

A GUIDE TO WRITING AS DEEP PLAY.



Writing from the Soul is an approach to the writing process that helps us burrow beneath our conditioned, conscious mind into those places where our real concerns, values, truths and passions reside. In other words, into the habitat of the soul. For this to be possible, we need to drop ambition, judgment and control to make room for the unexpected, the forgotten and the fresh. Unfortunately, given our conditioning, this is easier said than done.

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 not only takes all the fun out of writing, it can also derail our confidence 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 attitude is far more relevant than craft or talent in opening up creative possibilities.

My ability to relax and tap into a deeper source of writing has become much more reliable since I reframed the process to create a habitat where writing can become a form of deep play. Maintaining such a habitat requires cultivating three basic

attitudes, or states of mind: the generative mind, the reflective mind and the discerning mind. These attitudes need to prevail at different points in the process for the work to come from a soulful place, which is underneath our surface thoughts. Once you learn to recognize and generate the attitude that is most helpful for where you are in the process, all three attitudes can be weaving in and out of each other as you write.

The generative mind.

The first stage of writing begins when you have an idea or image that you are curious to explore. This stage requires a generative mind, which is open and non-judgmental, able to tolerate chaos and willing to make a mess. Using partial sentences as writing prompts can be very helpful when you're generating material, because you don't have to think. All you have to do is finish the sentence and then just write freely, wherever your mind wants to go, even if it is tangential or off-topic. You can fashion a prompt that will evoke a topic or tone you're interested in exploring, or use a general prompt, such as: *"Right now..."*, *"I remember..."*, *"I want to write about..."*, or *"Beneath all the words..."* If the prompt seems to get you nowhere, you can change it to what I call the "wild card" prompt: *"I really want to write about..."*

It's very helpful to time the writings, as it creates a container for the work and provides a definite end point. When the timer goes off, you know you're done, so there is no question of needing to write an ending, eliminating another potential source of stress. 10 minutes is usually enough time to explore a first layer. 25 or 40 minutes allows you to excavate a bit deeper.

The basic practice is to write the prompt, finish the sentence, and then keep writing until the timer goes off without stopping to ponder, reflect or edit. You don't have to write fast, just without taking pauses to think. If after finishing the sentence you feel you have nothing more to say, rather than thinking something up, write the prompt and finish the sentence again. You could end up just finishing the sentence for the entire time and that's fine. You don't need to get anywhere or write a narrative because you aren't writing a "piece," you're just experimenting.

Generative writing can be great fun and full of surprises. For me, it is the pure "play" of writing because it's simple, easy to do, and eliminates the torment we can

feel around getting started. The more playful we allow ourselves to be, the more we will leave the confines of our usual, discursive mind so we can access deeper sources of truth and inspiration. We can take leaps without it feeling risky, learn to welcome everything, to associate freely and to experiment because it isn't about making logical sense or creating a narrative, unless that's what naturally emerges. The lighter and freer you let yourself be, the better.

This is the form of writing that Writing from the Soul circles are designed to support. In the circles I facilitate, feedback is minimal. After you read aloud, I reflect back some phrases from your work that you might want to use for prompts, but other than that, we receive each other with no verbal feedback. This allows everyone to relax, stay with their own process and take each other in deeply while keeping the critical mind at bay. Simply being received is what we most need when we share something that has just emerged. Critical feedback or talking about what “works” or “doesn't work” is irrelevant and confusing at this point, as is getting a bunch of personal opinions on your subject matter.

The reflective mind.

The raw, initial free writings that come out of the generative mind have their own beauty and logic, and for some topic areas, they are enough, and there is no need to go any further. You have simply exercised your ability to access your truth as a writing and awareness practice. For some people, generative writing is all they ever need to do. But if you want to use writing to burrow deeper and get clear about what you really think and believe—and communicate to others in an essay or piece of art—you will want to move on to reflection after generating material.

The reflective mind tunes into your inner response to your generative free writes and looks for the truth of where the writing suggests you go. What phrases, images or ideas stand out and have energy for you? I call these *gems*, and suggest you go back and underline them, as they can be used to begin another freewrite or be harvested later for some other use. As you reread, notice if there is something that you glossed over because it scared you. Or maybe there's a vivid image that metaphorically holds a truth you're trying to convey. You could play with these as places to begin or

write further. 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 free writings, a form will begin to emerge. You might find something in a free write with a particularly strong pull and use it to begin shaping the work, sensing into what follows naturally from it. You can cut phrases or paragraphs from assorted free writes and put them in a new order, noticing what you sense is missing and what this new order is evoking in you. As the work begins to take a shape, the tone might suggest a poem, an essay, or a story—and sometimes you have the seeds of all three in one free write. Once you have identified the areas to explore more deeply, you can circle back to the generative mind to create, and then go back to the reflective mind until the piece is shaped into a more 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 want to skip the generative stage and begin writing from the reflective mind. While this can work, it doesn't allow for the surprises that come if you write freely from the generative mind before beginning to shape a piece. 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 exploratory free writes 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 writing 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 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 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 discerning mind.

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 bumps: 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 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, or summarize where detail would be more effective? Have you included sensual details where appropriate? 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 go lightly and monitor yourself for criticalness.

While the discerning 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 anywhere in the process.

Remember that too much praise can make us just 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 intellectual or 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 write the piece you need to write, 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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You don't have to do it alone.

Contact Jane for a free 30-minute consultation.

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