national, continental, and intellectual boundaries. Undergraduates with any spark of interest in countries beyond their own borders should always be encouraged to equip themselves as soon as possible with a working knowledge of the necessary foreign languages, the indispensability of which sometimes seems to escape their notice. (They should also—this is another matter—be warned about the special loneliness of the graduate student abroad, even in the well-regulated archive cultures of Europe: living in cheap housing with never enough money to enjoy the life around them, longing for 24/7 opening hours that would speed the return home, and possibly isolated by language skills more suited to anatomizing the Ottonian monarchy than buying basics at the supermarket.) But, at the risk of a kind of specialist's solipsism, it has always seemed to me that there was a unique, rather impressive quality to Germany's—in this case West Germany's—invitation to non-Germans after the war to join them in what came to be called *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*: “mastering” or “overcoming” the past. Not to be naïve—this was also a useful form of internationalization under the Cold War Euro-Atlantic umbrella—yet even so this embrace did not have to come at the price of repudiating Germans' own responsibility for their past.

As graduate students from North America and Britain who opted to do doctorates in German history in the 1960s and 1970s, we were the envy of friends working on the history of countries less generous in their funding or perhaps less interested in what foreign historians might have to

say about them. On the other hand, as we confronted living in a country whose immediate past was still so very present, we cast our own envious glances at those whose research topics put them in less dismaying, even pleasurable environments. We spent our days in the archives studying seven types of infamy, and our spare time in public places wondering who above a certain age had believed what, been where when, and done what to whom in their not-so-distant past lives. Yet I also felt there was an inescapable tension between reading that history as Germany's and as humanity's—a humble echo, perhaps, of Karl Jaspers's distinction between the different types of guilt, from the criminal to the metaphysical, that in the end imposed a moral responsibility on everyone. The special gift or burden of doing contemporary history, what Germans after 1945 called *Zeitgeschichte*, is this persistent, ineluctable testing of the boundaries between record and judgment.

I'm not sure that many of us graduate students in the 1960s would already have come across the concept of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or, if we had, whether it captured our motivation as such. Most of us were drawn, I suspect, by a rawer compulsion to understand Germany's then still-recent history and its devastating consequences for communities of which we may have felt ourselves a part. But understanding remained an elusive goal. And for this reason *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is clearly a process more than a destination; a process, moreover, that—as the circumstances of its coinage in German evangelical church circles in the 1950s suggested—has been as much a political and cultural project as an intellectual one. What historians can contribute is necessary, insufficient, and frustrating. The goal is always mutating in the act of being approached. In any case, I confess that I never felt I made much of a conscious choice about my research field. Even though I can knit together a plausibly rational story of what determined it, the conclusion of that story is always that the field chose me rather than the other way round. I have never, despite repeated detours into other fields, been able to escape it entirely. So: make your choice wisely. You may be living with it for a long time.

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## **The Art of History**

### **The Ability to Recognize a Good Source**

David L. Ransel, October 2010

One of the arts of history is the ability to recognize a good source. We know about the extraordinary influence of books such as *Montaillou* by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and *The Cheese and the Worms* by Carlo Ginzburg.<sup>1</sup> These talented historians were able to tell a compelling story and explain its meaning for us. But the initial success was their ability to recognize what could be learned from the trial transcripts they came upon during their work on the Inquisition. Indeed, Le Roy Ladurie's principal source had been published a decade before his study. He was the first to realize its possibilities. Ginzburg had been struck by a reference in a document in the Udine archives to a defendant who held that the world had its origin in putrefaction. Because he was busily searching for material on a different topic, Ginzburg merely noted the number of the trial about the world's beginnings for future reference. Luckily for us, the defendant's curious belief stirred Ginzburg's memory from time to time, prompting him years later to return to the trial document to see if he could understand what the man we now know as Menocchio had meant by his statement about the world's origin.

My favorite example of a master of the art of recognizing a good source is Laurel Thatcher Ulrich. She was not the first person to encounter the diary of Martha Ballard, on which she based her book *A Midwife's Tale*. Several historians had looked through the diary at the Maine Historical Society and set it aside because, as Ulrich recounted, they found that it contained much the same thing day after day. Most likely, they also rejected it because the daily life of a midwife

did not qualify as history with a capital H. Laurel Ulrich, by contrast, was interested in learning about how women served their communities, and a knowledge of textiles suggested to her that the patterns of family obligation and professional work evident in the diary wove a revealing fabric of the social and economic contributions of women.

The difficulty in recognizing a good source often stems from a narrow concentration on the materials needed to solve a problem in our current research. If we run into a potentially rich set of documents or images that do not shed light on that problem, we are apt to pass them by in our urge to get on with the task at hand. Very real material constraints also enter in. Dissertations need to be completed and grant requests justified. I recall finding a fascinatingly detailed report on relations between Russia and Persia in the 18th century during my student research year in the Russian archives. It might well, I thought, open a new window on early modern Russian history. But it lay rather far from my dissertation project on internal political reform, and I reluctantly set it aside.<sup>2</sup>

The Australian anthropologist-historian Greg Denning observed that the perceived value of a source increases in proportion to the difficulty of gaining access to it. He demonstrated this effect in a delightful story of his search for the letters of William Gooch, a young Englishman who had traveled in 1792 to the South Pacific as an astronomer on a supply ship and met a violent end at the hands of Hawaiian natives. Denning traveled to England and had to overcome a number of obstacles before obtaining permission to read the letters—and, accordingly, attached great importance to their contents.<sup>3</sup> The story has a powerful resonance for those of us who work in far-off lands where library and archive access is even more difficult than in the United Kingdom. We are indeed apt to attach excessive importance to materials for which permission to read or copy requires lengthy battles with bureaucrats and archivists. By the same logic, we can easily undervalue sources that fall into our laps. I once acquired—in a casual trade with an illegal book trader in the Soviet Union—an 18th-century Russian letter-writer's guide. It struck me as a quaint souvenir and possible reference for official titles and forms of address. It was only when I showed it to a senior colleague and heard him exclaim that the book contained a capsule social

history that I realized how useful it could be in reinforcing the arguments of my first monograph on the importance of patronage and personal clienteles in Russian politics. This book of model letters constituted a primer in how to initiate, reestablish, nourish, or end a patron or client relationship. I soon produced a couple of articles based on the letter-writer.

Another wonderful source that was easily acquired and therefore not initially appreciated came to me via a Swedish scholar. I had served as external “opponent” when he defended his dissertation on Russian legal history at Stockholm University. Because he had to turn his attention to Swedish history in order to compete for a professorship, he gave me a mimeographed excerpt from the diary of a Russian provincial merchant of the late 18th century. “Maybe you can find some use for it,” he said. At the time I was involved in research on child abandonment in Russia. When I dipped into the diary excerpt and found nothing on that subject, I placed the source on the shelf and continued with my other tasks. Not until I read Laurel Ulrich’s book on the midwife did I realize the possibilities of this plebeian diary. The midwife Martha Ballard lived at the same time as the Russian merchant and faithfully recorded her diary entries over the course of many years just as the merchant had. If Ulrich could bring her subject to life on the basis of such material, perhaps I could achieve something similar. Soon after I read Ulrich’s book, a colleague asked me for an essay on identity. That was the start of my work on what eventually became *A Russian Merchant’s Tale*, a book done in imitation and appreciation of Laurel Ulrich’s study.<sup>4</sup> Her pioneering work allowed me to recognize a good source.

If the source you need to answer a question does not exist, you may be able to create it. About 40 years ago a team of Swedish specialists was doing highly refined statistical calculations of the demographic transition in their country in an effort to discover the reasons for the change to smaller families. Someone not involved in the project pointed out that women who started families in that era were still alive. Why didn’t the researchers ask them directly why they decided to have fewer children? Good idea. The researchers soon turned their statistical analysis into an oral history project.

This story was on my mind when in the 1980s I launched a study of the cultural factors that may have influenced the very different rates of infant and childhood mortality among ethno-religious groups in Russia. Because observed differences had been most marked in villages and the majority of women had resided in the countryside until the 1960s, I wanted to focus on village life. But the Soviet Union was not Sweden. Travel restrictions and surveillance of foreigners made field work nearly impossible, and I was resigned to using ethnographic and statistical materials in urban repositories. Then, unexpectedly, as I was finishing my library spadework and heading to Russia on a sabbatical leave, the Soviet system began to disintegrate. Possibilities for research opened as never before. When I asked my Russian and Tatar friends about oral interviewing of villagers, they expressed enthusiasm and willingness to help. Although it was still not legal for an American to be visiting villages without permission and a Party handler, I ignored these constraints and began field work in the spring and summer of 1990. What I had projected as a study based on written documents suddenly found its appropriate source in the recorded voices of the women who, better than others, could explain the motivations for the changes in their ideas and practices of childbirth and childcare. The result was *Village Mothers: Three Generations of Change in Russia and Tataria*.<sup>5</sup>

One final example. My colleague, Dror Wahrman, was walking through the Indianapolis Museum of Art a couple of years ago and noticed a trompe l'oeil of a letter rack by a minor Dutch/English artist who worked around 1700. Something about the figures in the painting drew Wahrman back for a second look and then propelled him on a search that uncovered 60 similar paintings and revealed the artist to be a sophisticated and incisive critic of modernity, a postmodernist 300 years ahead of his time, who by means of a mysterious code and shadowy games embedded in his paintings called attention to the cost of the new economy of mass printing: deterioration of information as it spreads, errors introduced in cheap printing, and erosion of authenticity. Realizing the implications of the paintings, Wahrman put his current project on hold and threw himself into a study of this remarkable artist. The result is a fascinating new book.<sup>6</sup>

Good sources are often right in front of us. The danger is that our narrow focus on a current project may cause us to miss something altogether new and revealing. The scientists we remember are the ones who saw something anomalous and realized that it was not a mistaken observation but a path to a new paradigm. Historians do not exactly deal in paradigm shifts, but they can stay open to discoveries that lead to fresh insights. The key is to keep abreast of the historical and theoretical debates in one's own and related fields. A broad acquaintance with questions animating the research in the social sciences, literature, and topic areas of history outside our specialty can alert us to the relevance of a source that otherwise might seem unrewarding or insignificant.

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## Notes

1. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error*, transl. Barbara Bray (New York: Random House, 1979); Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, transl. John and Anne Tedeschi (New York: Penguin Books, 1982).
2. Constraints of another kind were also powerful in those days. Soviet archivists and librarians would not allow researchers to stray very far from a pre-approved "scientific plan." If I had moved my focus to this new topic, my requests for documents on it may have been refused or stonewalled.
3. Greg Dening, *History's Anthropology: The Death of William Gooch* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1988).
4. Full title: *A Russian Merchant's Tale: The Life and Adventures of Ivan Alekseevich Tolchënov, Based on His Diary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).
5. Published by Indiana University Press, 2000.

6. Wahrman's book on this subject will appear from Oxford University Press next year. The working title is *The Collier Code: A Tale of Art and Obsession at the Threshold of the Modern World*.

### **The Poetics of History from Below**

Marcus Rediker, September 2010

*In memory of Dennis Brutus (1924–2009)*

*Noralee Frankel, who coordinates this “Art of History” series, writes: Created on the suggestion of the AHA’s Graduate and Early Career Committee, the series was launched in December 2009 with an essay by Caroline Bynum on how she trains her graduate students to think about the nature of scholarship. Articles by Lynn Hunt, who wrote on the interrelationship between thinking and writing; Dipesh Chakrabarty and Gordon Wood, who wrote—from different perspectives—on challenges of writing for public; followed. The series recommences in this issue with the following essay by Marcus Rediker on the poetry embedded in historical narratives. Future essays in the series will include those by David Ransel on the perfect source and Dane Kennedy on humor in history.*

My grandfather, the late Fred Robertson, influenced how I think about and write history. He died years before I decided to become a historian and he was not an academic, but he was a historian and an intellectual in his own way. He was a master storyteller.

This Kentucky coal miner was a larger-than-life figure in my youth. I fondly remember sitting with him at the kitchen table. In one hard hand he held a Lucky Strike. In the other hand he held a saucer of his beloved Maxwell House coffee, which he sipped that way even when it was no longer hot. In this posture he told endless stories to a boy who sat enthralled amid the pathos, humor, and quiet heroism of working-class life. His mood changed with the story. He laughed with his whole body, like the then-popular comedian Red Skelton, at his own funny parts. His visage grew dark and scary at moments of danger or injustice. His eyes danced with the drama of his words. I knew something big was coming when he paused, put the cigarette in the ashtray,

and set aside the saucer, freeing his hands for emphasis. His stories were vivid, complex, passionate, and somehow always practical. They featured apocalyptic Biblical language (a lot of hell-fire), long silences (with fateful stares), and curse words that were normally forbidden in our house (son-of-a-bitchin' this and that). He always managed to tell a big story within a little story. One of the stories I remember best concerned a vigilante hanging of a man in a coal village where he had once worked, Beech Creek, Kentucky. I don't remember why the man was hanged. Nor do I remember whether he was white or black; I don't think he told me. I do remember my mother walking into the kitchen, expressing her doubt without saying a word about whether I should be hearing this particular story. What I remember most of all was how his telling of the story made clear how wrong the hanging was, and how a real-life lynching looked nothing like what we had all seen on television. He described a frantic, terrifying struggle, with legs flailing, ugly cheers from the crowd, and in the end a limp body with dangling eyeballs and wet pants. The storyteller's sympathy was firmly with the victim, whose deadly ordeal he had made terribly, hauntingly real.

My grandfather, the poetic storyteller, was perhaps the oldest and deepest influence on my life's choice to write "history from below," the variety of social history that emerged in the New Left to explore the experiences and history-making power of working people who had long been left out of elite, "top-down" historical narratives. He educated me about the ways of the world and at the same time about the fundamentals of storytelling. He helped me to see and appreciate the poetics of struggle. And he also helped to shape my sense of the art and craft of history.

Like all good storytellers from Shakespeare to Brecht, my grandfather was a good listener. He had a canny ear for how people talked; he was attuned to voices, rich and poor, black and white, male and female, adult and child. Even animals sometimes talked in his stories; a touch of Uncle Remus! He spoke metaphorically: a crowd of people might be "as big as Coxe's army"; something moving fast "took off like Moody's goose." I listened and learned about Coxe, but I never could figure out who Moody was or why his goose was in such a hurry.

I remember hearing while I was in graduate school an admonition about archival and primary sources: "Go on reading until you hear voices." It seemed an exhortation to schizophrenia at the

time, but memories of my grandfather helped me to grasp the point: humanize the sources, humanize the story. Learn to listen. And, of course, the recovery of voices has been a central purpose of history from below from the very beginning, but storytellers were way ahead of us.

The people I study did not often speak through documents of their own making, so it is not easy to hear them. This is the classic challenge of history from below, and many good books have addressed it. I listen by paying close attention to the meaning of words. I spend a lot of time looking up chronologically specific meanings in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. As an 18th-century specialist, I am especially fond of the words and meanings to be found in *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, compiled by Francis Grose and first published in 1785. In writing *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, a study of deep-sea sailors in the first half of the 18th century, I always had those wondrous things called maritime dictionaries close at hand to help me grasp the material conditions, cooperative work, communications, and consciousness of seagoing proletarians. I also paid close attention to sailors' speech wherever I could find it, and to their own tradition of storytelling, or yarn-spinning. In his brilliant essay "The Storyteller," Walter Benjamin explained that historically there have been two main types: the peasant storyteller who had a deep knowledge of locality and its lore, and the sailor storyteller who brought exotic tales from afar. My grandfather was, I suppose, a variant of the former; he helped me to understand the people I studied, the very embodiment of the latter.<sup>1</sup>

My grandfather chose his words carefully, showing me how a word, a phrase, or a quotation can bring a historical moment to life, even sear it into memory. And what could be more poetic than a note sent by a would-be arsonist to a gentleman in 1830: "My writing is bad but my firing is good my Lord." One can almost hear the defiant laughter behind the writing. Such words were often speech committed to paper and preserved in the archive of "crime"—always an important place for those who would reconstruct the lives of the expropriated.<sup>2</sup>

Having heard the power of poetry in stories, I make it a point to use verse as historical evidence wherever possible. For example, poetry is central to *The Many-Headed Hydra*, a book Peter

Linebaugh and I wrote about the motley proletariat of the Atlantic from 1600 to the 1830s. It appears in almost every chapter, some 50 times throughout a book that begins with William Shakespeare (*The Tempest*) and ends with William Blake (“Tyger, Tyger”). Famous, canonical poets (Shakespeare, Milton, Blake, Shelley) rub elbows with largely unknown proletarian poets (Thomas Spence, Joseph Mather, and the ever-scribbling “anonymous,” a preferred female writer’s name for centuries). Contemporary poets such as the Martinican Aimé Césaire appear to summarize themes and ideas, for example, about the serpentine continuities of resistance.

Poetry can get the historian close to the experience and consciousness of working people and can evoke people, places, and events in multidimensional, dynamic ways. Sailor-poet James Field Stanfield crafted memorable, graphic images in his epic poem “The Guinea Voyage” and in his grimly poetic letters about life aboard a slave ship. He described, for example, the second mate of his vessel, lying sick, near death, on the medicine chest, his long hair clotted with filth as it brushed the deck of the ship. He depicted the nightmarish enslavement, flogging, and eventual death of an African woman named Abyeda. Such images can arrest the reader as surely as a surrealist object, disclosing in poetic fashion important connections, relations, parallels, and unities. Christopher Hill once wrote, “Good—imaginative—history is akin to retrospective poetry. It is about life as lived—as much of it as we can recapture.”<sup>3</sup>

Poetry written by workers may be rare, but poetry to be found in action, in resistance by workers, is plentiful; it can be found most everywhere. My grandfather taught me to look for it. To give an example: I discovered a profound one-word poem in a memoir written by Silas Told, a sailor turned Methodist minister who described a drama aboard the slave ship *Loyal George* in 1727. An enslaved man had decided to die by hunger strike. Captain Timothy Tucker tried to force him to eat. He horse-whipped him to a raw and bloody pulp. He threatened to kill him. The nameless man uttered one word: *adomma*, so be it. Captain Tucker placed a loaded pistol to his forehead and repeated the demand to eat. Again: *adomma*. The captain fired and the blood gushed but the man stared him directly in the face and refused to fall. The captain cursed, called for another pistol, and shot the man in the head a second time. Again he would not drop, to the astonishment

of all who looked on. A third shot killed the man but by this time an insurrection had exploded among the enslaved, who were inspired by the man's resistance and outraged by his treatment.

It is impossible to know how many of the hundreds of people who witnessed this incident decided, like Silas Told, to tell the story, punctuated by the word *adomma*. I suspect many told it, and retold it, in several languages, on plantations, in urban workshops, on docks, and in ships, over many years. The nameless African man gives precise expression to a definition of poetry offered by Ann Lauterbach: "Poetry is the aversion to the assertion of power. Poetry is that which resists dominance." This is crucial to history from below.<sup>4</sup>

All good storytellers tell a big story within a little story, and so do all good historians. It can be done in many ways. In my work, the big story has always been the violent, terror-filled rise of capitalism and the many-sided resistance to it from below, whether from the point-of-view of an enslaved African woman trapped in the bowels of a fetid slave ship; a common sailor who mutinied and raised the black flag of piracy aboard a brig on the wide Atlantic; or a runaway former slave who escaped the plantation for a Maroon community in a swamp. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz once remarked that the small fact of sheep-stealing speaks to the big issue of revolution because the storyteller (in his case, the ethnographer) finds connections between the two.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, I remember my grandfather and remind myself that the historian, like the storyteller, is not above the fray. One of the big questions in the Kentucky coal fields in the 1930s was, which side are you on? In that spirit, I try to develop an ethical relationship with the oppressed and exploited people I study. The relationship is imaginary but no less important for that. In writing *The Slave Ship*, I asked myself repeatedly, from the beginning of the project to the end, how can I do justice to the people aboard the floating dungeons and what they experienced? The answer is to show retrospective solidarity and "accompany" them through their history, to use a term proposed by Staughton Lynd to describe an egalitarian relationship between historians/intellectuals and movements of working people from below.<sup>6</sup>

Walt Whitman made the same point in *Leaves of Grass*. He wrote of:

The hounded slave that flags in the race, leans by the fence, blowing, cover'd with sweat;  
The twinges that sting like needles his legs and neck—the murderous buckshot and the bullets;  
All these I feel, or am.

I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of the dogs,

Hell and despair are upon me, crack and again crack the marksmen;

I clutch the rails of the fence, my gore dribs, thinn'd with the ooze of my skin;

I fall on the weeds and stones;

The riders spur their unwilling horses, haul close, Taunt my dizzy ears, and beat me violently  
over the head with whip-stocks.

Agonies are one of my changes of garments;

I do not ask the wounded person how he feels—I myself become the wounded person;

My hurts turn livid upon me as I lean on a cane and observe.

Whitman exaggerates to make a point: he cannot “become” the fugitive, but he can demonstrate sympathetic understanding of the historical subject. As a poet he can join the struggle and convey it to readers. In the end I strive to write history that is vivid, complex, passionate, and practical. I try to make it real and pose questions of justice as I lean on a cane of social and temporal distance and observe. My grandfather would have expected nothing less, dadgummit.

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## Notes

1. Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” in his *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 83–109.

2. Quoted in E. P. Thompson, "The Crime of Anonymity," in Douglas Hay, Peter Linebaugh, and E. P. Thompson, eds., *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), 297.
3. Christopher Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (London: Allen Lane, 1993), 438, 437.
4. Ann Lauterbach, "Links Without Links: The Voice of the Turtle," *American Poetry Review* 21 (1992), 37–38.
5. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 23.
6. Staughton Lynd, "Oral History from Below," *Oral History Review* 21 (1993), 1–8.

## **Managing the Terror**

Brad Gregory, January 2009

This essay addresses a challenge—or perhaps the sense of abject terror—that confronts everyone who has ever written a history dissertation. We might call dissertation writing the fourth of the five terrors of graduate school (the first three being the uncertainty of whether you’ll get accepted into your favored program, the anticipatory dread prior to taking exams, and the daunting imperative of choosing a dissertation topic; the fifth is the anxiety of going on the job market). Typically, you’ve been deep in the relevant scholarship and sources for two or more years. You’ve compiled hundreds of files of notes, notes on your notes, folders with handwritten addenda to your notes from days spent sans laptop, and notes-to-self about what to do with your notes. You look at these files and piles, then you look at your bookshelves filled with historical monographs. You wonder: how can I turn this mess into something resembling those books? You consider making a grand performative gesture about the putative arbitrariness of narrative, coherence, and rationality within the discipline—“I’ll just bind my notes as they are and turn them in as my dissertation!”—but then you remember your committee members and hopes of finding employment as a history professor, not as a note taker.

Although creativity perhaps cannot be taught to historians, the terror of turning notes into narrative can be managed. Writing history requires a demanding combination of discrete intellectual abilities: the mastery of relevant sources, knowledge of pertinent scholarship, self-awareness of one’s own methodological and theoretical assumptions, and an ability to combine these to generate coherent, sustained prose that is both true to the past and intellectually compelling. Anyone who thinks this sounds easy has never tried it. There are multiple ways to go about it—historical projects are themselves hugely diverse, and individuals work best in different ways. In lieu of any master plan, I hope that some of the following nine points will be helpful as you begin or continue to transform masses of notes into a successful dissertation—which means not only writing a draft, but also submitting a finished dissertation that is the best it can be.

### **1. Study Monographs as Models**

When you're faced with turning your notes into persuasive historical prose, you don't have to reinvent the wheel. See how great historians have done it—especially in first books, since these are the scholarly products closest to a dissertation. Although you don't have access to their notes and drafts, you do have their footnotes, quotations from primary sources, and acknowledgments of theoretical underpinnings. From these you can get an idea of how they moved from your current stage to the published monograph that you admire. Think backwards, as it were, from their narrative and analyses to their sources, a valuable exercise even if it's not a work in your field. Study how great historians organize material and think in section- and chapter-length chunks, integrate primary sources with background scholarship, balance paraphrase with direct quotations, combine the concrete and particular with the abstract and analytical, and make successful transitions from one paragraph to the next. Their outstanding books were once piles of notes, too.

## **2. Make a Provisional Chapter Outline**

Making a chapter outline might seem like putting the cart before the horse—presumably you need to know what your overarching narrative is in order to conceptualize its subdivisions. How can one imagine parts of an as-yet undetermined whole? To write history you must bring your intellect to bear on your sources. You must *decide* what your narrative is and how to structure it, which normally involves a dialogical process of coming to see how plausible parts (usually “chapters”) relate to potential wholes. So while respecting chronology and what is already known, you must think and reflect. When considering possibilities and making a provisional chapter outline, don't worry about whether things will turn out as you envision them. The important thing is to think hard enough to consider seriously some possibilities. Is yours a before-and-after single story?

Will it be one narrative told chronologically from start to finish? Or will it consist of multiple narratives embedded within an analytical structure with a different organizational rationale? Is it, for example, about the ways in which multiple individuals or groups experienced common changes, and so best organized by chapter according to their respective perspectives? Most graduate students, while reading sources, are simultaneously thinking about possible narratives and ways to organize their material. I did, and I urge my graduate students to do likewise; indeed, it seems impossible to separate the reading of sources and taking of notes from decisions about what you're reading, why you're reading it, the questions you're asking, and the sorts of answers you're getting or not getting, all of which are related to certain possible narratives and not others.

Implicit in this research activity is a range of possible ways to organize your material, but certainly not an infinite range. Guiding questions have shaped what you've read, and source content affects what arrangements of the material are possible. As you're considering potential outlines, make chronologies of key events and where crucial sources fit; this can remind you of much more than you can hold in your head, stimulating reflection about the relation between the parts and the whole. It can be useful to draft multiple chapter outlines, each reflecting different ways of organizing your material—potential advantages and disadvantages emerge by comparison and contrast. Remember that you're not bound to stick with the chapters you think might work. If they won't, you'll find out soon enough. You can always change your mind.

### **3. Reacquaint Yourself with Your Notes in Light of Your Provisional Outline**

A big difference between writing a dissertation and an article is that a dissertation usually involves more research than most of us can remember. Most of us probably have had the experience of finding our notes on a source about which we had forgotten entirely. Moreover,

most scholars don't remember everything significant about a source on which they've taken notes. And new questions arise in the course of research that we didn't have when we first took the notes. All of this means that you can't just take notes and forget about them until you're ready to start drafting. You need to make them alive and "in play" with each other and in your thinking. So with a provisional chapter outline, and before you start drafting a chapter, it's important carefully to reread your notes and review secondary scholarship relevant to your prospective chapters. (This might take weeks, but it will be time well spent.) Here specific working methods vary considerably. I proceed in what is now perhaps an old-fashioned way: I print hard copies of all my notes and work by reading, rereading, annotating in the margins, and crossreferencing what might be relevant to a particular chapter. Then I think about patterns, or thematic clusters, or specific chronology, depending on what it seems the chapters require, and write out abbreviated references to sources for potential placement within a chapter. This process is somewhat analogous to conceiving the relationship between the whole of one's dissertation and its provisional chapters, but with a finer grained conceptualization—sections within chapters, subsections within sections, events and reactions to them within narrative strands—all provisionally guided by the overarching structure of the chapters within the whole. If there are significant problems with the arrangement of chapters, they'll usually become apparent at this stage, when you see whether (and if so, how compellingly) your evidence can sustain your argument. If you don't have the evidence, perhaps you need to read more (see below); if your evidence doesn't fit well your provisional narrative and chapters, you might need to alter them. There's nothing wrong with that. Focus on the best possible final product; don't cling stubbornly to the first imagined arrangement of your masses of material.

#### **4. Break Big Tasks Down into Little Ones**

Much of the terror involved in writing a dissertation comes from its size. For nearly everyone, writing a dissertation is an unprecedentedly ambitious and arduous endeavor, and we are tempted to consider it as a whole and feel overwhelmed. And it is overwhelming, if you think: "I've got

300 or 400 pages to write; the most I've ever written is 40; how am I going to do it?" The answer, of course, is simple: one sentence and one page at a time. No dissertation or book has ever been written in any other way. No one can write a dissertation in a month or a chapter in a day. But you can write a page or two or five in a day, and as the days pass, the pages accumulate. In one way or another, everyone ends up doing this in practice—but conceiving it as an incremental process helps psychologically. After writing three pages, don't say, "That's only one percent of the whole dissertation, the notes are sketchy, plus I've got to reread that article and make sure I didn't misrepresent the author"; say instead, "At this rate, I'll have 20 pages done this week, which is decent productivity for a first time through." Which, it is. Reward yourself for steady productivity (watch a movie in the evening, have a drink with friends, or go to the gym).

## **5. Don't Let the Editor Overwhelm the Writer**

Most scholars agree that revising is easier than writing a first draft. But in proportion as one cares about beautiful, analytically precise prose, a premature editorial impulse can stifle writing and stymie productivity. Some of you have perhaps experienced an internal dialogue something like this:

*Editor:* That sentence is trash—the second adjective is redundant, and there's your chronically overused verb, "emerge." Not to mention that the prose has no life, no rhythm. Can you really imagine reading that in print? Ugh.

*Writer:* I'm just trying to get something down; I'll go back and fix it later.

*Editor:* Why not fix it now? If you know it's lousy, make the corrections. Maybe you'll forget them otherwise.

*Writer:* If I interrupt my train of thought, I might forget where that's going, and right now that matters more. I need to work this quotation into this paragraph.

Whether or not you're prone to something like this, try to draft without worrying about style. You'll revisit what you draft many times, and can concentrate then on improving the clarity, eloquence, logic, and rhythm of your prose. Of course, your initial prose has to be clear and

coherent enough to sustain the flow of what you're saying, something that comments such as "Insert Southern view of slavery" usually can't do. I typically start a day by reworking what I've written the day before, catching awkward phrases, lousy word choices, overused adverbs and semicolons, and the like. I might spend an hour or two on this. This revision invariably improves the original, which puts me in a good frame of mind for the current day's drafting. With this habit I also retrace the previous day's train of thought as a prelude to pursuing it further.

## 6. Resist the Temptation to Include All Your Notes

Great history is marked not by how many of a scholar's research notes are included in the narrative, but by whether what is included persuasively serves the purposes at hand. More is not always better, and very often less is more. It can be initially painful to leave out, say, a body of sources on which you spent two weeks of archival work ("I did all that for nothing?"), but it's often advisable. It's unlikely you knew exactly what your dissertation was going to be about and what specific form it would take before beginning the research. Almost certainly you weren't sure whether everything on which you took notes would turn out to be important. So it's extremely unlikely that all your notes will find a fitting place in your dissertation. The question for turning notes into narrative is not "How am I going to fit *everything* I have into my dissertation?" but rather "*Drawing on* what I have, how can I write the best dissertation possible?" Prudent concision, not bulk, is a virtue in historical scholarship, not only in writing prose but also in using evidence. Writing history is so difficult partly because of the constant, multilevel decision making that it demands about what to include and exclude. Seeing that something should not be forced into your account often becomes clear only after you've drafted a section or chapter. If in doubt, try at first to work it in—or consider whether it might fit somewhere else, or is best addressed in a stand-alone article. You can always return to something that you leave unused in your dissertation

## **7. Return to Research Mode Whenever Necessary**

This suggestion is the converse of point six: just as you should exclude notes if it becomes clear that they don't serve your purposes, so you should return to primary and secondary sources if it becomes apparent that you lack either the evidence or the knowledge (or both) to draft what you're about to draft. This happened to me multiple times while working on my dissertation. I realized I knew next to nothing, for example, about the person who was ostensibly the subject of my next paragraph. What then? You go and learn something about what you need to know. This might be as simple as checking a biographical dictionary or encyclopedia entry; at the other extreme, it might mean a return trip to an archive. It is fairly rare for a historian's research and writing to be two entirely discrete, sequential phases. In part, that's because the actual process of writing usually discloses strands of exposition that weren't envisioned when a chapter or section was outlined, and for which you don't have enough material. The relationship between research and writing is usually a matter of degree: just as you might make diagrams, sketch possible chapter outlines, draw up chronologies, and jot interpretations of sources as you're taking notes on them while you're still primarily in research mode, so you can (and when called *forshould*) return to reading and taking notes in order to acquire the basis necessary for drafting when you're primarily in writing mode.

## **8. When You're on a Roll, Ride It**

Some historians, including dissertation writers, can write with remarkable regularity—say, five hours per day, yielding a predictable average of three double-spaced pages per day, six days a week. I envy them. Based on my experience and that of most colleagues I know, greater variability is the norm. Sometimes the upcoming paragraph frustrates us for hours, but at other times we're "in the zone": the argument and evidence for a section mesh beautifully, and we find the sentences almost writing themselves. It is as if the muse of history were integrating sources and analysis and suggesting unanticipated insights. When this happens, stay at your keyboard

longer than usual. Often that's easy to do, because the experience is energizing and you don't want to relinquish your intellectual high. But beware the temptation to work so hard and long that you skip meals, sacrifice sleep, and work yourself toward exhaustion or illness. (This is especially a danger when research is going well.) Different people have different work habits, but whether you're a "morning person" or a "night person," try blocking out chunks of time each day in which you resolve to be at your computer writing (not checking email, surfing the web, or browsing through YouTube). Then, if things are going well, expand your working hours so long as you don't compromise your intellectual edge or your health.

## **9. When the Writing Bogs Down, Do Something Else Productive**

There is perhaps nothing more difficult in being a historian than turning notes into one's first draft. It's unrealistic to expect that every day, you're going to cruise toward your goal without snags, letdowns, mood swings, intellectual quandaries, and other realities than impede your progress. When the drafting hits a wall, turn to something else that you'll have to do prior to handing in the finished dissertation. Revise a previous chapter or rework an unsatisfactory paragraph; read articles that you've printed out but haven't had time to read; clean up your notes from another chapter; recheck your translations from non-English sources. All of these things need doing before you submit your dissertation for approval; it doesn't matter in what order you do them. Keep your eyes on the prize of the finished, polished dissertation.

I can't promise that these nine suggestions will impart historical creativity, but I hope they will be useful in managing the task of writing your dissertation. Remember that it's been done before, many thousands of times—in the phrase from Walter Johnson's book, "soul by soul," and sentence by sentence.

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### **Finding the Story**

Deborah E. Harkness, January 2009

Today, you are going to write. You sit at your desk, surrounded by stacks of books, piles of index cards, an outline for chapter one that came to you in Starbucks and is written on a napkin, sharp #2 pencils, different colors of post-its, one blank yellow notepad, a steaming cup of coffee, and your computer. Two hours later you are sitting exactly where you began. The only thing that has changed is that the coffee is gone. Not a single sentence made its way from your brain to your fingers in 120 minutes, you have had no paradigmatic breakthroughs, and you certainly cannot proclaim the morning’s exercise in “writing” a success. You turn off your computer and leave the scene. It will be weeks before you write again.

Every historian has days like this, even the most productive. Sometimes the words do not come easily or at all. What you need to do in these cases is to reconnect to the story that you want to tell. In 1895 the French author Jules Renard jotted down the following in his diary: “The story I am writing exists, written in absolutely perfect fashion, some place, in the air. All I must do is find it, and copy it.” In this essay, I am going to talk about how to move from the notes you have taken and the *plans* you have made to *write* and begin to actually write by finding the story that is lurking somewhere between your research, argument, historiography, and bibliography. It may seem to some that I am focusing too much on the work of the writer—and perhaps worse, the work of a writer of fiction—but I believe that the work of the historian and the writer are intertwined.

The reason why history and writing are tangled together is because, at the most basic level, all historians are storytellers. We come from a long lineage of epic poets, chroniclers, and bards. Despite this illustrious family tree it is all too easy, when faced with considerable professional pressures, to focus all our energy on research, argumentation, and historiography. It is true that no excellent work of history can fall short in any of these areas. At the same time, however, no excellent work of history can simply report findings, recount the arguments made by others, and add a unique contribution to the mix. What distinguishes a good work of history from a great work are the stories a historian pieces together. Without a story, your writing experience can become mechanical and heavy, without human warmth or interesting plot twists and turns. Such writing can make the task of reading dull and uninspiring.

This is not what any of us wishes for when we set out to write. With so many other matters of concern on a historian’s mind—accuracy, originality, and clarity, to name a few—perhaps failing to tell a good story can be considered a forgivable oversight. Nathaniel Hawthorne is reputed to have said that “Easy reading is damn hard writing.” But it is only through the act of hard writing that we truly come to terms with the marvelous complexity of history, and are forced to see the nuances in our evidence.

There is help for those of us interested in damn hard writing, and much of it comes from other writers—particularly writers of fiction. I particularly recommend Ann Lamott’s best-selling *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, an inspiring book about the process of writing. Lamott gives struggling writers no magical cure-alls or false promises that everything is going to be easy and all right. She acknowledges that writing consumes your life, and that writing is never smooth but full of false starts and dead ends. And she talks openly and honestly about just how hard it is to find the story and tell it well.

When setting out to write, think like a *writer* and begin paying attention to two basic, yet crucial, elements: characters and plot. It is going to feel strange to suspend your concerns for evidence, argument, and accuracy and to instead focus on character and plot. But the most vital elements of any story well told are the characters. When you have a moment, jot down at least one central character in your dissertation or book. One day when you are stuck, go ahead and list them all, and keep updating the list as you find new characters and abandon old ones. Whenever you are mired down in your work you can always turn your attention away from the accusatory blinking cursor and toward writing up brief, one- or two-paragraph biographical sketches for each of them. At first, the sketches will read like bad entries in *Who’s Who*, full of names and dates and places. But as you come to learn about your characters, you will be able to breathe more life into them. Knowing what someone liked for breakfast, who their neighbors were, and what books they owned, will lead in ways you cannot predict to a multi-dimensional sense of your research subjects. The final goal of collecting this information and writing up character sketches is to reach a point in writing where the historian stops telling her readers about a character in pages upon pages of descriptive prose and begins showing them instead using powerful images and the insights that come only after years of close companionship with your subjects.

Getting to know your characters depends on deep research in a wide variety of sources; it also depends on listening to them and asking the right kinds of questions. The most important thing to know about any character—and the hardest to figure out—is what matters most to them. Lamott again offers help to historians by asking writers to uncover and then articulate “what each

character cares most about in the world because then you will have discovered what's at stake" in the story that you are trying to tell. / The question of what is at stake is the great bugaboo of historical writing and argumentation. Figuring out what's most important to one or all of your main characters brings clarity to your argument, gives structure to your book, and helps you to find the story.

Of course, not all historians are telling stories primarily about humans. I think that Lamott's advice is useful even if you are working with inanimate objects and numbers—I suspect there are still some human beings wandering through the rooms full of steam engines and demographic data that you have collected. One possibility for such cases is that you can ask yourself what is most important about your steam engine? Is it where it was made? What about who made it, who owns it, or where they bought it? Knowing the answer is as important—perhaps even more important—when some of your characters are cities, steam engines, and trees as when they are poets, parlor-maids, or public librarians.

There are times when, to your horror, the main characters turn out to occupy minor roles in your story. It is easy when you begin to assume the main characters are the people you have heard of before and already know something about thanks to the work of other historians. When writing about Elizabethan natural history, for example, I naturally assumed that the period's most famous botanist would be the main character in my story. I tried everything to keep him in the spotlight, but he kept getting upstaged by apothecaries and silk merchants no one knew much about. This is a good thing. Who wants to hear a story that only contains familiar characters? Be courageous, and if you think Hawthorne's neighbor's cousin's gardener is a main character, stick with it and see what happens. You might surprise yourself—and the rest of us—by being right.

As you develop your characters, you will find connections between them that you never imagined. A fiction writer like Anne Lamott would tell you that this is the moment when you see the first glimmers of your story's plot. The relationships among the main characters create the narrative arc or plot for a work of fiction—and it does for a work of history, too. A useful formula

for developing plots and subplots is described by Anne Lamott as “setup, buildup, and payoff.” The setup that most historians use—and sometimes overuse—is the telling anecdote. In the setup we are introduced to main characters, and to the time period, place, and scope of the plot. For historians, the buildup includes the unfolding of subplots and the sub-arguments that they are associated with, the use of evidence to substantiate arguments, and the exploration of characters to show us what’s at stake. Finally, in any great work of history there is the payoff—that moment in a book when the pieces fall into place and you find yourself agreeing with the author’s claims about what is at stake. For most readers, the payoff of a great work of history is transformative, and we will never look at the major characters in the same way again.<sup>2</sup>

By getting to know your characters, and following the plot as it unfolds through relationships your characters have with each other, you will find the story that you are trying to tell. But finding the story, Anne Lamott warns us, “will often take place in fits and starts.” “Don’t worry about it,” she counsels. Just “keep trying to move the story forward. There will be time later to render it in a smooth and seamless way.” Let your characters surprise you, and let the plot unfold in ways you do not expect. To write is to accept that every word will change, that the story will be ornery, and that characters will refuse to behave.

We are all writers. Often, however, we confuse what E. L. Doctorow called “planning to write”—the “outlining ... researching ... talking to people about what you’re doing”—with actual writing. Doctorow clearly distinguished planning to write from writing. And it can be helpful for us to remember that distinction, too, or we are likely to remain stuck in the hunting and gathering stage of project development, endlessly returning to our notes and our archives without a word to show for it. We do so because we are frightened the enormous task before us, and we do so because the voices of our inner critics are so loud. But we also keep piling up books and filling out index cards because we have become so overwhelmed with information that we have lost the story, and can no longer find the main characters with two hands and a flashlight. Finding the story is a challenging task, and writing that story down and doing justice to it is even more difficult. Thinking about character and plot is one way to find the story and tell it in a

convincing and lively fashion. Nothing presented here is meant to substitute for the meticulous research, structured argumentation, and scrupulous reviews of the scholarly literature you have been trained to do. Instead, finding the story and then telling it well adds something to your existing, hard-won historical skills. In the very near future you will find yourself sitting in front of paper, typewriter, or computer. You will be trying to write. You may even be planning to write and thus armed with outlines, notes, and coffee. I hope that if you get that far, you will focus on your main characters, follow them as the plot unfolds, and begin to actually write.

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## **Notes**

1. Lamott, Bird by Bird, p. 55.
2. Lamott, Bird by Bird, pp. 58-62.

## **On Taking Notes**

Judith Walkowitz, January 2009

When I was first invited to participate in the “Notes to Narrative” forum, I was initially reluctant to publicize my messy notational practice. But friends told me that exposing the sheer

inefficiency of the process was a socially useful act that might prove reassuring and enabling to historians in the making.

I travel a long distance—to London, England—to visit the archives I often use; so my research trips tend to be highly compressed and focused on the acquisition of documentary materials rather than on sorting and processing them as I go along. As a social and cultural historian, I am always engaged in a double process of interpreting documents. I assess a document as both a source of historical information—evidence about what “happened” in the past—and also as a rhetorically constructed text and cultural representation.

Before going to the archives, I try to read in advance the secondary literature on my research topics, including popular histories, for two reasons. I need to know the received narratives about my historical subject and master a lot of historical detail. I also mine these texts for their archival citations. It is a rare occasion when I discover a source that has not been previously consulted by someone else (it is a delight but a rare occasion).

Unless I am going to the U.K. National Archives in Kew, where it is unnecessary to book a place in advance, I write ahead to archivists, make an appointment to visit the archives, and request documents in advance. I note the names of the archivists with whom I have corresponded and spoken. When I arrive, I attempt to establish cordial relations with them.

I arrive, equipped with a laptop computer, a battery and plugs, an external hard drive with many gigabytes of storage space, and a digital camera with at least one extra battery and a cable connection to the computer. I open up a Word document file for each source. I do not use a bibliographic system such as “Endnotes,” but I keep a running bibliography. I try to take stock of the file before I dig into the specifics of summary note-taking. I try to determine the conditions that generated this file: in the case of governmental files, was it a result of routinized oversight or was it the result of the disruption of routines by an outside force, such as a complaint or a

newspaper report about a scandal? I also try to describe the materiality of the file, its size, variety of paper, layers of communication, and chronological ordering.

I then take careful summary notes of what seem to be the most significant documents, with careful attention to their place in the sequence of the file, how much space they take up, and their rhetorical ordering and sequencing. I back up my files religiously on the external hard drive. I also open a second Word file, which I call “Idea File.” This is a space of free association, a form of uncensored writing that might well not see the light of day in any final text. This second file is intended (1) to engage in an active cognitive process or “engaged reading,” (2) to move to generalization while still staying very close to the textual particulars, and (3) to start the writing process as early as possible.

In this second file, I sometimes include a running commentary on what I think is going on in this document and how it might connect to other sources. I also write memos to myself about secondary or theoretical texts I need to consult in relation to this material. Most important, I record the details or features that strike me as surprising or telling: whether there are significant silences or elements that seem to be missing.

I also do a certain amount of photocopying and digital photography. I think it is a mistake to photograph or photocopy documents without simultaneously processing them into some form of notes and explanation. I treat both forms of reproduction as supplementary to the task of summary notations and engaged reading. I am selective about what I reproduce—I tend to reproduce the most important documents that would otherwise require a complete transcription, and then I also reproduce some supplementary documents. I keep a log of the documents I photograph or photocopy. Before I photograph, I place a rectangular piece of paper on the document that records its archival citation and maybe a keyword or two relating to its contents. To keep my notes in order when I am in “writing mode,” I print out notes from the computer and file them in file cabinets, arranging them alphabetically according to chapters. I keep a running index of this file system on my computer. I read over my hard-copy notes, annotating them and adding comments to idea files.

I index these notes in multiple formats. If I have a really long source file (say I have been working on a huge scrapbook collection of newspaper cuttings), I type up a compressed index of that file, with highlighted elements, using a split screen. In addition, I organize my notes into topics or themes by cutting and pasting text fragments and quotations, using a keyword search on my computer.

I then assemble a two-inch loose-leaf notebook. This contains a paginated table of contents and three sections. The first section is a summary of relevant secondary materials on the subject and occasional, suggestive excerpts from theoretical texts.

The second section consists of my various indexes, idea files, and topical arrangement of notes. The third section often contains the full, long source notes that are at the heart of the chapter, accompanied by some of the photographed or photocopied texts.

This tends to come to about 300 pages but it is mostly what I will need to write a chapter.

The indexing and compression process serves two functions: it is a primitive, homemade information retrieval system that helps me with paper management; in other words, it is an effort to stave off disorientation and distraction from too many documents. It is also an aid to memory. The process of producing these indexes helps me regain an active command over the texts I have read over a long time. No retrieval system can substitute for the historian's memory—but it can aid memory.

After all these maneuvers, my texts do not write themselves. I still have to engage in trial and error and multiple redrafts. I keep redrafting outlines. My organizational difficulties relate to negotiating foreground and dense, compressed background. I always have a lot of things going on in a text; or to put it more positively, I try to produce a multilayered text that does not appear to be too busy. It is a challenge for me to balance diachronic and synchronic elements in a text and sustain a narrative arc and build momentum, but I must say that my note-taking methods, unusual and idiosyncratic as they might seem, help me immensely in my writing.

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