

Don't Erase: Advice from the Spring of '95

I had intended for this month's blog posting to be about earthworms. I've been reading Charles Darwin's book on earthworms (*The Formation of Vegetable Mould through the Action of Worms, with Observations on their Habit*, first published in 1881) and had just purchased 300 red wigglers (*Eisenia fetida*) for a modest earthworm farm. I thought this would be an appropriate moment to share what I've recently learned about worms and describe our efforts to create a pleasant home for them at the Coe garden. But this past weekend, while reorganizing a stack of papers in my office, I came across the 2013-14 edition of *The Enchiridion*. This was the last handbook I assembled for the Coe Writing Center's undergraduate staff, published shortly before I retired as CWC Director. While leafing through the 144-page anthology, I came upon a document created by students in two Honors Composition classes I taught in the spring of 1995. Near the end of the term, I had asked each student to create a list of 5-10 pieces of advice they would give to the Spring '96 cohort. After creating a master list of their suggestions, I performed some minor editing and shared this compendium with many students I taught in the next two decades.

I was surprised, reading through this document, how frequently the students' advice applied to my current efforts trying to learn how to garden and how to write about gardens. Copied below is the 1995 document. In most instances I've allowed the advice, intended for an audience of first-year college students, to speak for itself. In a few instances, however, I have inserted parenthetical observations, commenting on the implications for my own situation.

~Bob

Don't Erase--And Other Advice

- Don't erase - you may later decide to use that information. Cross it out, but never erase.
- Make yourself believe that the work is due before the actual due date.
- Don't sit and stare at a blank computer screen. Write SOMETHING. It doesn't have to be related to anything - just so that it looks as if you've done something. Then start into the assignment. It's not so bad when you have something on the screen to start with.
- Don't waste your time writing a rough draft of a paper. Get on the computer and start typing. I find it much easier to stare at a blank screen than paper. It's also not as easy to crumple up the computer screen when you are pissed about not being able to think of anything else to write or if you don't like how it looks.
- Just sit back and let it flow. You may have a clogged drain once in a while, but look at it as a minor hairball, nothing a little Drano won't fix.
- Let your thoughts do the talking, your fingers do the walking.
- Write with whichever utensil feels most comfortable at the time. I have different utensil moods, e.g., the *I know I'll regret writing this pencil mood*; the *I'm blue so I'll use a blue pen mood*; the *wicked dark thoughts are swirling in my brain gotta use a black ball point pen mood*; the *happy colorful big writing with crayolas mood*. [In gardening, the use of specific tools is often critically important to the pleasures of the task. For example, I have several small hand hoes, but I have a Japanese twisted shank weeding sickle that fits perfectly in my hand and is always

my first choice when I am down on my hands and knees, weeding a flower bed.]

- Don't think when you are writing, just let the ideas go.
- Don't be afraid to try new ways of writing; surprise yourself.
- When you finish a draft, read it out loud to hear the words.
- Start small, don't start with world hunger, narrow the topic. Perhaps hunger in Cambodia.
Be specific.
- Be patient.
- Don't write in marker or ink if you are left handed; the marker/ink smears across your paper and on your hand.
- Write in crayon when you start getting too serious.
- Never work at a clean desk. Chaos stimulates the mind.
- A paper cut is the worst pain that you will get from writing.
- Write when it rains. Words sound better with the backdrop of rain behind them.
- Write lists like this one.
- Steal. Take words you like from other writers. Please amuse yourself and ask them if it's ok, especially if it's a noticeable word like Trefoils. The English language recycles a lot. Most people won't mind. [*Most gardening inspiration is stealing ideas from those who have gone before.*]
- Don't write while you're having sex. Most of the time it's too dark anyway.
- Put glossy black and white 8x10's of detested English teachers in your locker/room/car. Use them as gum receptacles.
- Don't live by the Girl Scout Law.
*On my honor I will try
to serve God, my country,
mankind, and to live by
the Girl Scout Law.*
You don't know what's going on in these phrases. Nothing is clear, except that you will have to be a slave to the universe. If you were serving everyone else, you wouldn't have time to write.
- Write what you feel, don't lie. If you felt it, write it. If it made you happy to find out your ex-boyfriend broke up with his girl friend, say so. Don't be afraid to be mean.
- The first draft is the first draft. Don't think you're a perfectionist and write the best papers the first time. There can always be room for improvement, and the "perfect paper" is never written. [*Nor is the perfect garden ever to be obtained. All I can do is do the best I can do.*]
- Show your papers to other people to get a fresh angle. After you have been working on a paper for a long time, you can see it only from your own narrow view. Other insights can give you new ideas of what to write about. [*Every time I walk around the garden with a visitor, I always discover something new, seeing the "text" with fresh eyes.*]
- Avoid writing a paper and revising it in the same day. Set it aside for a few days; that makes it much easier to do a good revision.
- Turn on the computer after waking in the morning and leave it on until just before climbing into bed. It should always be available for moments of innovation or creativity.

- Never discard a thought. Type the words before you determine their worth. Once you realize they don't belong, tailor the surrounding text or cut the words and leave them at the end of the composition. They'll be out of the way and won't demand that you use them, yet the option is there.
- Don't use *love* as a transitive verb for at least 15 years.
- Be open to revision. Although it's often disturbing to see your composition dissolve in the presence of criticism, improvement will be the only consequence. [*This advice reminds me of a remark made by President Eisenhower: "In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable." During the winter, my days are full of plans, but once I enter the garden in the spring, the plans never match with the reality. The planning, however, is invaluable.*]
- Read read read. Reading teaches you valuable tricks of writing, plus it can come in very handy for stealing ideas.
- Always let several people read your paper to get a variety of ideas about it. Your initial idea is seldom supreme.
- Try to write at the same computer every time. Familiarity breeds comfort.
- Don't be afraid to cut out a well-written sentence. It may not get along well with its fellow sentences.
- Drink the coffee from the Writing Center.
- Don't drink the Writing Center coffee and eat jolly ranchers at the same time.
- Avoid cliches like the plague.
- Memorize poetry lines. Someday you can use them.
- Never consider a paper complete. [*Eminently applicable to gardens.*]
- Only focus on one thing at a time, the words or the subject.
- Don't try to teach a pig to sing. It's a waste of time and it annoys the pig.
- Always leave the campground cleaner than you found it.
- Always read the fine print.
- Don't think that your paper is done. There is always room for improvement.
- Let a variety of people read your work; always let the person you are most intimidated by read it last.
- Do not sound flowery or brainy. Adverbs can become your worst enemy.
- Bold or underline the most important word or idea in your paper. Then concentrate on making sure that the reader would bold the same thing. [*For me a major challenge in gardening is trying to determine what are the key plants in a flower bed. Does this flower bed have a structural coherence? How should these plants be complementing each other?*]
- Sometimes, write a paper as one, giant paragraph. Then, after you're finished, separate it as necessary.
- Always allow yourself more time to write than you originally estimate. Although some people may claim to work best under pressure, it is always nice to have the extra time.
- Don't get into the habit of complaining about writing. If you hate an assignment, just do it and get it over with. The more you complain, the worse the paper will be.
- When revising, go through the paper several times, each time concentrating on a different

element that needs work.

- A good technique for writing quality poetry is to first write prose, then take out every third word and call those words a poem. This ensures ambiguity and hidden meanings.
- Build a trusting relationship with your audience. Tell them anything. If you're not willing to share something, don't feel as though you were obligated to share it.
- With writing, as in all things, "this too will end." As a writer, that's your job. Do it.
- When considering subjects for your poetry, confine your main subjects to the following list:

Rutabagas	The Donatist controversy
Lemon curry	Particle/wave theory of light
Earthquakes	Transverse myelitis
Tetrahedrons	Rogue elephants
The end of the world	

Avoid writing poetry that focuses on any of the following:

Emotions	Personal journeys
Nature	Chicken curry

These subjects are 'played out' and will bore your audience.

- Read your paper backwards, starting at the end and reading a sentence at a time. Errors are spotted more easily this way because your brain isn't just skimming the paper.
- Keep your mind open to any possible idea.
- Lower your standards. When your standards are lower, the writing is a lot easier. "Don't get it right, get it written" (James Thurber). [*Thurber's advice is never far from my thoughts; I would never get anything posted to the website without lowering my standards.*]
- Even though it's bad for my eyes, I like to type in the dark, with the monitor the only source of light. This allows me to concentrate on the screen and what I'm typing.
- When I write by hand, I notice emotion and haste. Type-written words are the same every time. They are good speed tools. If the purpose is to get as much as possible, type. If you prefer to look at the words and feel them, write on paper.
- Short sentences can summarize or throw the reader's mind into a completely different place. Jamaica's sunny today.
- Don't be afraid. [*Overcoming fear was a daily challenge when I first began working in the Alumni House Garden. I knew I didn't know what I was doing, and my inadequacies as a gardener were readily apparent. But eventually I decided to "hell with it." I will do this to please myself, and if the Administration doesn't like what I've done, they can fire me.*]
- Have fun. Writing is self expression. Enjoy yourself. [*Amen.*]
- Write some place that makes you want to write. Write with materials that make you want to write. You should feel like the words are being welcomed into existence.
- "Just get in the car and drive." Right now the computer I'm working on is my mind. With each keystroke I stimulate another idea to follow ones just completed. After pressing F11, Reveal Codes, I realized I had just put my writing philosophy in a tangible and visible form. The bottom of the screen is a mess with many crazy looking abbreviations and on top is a clean looking paper. From now on I will write with the codes on screen.

The content down below is the same but the material is raw and you have to dig in to understand it. When it comes time to revise, the codes will come off and a clean version will be produced, but for regular writing the split screen and the codes inspire me. [*Two observations. (1) This student's advice reminds me of a remark by E. L. Doctorow in a Paris Review interview: "Writing is like driving at night in the fog. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way." Equally true for gardening—except that for gardening, there may be temporary pauses but there's never a whole trip; it's a never-ending journey. (2) The "Reveal Codes" comment suggests that in 1995, Coe students were still using WordPerfect for composing their papers, the word processing program that I'm using as I type this parenthetical comment.*]

- Don't be afraid of rambling in the first draft.
- Jump at the chance to cut the beginning or the ending.
- Keep your mind open, but don't force writers' block (while writing, say to yourself "Boy I'm having fun" or "Yippie").
- Writing is an art, and art without admirers is like a fish without water.
- Stop looking at the paper as a writer and start looking at it from the reader's point of view. Writing what you feel is a good quality, but if nobody reads it, it is worthless.
- Keep a small notebook for ideas as they arrive.
- If a thought hits and you think, "Hey, this would be a great idea," don't wait to write it down.
- Bullshit until you think you can bullshit no more, and then keep bullshitting. People buy it and cook it up for dinner, so why ask why? Just do it.
- Life is more rewarding the more you can record and make something out of it. Carry paper and pencil to record daily thoughts and observances.
- Write for yourself. Don't listen to me, or teachers, or peers. If it sounds right, write it. Grammar is unimportant, dictionaries are wrong. No one has written what is inside you. You are original. Write in passive voice, use the first person, let your participles dangle. [*True for gardens as well. Every garden is unique: singular soil conditions, ad hoc combinations of plants, seasonal weather that's different every year, an evolving understanding of the relationships of plants and wildlife, each gardener's changing ideas of what a garden is trying to achieve. Gertrude Jekyll and Christopher Lloyd have been for me great teachers. I've tried to learn as much from them as I can. But, ultimately, I have to "use the first person" and figure out what might work right here, right now. I might even, on occasion, need to let a participle dangle.*]