

3 attitudes that produce soulful writing.



for many of us, the idea of writing and criticism go hand in hand. In school, we handed in a paper and got it back marked up in red with all of our mistakes glaring back at us. Even good writing programs and writers groups tend to emphasize bringing in the critical mind far too early and far too harshly. This can derail our confidence as writers and throw off the whole creative process. For this reason, it is important to develop clear awareness of the attitude you are taking toward your work, as it is far more relevant than craft or talent in opening up the possibilities in your writing.

I think of writing as having three stages: the generative stage, the reflective stage and the discernment stage. Of course, these are not true stages—they are more like states of mind or attitudes that need to prevail at different points in the process so that the work can come from a soulful place, deeper than the discursive mind. When you get in a

groove, all three can be weaving in and out of each other. The point is to learn how to tune into which attitude is most helpful for where you are in the process.

The generative stage.

When you have any sort of block to writing, or are just beginning to work on a piece and want to open the channels, it's time to be generative. Freewriting is great for this. You can use prompts pulled from writers you admire, from your own work, or from the Writing from the Soul site. Or just start writing freely without a prompt, if you are comfortable with that and have a topic area you want to explore. Whether or not you are working on a specific piece, it can be useful to do freewriting practice with a partner or group to keep the channels open, but of course, you can do it on your own as well. Using a timer and keeping your hand moving without stopping to think can help break through blocks and sluggishness.

This stage requires a generative attitude—the same attitude we practice in the Writing from the Soul freewriting circles. The generative attitude is open and non-critical. It is an attitude of presence, of receptivity and playful experimentation, where we are able to tolerate chaos and are willing to make a mess. The point at this stage is to take leaps and risks, to welcome everything, to associate freely and to experiment. It isn't about making logical sense or creating a perfect narrative, unless that is what naturally emerges. The freer you let yourself be, the better. Give yourself permission to write junk.

At this stage the only truly useful feedback from another is for them to reflect back what images or phrases were striking or vivid or memorable, what feelings were evoked, and what elicited curiosity or attention. Critical feedback or talking about what “works” or “doesn't work” is irrelevant and confusing at this stage, as is getting too many personal opinions on your subject matter.

The reflective stage.

After you've generated some material, it's time to tune into your inner response to your own work and the truth of where it suggests you go. What sentences or ideas stand out and have energy for you? Is there something that you glossed over because it scared you? What images strike you? Look for where the work is still in seed form—where it suggests more avenues for exploration—and investigate with further free writing.

As you delve further into the seeds in your work, a form will begin to emerge. The tone will suggest a poem, an essay, or a story—and sometimes you have the seeds of all three in one freewrite. If you are freewriting on a specific topic, you may sense where the work can begin and how it might be organized. Once you have clearly identified the areas to explore more deeply, you again need to engage the generative mind to create, and then go back to the reflective mind, until the piece is shaped into a coherent draft.

This stage is the beginning of craft, though it is highly intuitive at this point and still very much in the spirit of experiment and play. Don't spend too much energy refining: keep it rough enough that you can cut and move things easily as your ideas emerge and the seeds germinate. Bring in refinement only in the service of seeing more deeply into what you are trying to say.

Many writers begin with reflection. While this can work, it doesn't allow for the surprises that come if you allow yourself to write freely on your topic before beginning to shape it. Beginning with reflection can also make your mind contract, especially when you try to create a form before you have a full picture of how you feel and think about your topic. If you notice you are tight around your writing, it is a sign to free it up — get out of the “real” piece and do some throw-away freewrites on aspects of your topic to see what you discover.

Be careful about bringing others in to give feedback at the reflective stage, because you are still figuring out what you're talking about and what shape you want it to take. Sometimes, someone else's perceptions can throw you off from what is most important to YOU in the work, especially if they are highly skilled or opinionated, because it is natural for you to feel unsure at this stage.

If you do bring someone in, choose someone who can tune into the work itself—rather than some outer standard for the work—and help you to find your truth about it, rather than impose their opinions and judgments. A sensitive reader might find seeds you overlooked, so hearing their experience of reading—what they were moved by, what made them think, what attracted or confused them—might help reveal avenues for exploration that will deepen the work, as long as you tune into yourself before following their leads to be sure that what they say matches your own sense of the work.

The discernment stage.

Once the work is roughly in the form you want, it is time to bring in the discerning mind. Here you look more finely at the detail and artfulness of the work and refine it, just as though you have done the main carving of a marble sculpture and are now chiseling, polishing and shaping it into the aesthetic you're after.

Now you look for flaws: where does it need smoothing? Where did you speak in generalities—like writing “tree” instead of banyon, willow or fig? Where do you use clichés? Can you make that language fresh rather than relying on a standard phrase? Where did you use two adjectives where one would do? Where do the verbs get lazy and rely heavily on adverbs (-ly words) rather than on their own verve? Would your meaning be clearer if you rearranged paragraphs or sections? What can you cut to make the piece more essential and vivid? Did you pass over something important?

These are some of the craft issues you can tend to at this point.

Please remember that there is no need to worry about any of these issues in your draft until this stage, and having these issues is not a sign that you did something wrong. Writers can't attend to all the details at once. That's why we go through our work in layers, looking at this, then at that. This process doesn't have to be laborious. It can be deeply satisfying, to bring the work into greater depth and vividness. But for many of us, our experience of being judged by ourselves and others can create obstacles, so it is good to be gentle and monitor yourself for criticalness.

While the discernment phase is the proper place for what is commonly thought of as "critical feedback," I prefer to invite and give only "discerning feedback," as it is the mind that can discern the difference between smooth and rough that we are after, not the one that praises smoothness and criticizes roughness. The critical eye doesn't serve our souls. The discerning eye does. In that sense, there is no need for criticism in the process.

Keep in mind that too much praise can make us as sick as too much criticism. It can turn our attention outside of ourselves when the whole point is our inner process. If our intention is to write from a deep inner source, rather than to write an instruction manual, a genre story, or the latest literary trend, the real questions are always: Does the work satisfy us? Did we say what we meant to? Did we clarify our own mind and heart?

Your job is to make the piece, not to try and control how others receive it. If you write, you are a writer, whether you publish the work or not. Think of Emily Dickenson. Some poems she shared, but she died with most of her work in her desk drawer. She let the work serve foremost as her personal expression rather than as a product for consumption. That certainly didn't make her any less a writer.

The finished piece is an artifact of an inner process and may or may not be of use to others. Either way needs to be okay. Sometimes what we think will be widely shared is actually a stepping stone to something else that becomes our main work. For this reason,

it can be useful to think of each piece as a gift to yourself and others who resonate with it—whether one person or 100,000—rather than having a big agenda for where it goes, or relying on the reaction of the world to receive validation of your identity as a writer.

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