

Some thoughts about the research phase of writing

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**Research precedes writing. Research takes many forms, and many writers don't consider their research to be research. It still is, and researching can be easier and more effective.**

Question, "How long does it take to write a book?"

Answer, "One week or thirty years depending on what you count."

That is not a cynical answer; it is candid and accurate. (1) Do you want to know how long it takes to type the words? (2) Do you want to know how long it takes to do the research and then type the words? (3) Do you want to know how long it takes to revise the words? (4) Do you want to know how long it takes to let the first words sit before reading them? (5) Do you want to know...it is easy to make many more questions. Let's try to focus on questions (1) and especially on (2).

For example, writing a ten-page article on a new technology, and frankly, why would anyone want to do such a thing, would take a week to do the research and a half day to type the words. Therefore, it takes one week.

Writing a 100-page fiction story about growing up in rural Louisiana, takes maybe three days to type the words. That, however, would be preceded by twenty years of growing up in Louisiana to live the research. Therefore, it takes twenty years.

How long does it take to write this paper? Two hours for the typing preceded by fifteen years for the writing practice.

Consider the research portion of writing. As stated earlier, writing about a new technology requires traditional research. The interconnected networks allow researching from the distraction of the dining room table or from the couch in front of the TV. Google, among others, permits the search for knowledge. There are various pieces of software for convenient note taking.

These things are great and have reduced the time and effort required to perform traditional term-paper-like research. Go to the library? Navigate the card catalog? Have a stack of note cards? These are from the 1970s (Yes. I am that old.).

Now consider research for a general topic like growing up in rural Louisiana or researching before writing. Those topics are broad and require great time. The time can be reduced for some writers and some topics depending on the one skill that is almost indispensable for a writer—a good “noticer.” (Pardon the spelling as I am creating words to condense and convey concepts.)

The noticer is that part of the writer that grabs something from the world and uses it for writing. The noticer may have four parts: (1) observer, (2) storer, (3) retriever, and (4) writer.

(1) The observer encompasses the five senses and the brain. It answers the questions, "Did you notice?"

Did you notice that odor? Did you notice that color? Did you notice that texture? Did you notice that sound? Did you notice that taste?

Moving beyond the senses, the brain combines things into concepts. Did you notice those six teenagers in that expensive car? Did you notice who was having a heated discussion? Did you notice how those two people in the grocery store came from opposite directions and glanced at each other? Did you notice the shift in the wind and the birds flying away? Did you notice how that one person's appearance was noticed by those other people?

The observer part of the noticer brings all these things and concepts to attention. The problem is, there is so much to observe. This means that the observer requires much attention and energy. With practice, however, observing becomes easier. It is easy to find more things to write than a lifetime of fast typing can accommodate.

Hence, we have (2) the storager. Store what is observed. For thirty years I have carried note cards and a writing instrument in my shirt pocket (I always have a shirt pocket.) Look unfashionable? Perhaps fashion is not for writers while researching.

And technology comes to the forefront. Enter the smartphone. It has a microphone and memory. It has an imager and memory. It fits in a pocket or hangs about the neck. It is the ultimate storager.

And yes, I still carry cards in my shirt pocket, and that is still my primary storager. Perhaps one day... Regardless of the technology used, notice, scribble or mumble enough to be bring the thought to mind. Have the storager tools in hand at all times.

Much is noticed; almost as much is stored. Now comes that part that hinders me most—(3) the retriever. It is easy to collect a shoebox full of cards storing noticings. Finding the right card at the right moment is not easy.

Technology helps again. Searching for typed text has been mastered. Searching for recorded voice is much better, but still has its problems. Searching for stored images has much further to go, but maybe one day. For now, transcribe the noticings into a computer storager of text. Use a storager that will be readable in one, five, and twenty years. That is a challenge, but possible.

The last piece of the noticer is (4) the writer. Writing the words is what happens after the research, after the noticer finishes. That is usually, but not always the case. Often the words written are not finished. They are a part of the noticer. Many writers wrote short pieces for decades. One serendipitous day, they reran the noticer and observed persons, places, things, emotions, concepts, and the like in all these writings. The decades of writings were a massaging of the retrieved. Research ended. Writing the words began.

Notice how (1) the observer part of the noticer occupied the most discussion? For me at least, observing takes the most time and energy. (2) Storing—the first part with the cards in my pocket—is quick. Transcribing to a computer is longer and tedious. Perhaps a technology will come that quickens that. (3) Retrieving has become quick. Actually, it is too quick and too easy. Deciding what becomes written words has become more difficult with all the good material available. (4) Writing what is retrieved has become easy for me. Practice—years of it—has made that so.

Exercise your noticer—all the parts. Then write the words.

When asked, tell them it didn't take much time at all.