

Questions from undergraduate students in English 320: Intermediate Fiction Workshop, for [Nathan Leslie](#), [Steven Gillis](#), and [Lex Williford](#). 3.5.07.

Can you describe the writing process behind the work you published in Segue? Is this your typical writing process? How has your writing process changed over the years?

Nathan Leslie:

The writing process: It has been about six years since I initially wrote that story, so it is difficult to remember the exact process. However, I know I did some research on the perfume and scents—especially the “spiritual” component of smell. Because of the complex structure of this story, it came together rather slowly and I revised it several times to pursue the point of view technique I utilized in this story.

Each story I write is a bit different in terms of process. Some are relatively easy births, while others I outline and sketch quite a bit before I write the story proper.

My process has just become more nuanced and flexible, I think. I am a believer in taking extensive notes and brainstorming, first and foremost. I also have various exercises I do to prepare myself for writing a story—especially a complex one like “Through the Nose.” Also, sometimes I simply think about a story quite a bit before I write. I can sometimes accomplish work towards my writing even if I’m doing something else: I’m always ruminating over fiction, trying to work out problems in my head. In the end I don’t think one can be cut and dry about the writing process, since so much unconscious energy goes into it as well—what one is reading, experiencing, dreaming about, etc., all goes into the writing of a given work. The short answer is I don’t always do one thing.

Steven Gillis:

Let me answer the last part of this question first—what has changed over the years is that I have a better understanding of the process and no longer am as tempted to slit my wrists at every difficult turn. Writing - as with any serious endeavor—is hard work. If you want to be a writer then write and by writing you will learn the process and be able to move forward. For “The Thing Of It Is,” the process was the same: I begin with an idea—in this case juxtaposing a story in a movie and a story in “real” time and entwining the theme which in this case was the miscommunication between the sexes. The process for me was much as always. work and rework, let the story come to life and in the process I take my cue from where the story was telling me it had to go in order to work. As for my writing schedule—if you are interested—I keep to a very rigid schedule and find this imperative for any serious writer; set a schedule where you write everyday and never ever let anyone mess with your writing time. I get up very early and go for a run, come home and write. Having a set time to write is very important to the writing process. Writing is just like athletics in that it requires diligent training and dedication. The art comes from mastering the dream.

Lex Williford:

As I’ve become increasingly attentive to craft, my writing process has slowed, so I tend to get stuck a lot. I tend to revise as I go, and when I get stuck I work on something else to let problems work themselves out in the unconscious. Several of my students recently asked me why I can’t

just write a draft all the way through and then revise. Because, I tell them, writing fast for me means making too many easy moves, too many wrong moves as it turns out. When I reach a fork of decision-making in a narrative, I see several doors I must open before I know where to go next, and I try to pick the most surprising door. Sometimes that means writing many scenes before I know where to go next. It's hard work, but I think I have to revise less once I've gotten to the end.

One of the most important—and difficult—aspects of the writing process is revision. When you're drafting a story, how do you go about deciding what to cut, and how/when to add more story? How do you know when a story is finished? Can you describe a moment when you decided to quit on a story draft—how did you know when to quit?

Nathan Leslie:

It all depends on the story. Revision is pragmatic—you have to revise according to the needs of a given plot, character, voice, and so on. There is no absolute answer here—just a method of trying to address gaps, cut redundancies, give more motivation, flesh out characterization, smooth over voice...I could go on and on. One myth though is that a story can be “finished.” Yeats was of this belief as well. Revision is never really “over.” Even after some of my work is published I come across sentences I would like to tweak. The best we, as writers, can hope for is a story that is 99.99% complete. However, the perfectionist in me is never absolutely satisfied.

I quit on a draft when I am stumped by either the character or the plot, usually the plot. If I can't figure out what would happen next I sometimes do stop writing. I have given up on some stories for this reason—some I am still trying to figure out.

Steven Gillis:

The art of writing is in the rewriting. Make no mistake of that. To answer your question, again, it is all about working hard and coming to understand the process. Decisions are made as the writing and re-writing evolves. Such becomes a gut instinct after a time. The writer sets out on a path, begins to create the story, sees which direction the piece is going, crafts and reworks, writes and rewrites until the story has a solid form. Then the writer begins to craft and give the work its final voice. Decisions are made in the course of the process. As a professor, the thing I get from my students who have not been writing very long are stories they think are done when in truth they are barely a draft. One knows when a story is done when they have been writing for a while and know what they are going for and what a finished story looks like. Not to beat a dead horse, but the only way to develop this ability is to write, write, write! And read, read, read! Read everyone and everything! Reading is imperative!

Lex Williford:

Revision isn't that difficult for me, since I revise a great deal as I write. But because my sentences may be more highly crafted than someone writing quick drafts, I have a harder time cutting them. But I do cut them, especially when I've done everything I can to make everything work, and then a close reader points out something I hadn't seen. For me, patience, time, waiting—these are everything. I'm an excellent editor of others' work, but I have to have at least six months to see something of my own clearly, and then I cut mercilessly when I see what I've written doesn't work. “Slay your darlings,” Faulkner advised, and I do.

Students are taught that a compelling main character is three-dimensional and complex. Can you describe where your characters come from and how you develop them? On a related note, we know that two ways to allow a reader to get to know a character is through dialogue, and through an effective name for the character. Can you share any ideas about dialogue in a story, and about finding a character's name?

Nathan Leslie:

This is a complex question and not easily answered. There is an essay by Anne Beattie I like where she says that though many of her characters come from her real life, they are extensions, exaggerations, or renditions of the walking, talking people she might know. This is one place my characters come from. They also come from newspapers, images, songs, dreams, art, other stories and novels, ideas...it runs the gamut.

I have a baby book for character names. I also use the phone book. However, I think names are not the best way to convey character. It's just one small part of the puzzle. Dialogue has to sound real, natural. It has to sound spoken. This is why it is so difficult: as writers we are constantly trying to craft "written" language. Dialogue isn't "written," per se. It is spoken. So are voicey first person stories.

Steven Gillis:

Ahh names. I hate "normal" names and try to give character's names I can work with and feel comfortable with. Characters come from the essence of the story, and it is imperative that the characters be real—even in fanciful pieces—that they be flesh and blood and brought to life in the course of the theme of the story. As for dialogue it is all again a process of working and reworking and getting the right sound and pace and rhythm for the narrative of the story. Make the dialogue work for the story. Don't every use something that simply sounds good. It must work for the entirety of the piece. You'll note I had no direct dialogue between the characters in the movie part of the story. This was a very conscious decision. I love dialogue and use it liberally in many of my other stories but, again, dialogue like all aspects of a story must serve the whole of the work.

Lex Williford:

My former teacher William Harrison once said that all characters begin in types. But almost as soon as the type—a geek with a pocket protector and a leaky Bic, say—is established, Harrison said, one must create individual characteristics that immediately go against type: a geek who's also a black belt in Tai Kwan Do. Every bad guy has good characteristics. Hannibal Lector is a cannibal, but he eats only the livers of characters we dislike, and he eats them with only the best Chianti. Every good guy also has to have deep flaws. Take Achilles. Take Levin and Anna in *Anna Karenina*. Levin, the hero who's on a spiritual quest, is boring. Anna, Tolstoy's example of moral disintegration, is the real heroine, and we, like Tolstoy, end up loving her and grieving for her when she throws herself in front of a train. Why? Because she's like us. Life isn't black and white—at least human beings aren't—only many shades of gray. Characters we love are also alcoholics and drug addicts, schizophrenics, manic-depressives, homeless people. Characters we hate are also priests, evangelists, presidents. All of them are complex because they're like us. Human.

As for character names, I usually live with my characters' names a long time, until they become old friends. In *Nacogdoches*, Allyn Vanderbeck's original first name was *Paige*, a name I disliked immensely. I knew her sisters' names were Sherilyn and Marilyn, and then I met someone named

Allyn and asked her if I could use her name. It's a wonderfully ambiguous name—when I read people think I'm saying *Alan* or *Allen*—and somehow it's just strange enough to fit her and her family. I'm not sure why; I just know. I also wanted a character who was a distant relative of the so-called "hero" of the Alamo: William Barret Travis. And that's Travis's name: William Barret Travis Truitt, III. His father *Deuce*, William Barret Travis, Jr., calls him *Trey*, and Travis hates it. He doesn't want to be heroic or follow in his father's footsteps. He doesn't trust people who call themselves heroes. He wants to distance himself as much as possible from his father's military background and his tendency to abuse authority like a drill sergeant. He wants to be himself.

The naming of characters is intuitive, but I've been known to pick up a phone book and spend hours looking through names at random. Baby name books help, too.

"Dialogue is poetry," as poet and translator of my favorite version of Dante's *Inferno* John Ciardi once said. He doesn't mean that dialogue is flowery or overblown. No, he's referring to the precision of poetry, the absolute attention to saying what one means in the fewest words. Dialogue imitates the language of oral speech, but it isn't oral speech at all. If you listen to people talk on a bus or in a mall or around the dinner table, they ramble and go off on tangents and they usually talk around what they're really trying to say. More important, they say what they mean by "telling it slant," as Dickenson said. A scene with a husband and wife arguing over whether to set the oven at 350 or 400 degrees is really an extended argument they had weeks ago: The wife wants a child and the husband doesn't.

How many of you know someone who speaks very rarely but when she does, she speaks in a few words and nails the essence of an idea with a kind of elegant simplicity? "Dialogue is poetry," for example.

Question for Nathan Leslie:

Your story "Through The Nose" is structured like a documentary, subtitled with characters' names followed by brief monologues about Ed's efforts to start a perfume business. Can you describe how you arrived at this structure, and why you think it's effective?

Well, I don't know if it is effective or not—only the reader can decide that. I hope it is. I have used this technique in a few other stories as well—it is one of my favorite approaches to fiction. I am obviously inspired by Faulkner on this one, among others. As *I Lay Dying* is one of my favorite novels, and I have even written my own novel (which I'm shopping around), which is a kind of homage to this novel. The mention of the "documentary" feel of this approach is interesting, and right on: I've always loved documentaries, the kind of truth telling this kind of film can approach. I've been interested from the outset at getting characters on the page in the same way that a documentary filmmaker might try to capture a person on film (one of my cinematic heroes, for instance, is Errol Morris). There is something ultimately futile in this, of course, in that humans aren't like butterflies we can pin to a board and understand completely. However, the effort is worth it, and fascinating as hell, and ambiguous, and I hope also, in the end, revealing of the various characters I put on paper.

Question for Steven Gillis:

The ending of your story, "The Thing Of It Is," depicts the main character having a sort of epiphany and deciding to tell his wife about the trouble he's gotten himself into. For him, his confession is "restorative, unburdening, a leap of faith," yet the story seems to end on an ambiguous note: the narrator hasn't been listening to his wife speak, and the disconnect that has plagued their entire evening together doesn't seem entirely resolved. The final line, "I couldn't at first understand," highlights the communication problems the narrator and his wife struggle with, yet the "at first" signals that the narrator does eventually come to a certain understanding of something. Can you elaborate on the ending of your story for us? And what can you tell us about the role of epiphanies in stories, and where to locate them in a narrative?

Endings of all stories are imperative. Obviously. Short fiction must be going somewhere. As for epiphanies, good stories take a character through a sea of change, for better or worse. Not all epiphanies result in enlightenment and I purposely ended this story in the ambiguity of it all as you notice. This story is about communication and the lack there of between the sexes. This is clear in the characters in the movie as well as with the husband and the wife both as they discuss the film and in what is going on in their real lives. The husband has secrets as does the wife. We live lives devoid of the intimacy we aspire to and rarely notice until its too late and even then we aren't sure what has happened and why. The ending of this particular story is meant to show—as does the suicide in the film—that people make decisions based on their perceptions and private actions—the husband to at last confess his "crime" to his wife—and we are so consumed with our own actions and thoughts and perceptions we rarely see what is really going on with the people closest to us and in failing at this we can hardly claim any measure of intimacy with anyone.

Question for Lex Williford:

The essay you published in Segue, "Generating Mind, Editing Mind, Sequencing Mind in Linear and Modular Design," invites the reader to respond to a couple of questions about your novel-in-progress concerning which of the two chapters you published should begin the novel, and which structure—linear or modular—the reader thinks might work best for the novel. We wanted to let you know that we believe chapter one establishes the novel's main character and situation more immediately and clearly than chapter three does, and for that reason would make for a better opening chapter. However, we also feel that chapter three is more engaging and entertaining than chapter one, which moves more slowly. As for the novel's modular structure—we like it. As a first person narrative, the modular structure seems organic—it's how people naturally relate their stories. The modular structure also seems to us better suited to stories that revolve around some sort of "theme" rather than a series of events; however, we don't know from your two chapters if your novel approaches a theme through its plot, or vice versa.

Thanks for these comments. I agree with you about the modular structure, but the problems you identify with the slowness of chapter one are helpful in recognizing that I'll have to make the chapter move a bit more quickly. It's difficult, of course, to make a judgment about a novel by reading only two chapters, but I'm glad to hear that you're at least engaged in the writing so far. Thanks for these comments.

One question we have about your two chapters concerns Who, the protagonist's dog. Who gets a lot of attention in the narrative, and we're wondering why you decided to make him such a significant part of the story in chapter one.

As I see it, my novel is about escape artists. Several characters escape through suicide, and Allyn is a master emotional escape artist—as is, to some degree, Travis and his sister Maddie. In other chapters I develop Who from the time he first appears at Travis's door, half-starved and badly abused, badly injured from a fight with a Doberman Pinscher twice his size, and then I explore his many escape attempts: the dog is a genius at escaping, and he spends weeks gone, rolling around in road kill, coming home stinking of death.

I'm a dog person, and I'm fascinated by dogs' behavior. We may not want to admit it, but we are much more like dogs than we want to admit: We run away; sometimes, as Travis does, we roll around in death.

We're also incredibly territorial, possessive. The dog comes between Travis and his wife, and he plays a large part in their split in, I hope, a very surprising way.

There's also the element of rescue. Travis and his sister Maddie are rescuers; at one point in the novel, while Travis searches for Who, an animal shelter is flooded as Bonita Creek rises, and Travis rescues dogs with cold water up to his knees. And Maddie rescues abused animals all her life. Their dog Reveille protects and rescues both Maddie and Travis from their father. But being a rescuer isn't everything; rescue a dog (or another person), and we sometimes pull back a bloody hand.

In many ways, dogs mirror us, especially when we just consider them to be animals. "He's just a dog," Travis's wife says at one point. And Travis, abused and desperately depressed himself after his divorce, takes it out on his dog and feels terrible regret: He doesn't want to become his father, and his ability to see himself clearly for the first time—his misdirected rage—makes such a change possible.

Like Who, dogs can seem like a curse sometimes, crapping on the floor, running away, tearing up the furniture, but they're really a great blessing. Humans have had dogs as companions from almost the beginning of humankind. And dogs stay with us even when people we love abandon us. It's not just a matter of dumb loyalty; it's a kind of unconditional love that human beings are incapable of sometimes.

But it would be too easy to say that dogs are metaphors. Sometimes, to borrow from Freud, a dog is just a dog. I can only hope that Who ends up being as interesting as the other (human) characters.

Thanks for reading my work so closely and passing along your helpful comments.