

Triggers & Practice

How Extremes in Writing Relate to Creativity and Learning

Richard P. Gabriel



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Fundamental Truth of Writing

It can be argued that all writing is creative writing, since if one is writing the way one should, one does not know what will be on the page until it is there. Discovery remains the ideal.

–Richard Hugo, *The Triggering Town*

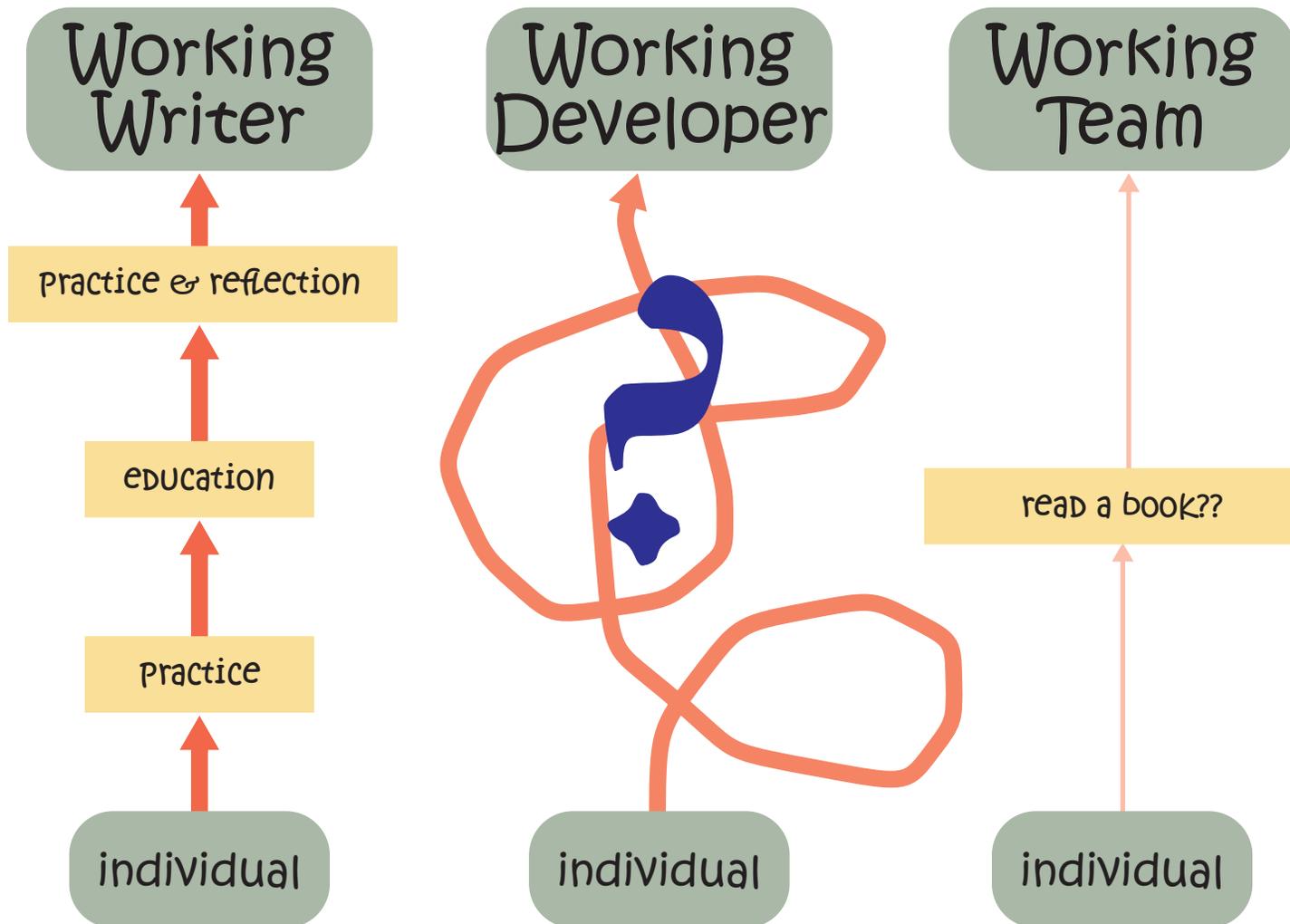


Creative Writing in the Extreme

- Creative writing is unquestionably a creative activity
- Creative writing is a social activity
- Creative writing is about building a literature
- Creative writing is about exploration, discovery, and learning
- Creative writing requires practice
- Creative writing requires understanding specific craft techniques
- Creative writing is risky business



Creative Writing and Software





Creative Writing is . . . Creative

- Creativity is not special, it involves skills that can be learned

The conventional wisdom here is that while “craft” can be taught, “art” remains a magical gift bestowed only by the gods. Not so. In large measure becoming an artist consists of learning to accept yourself, which makes your work personal, and in following your own voice, which makes your work distinctive. Clearly these qualities can be nurtured by others.

—David Bayles & Ted Orland, *Art & Fear*

- The writer’s job is to learn to work on the work



Talent

- Talent determines only how fast you get good, not how good you get
- Many incorrectly believe

that art rests fundamentally upon talent, and that talent is a gift randomly built into some people and not into others

–David Bayles & Ted Orland, *Art & Fear*

- Art is made by ordinary people

Even talent is rarely distinguishable, over the long run, from perseverance and lots of hard work.

–David Bayles & Ted Orland, *Art & Fear*



Fear

- *Repetitive making*: a mostly predetermined amount of work of a definite sort produces a mostly predictable result
- *Risky making*: failure is a possibility
- In both cases, the results might be disappointing, but only in risky making is there the real possibility of complete failure
- Risky making requires a kind of skill: People with more of the skill seem to produce better results—but the skill can be improved by practicing and paying attention while practicing

Art is a reckless encounter with whatever comes along.

—William Stafford, *Writing the Australian Crawl*



Fear

Fear is at the center of the concerns of risky makers

- Fear of audience reaction is fear of failing to get *acceptance* and *approval*
- *Acceptance*: when what is produced is accepted as a valid artifact—for an artist, acceptance happens when a piece is considered art, the real thing
- *Approval*: when the audience likes the piece

...fear keeps us from attending to the work and getting better at it. Instead, we look to others or to the cosmos for help getting better, but the only way to get better at making things is to make things, to make lots of them, to think about how we are making them, and to realize that to produce something truly great—whether art or technology—we need to produce a lot of those things

—Richard P. Gabriel, *Writers' Workshops & the Work of Making Things*



Triggers

Creativity is overcoming fear and trusting triggers

...art is simply making things in one's own way, guided by the skills and inclinations at hand, experiences, the materials at hand, and the triggers that present themselves. Triggers play the role that most see as creativity or self-expression. A trigger is any thing, place, person, rhythm, or image that presents itself, or metaphor that comes to mind that leads the maker to make a work; often the trigger appears in the final work, and if the work contains a lot of private triggers, it is sometimes considered hermetic.

—Richard P. Gabriel, *Writers' Workshops & the Work of Making Things*



Triggers

A trigger helps discovery:

A poem can be said to have two subjects, the initiating or triggering subject, which starts the poem or “causes” the poem to be written, and the real or generated subject, which the poem comes to say or mean, and which is generated or discovered in the poem during the writing. That’s not quite right because it suggests that the poet recognizes the real subject. The poet may not be aware of what the real subject is but only [has] some instinctive feeling that the poem is done.

–Richard Hugo, *The Triggering Town*



Triggers

- Triggers cause diversity by enabling the world, not just us, to supply ideas

The secret to creativity is knowing how to hide your sources.

–Albert Einstein

- Triggers begin the process of creation by being there conveniently



Triggers

To use triggers, the writer must be prepared to follow where they and the writer's mind leads:

When you start to write, you carry to the page one of two attitudes, though you may not be aware of it. One is that all music must conform to truth. The other, that all truth must conform to music.

—Richard Hugo, *The Triggering Town*

Only the most clever writers—like W. H. Auden—can make music conform to truth.

One mark of the beginner is his impulse to push language around to make it accommodate what he has already conceived to be the truth....

—Richard Hugo, *The Triggering Town*



Triggers

Following triggers maps the writer's mind, which can never be meaningless, so following triggers is always sensible:

It is impossible to write meaningless sequences. In a sense, the next thing always belongs. In the world of imagination, all things belong. If you take that on faith, you may be foolish, but foolish like a trout.

—Richard Hugo, *The Triggering Town*



Triggers

Writing is between the writer and the page:

Never worry about the reader, what the reader can understand. When you are writing, glance over your shoulder, and you'll find there is no reader. Just you and the page. Feel lonely? Good. Assuming you can write clear English sentences, give up all worry about communication. If you want to communicate, use the telephone.

–Richard Hugo, *The Triggering Town*

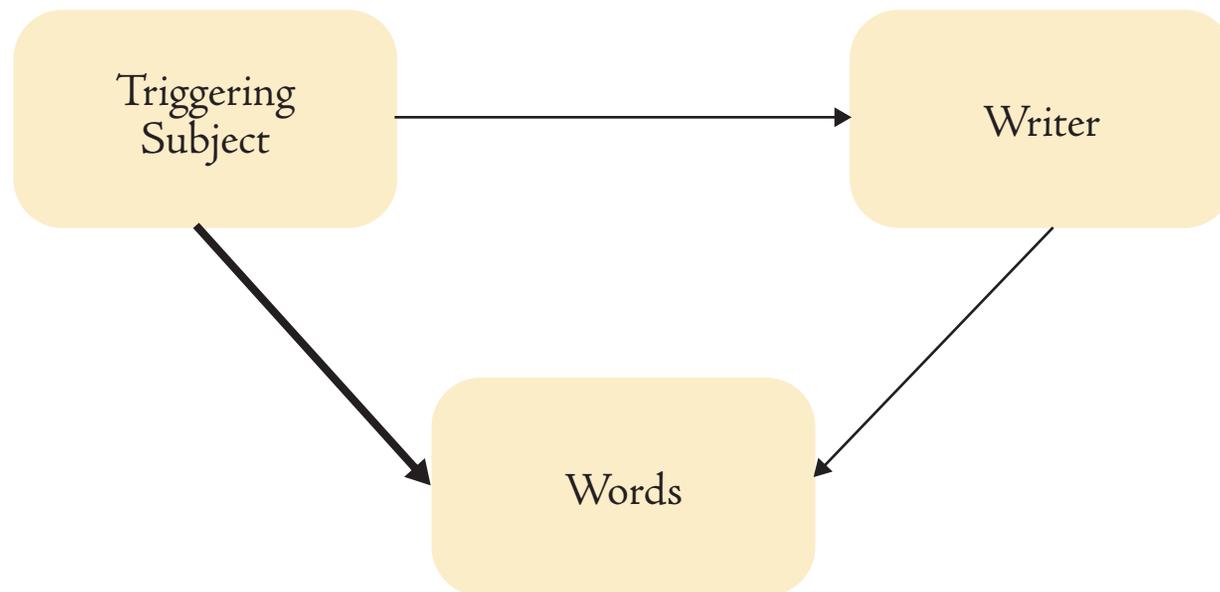


Triggers

Once you have the information, the words seem unimportant.

—Richard Hugo, *The Triggering Town*

In pieces written to convey information—such as newspaper articles—the relation between the subject and the words is strong while the relation between the writer and the words is weak or nonexistent.



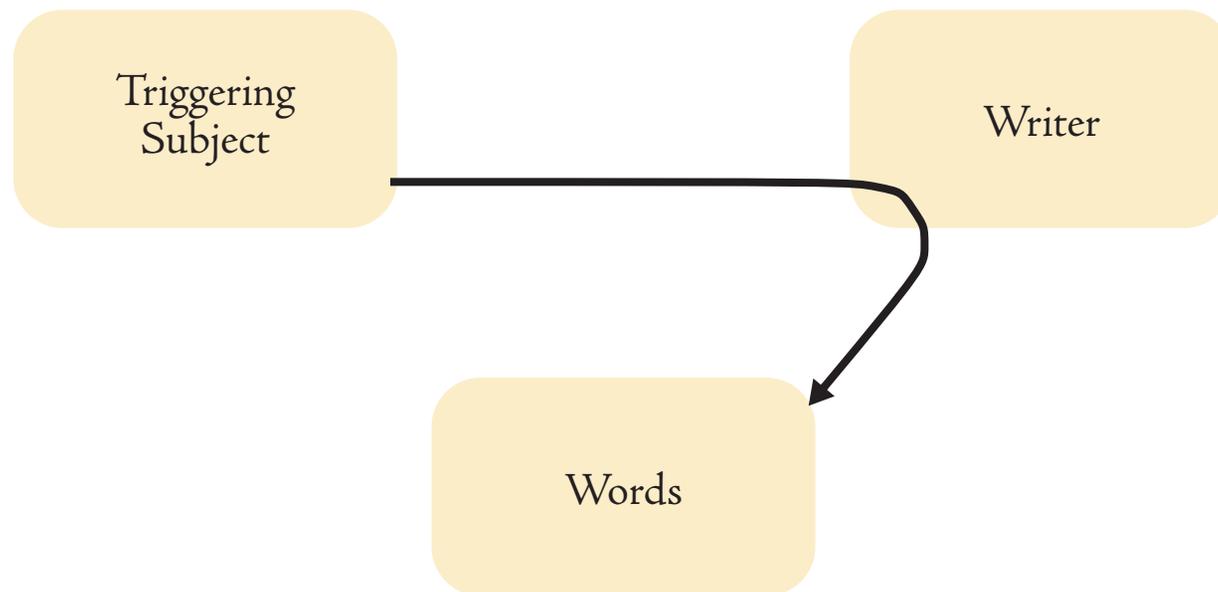


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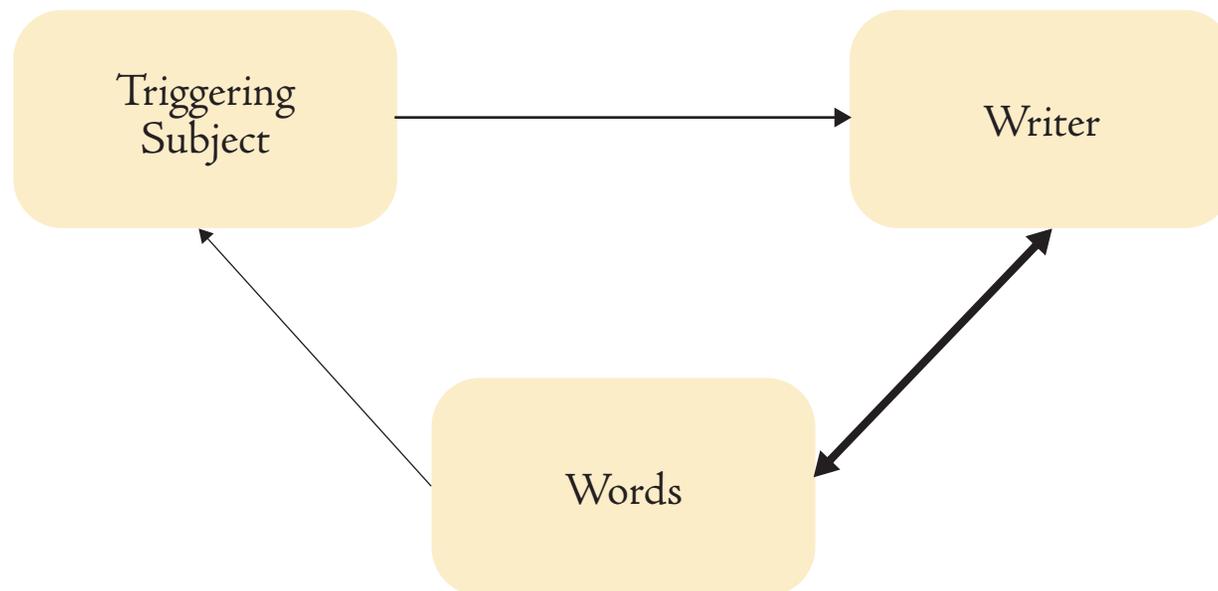


Triggers

Words and language represent ways to look at ourselves because the ways words associate within each of us recollects how we see the world including ourselves:

The poet's relation to the triggering subject should never be as strong as (must be weaker than) his relation to his words. The words should not serve the subject. The subject should serve the words.

—Richard Hugo, *The Triggering Town*





Triggers

What are triggers for?

You are trying to find and develop a way of writing that will be yours and will, as Stafford puts it, generate things to say. Your triggering subjects are those that ignite your need for words.

–Richard Hugo, *The Triggering Town*



Triggers

- In any piece of writing there are many triggers
- Some are concerned with the actual subject or topic (as in a newspaper article)
- Other triggers support directions of discovery and should not be treated like subject matter triggers—some are informational, others poetic



Education Gone Wrong

For around 400 years [creative writing] was a requirement of every student's education. In the English-speaking world, the curriculum for grammar and high school students included the writing of "verses." In the nineteenth century, when literary education was weakened or was dropped from elementary and secondary education, colleges picked it up, all but the creative writing. Creative writing was missing for 100 years or so, but in the past [70] years it has returned.

—Richard Hugo, *The Triggering Town*

- With this, the concept of creative writing was warped to become roughly “unrestrained self-expression.”
- Was this change in education a result of Western civilization's obsession with science, mathematics, and the Industrial Revolution?



Education Gone Wrong

Here is one result of the separation of creative writing from the basic curriculum:

When I read some academic writing I marvel that as common and everyday as language is, it would have the effrontery to get in the way of all that thinking. I've seen sentences that defy comprehension written by people with doctorates in English from our best universities. So have you. And I doubt that academic writing will improve until academics believe Valéry, who said he couldn't think of anything worse than being right. In much academic writing, clarity runs a poor second to invulnerability.

—Richard Hugo, *The Triggering Town*



Education Gone Wrong

...because writing is not quite what it seems:

We creative writers are privileged because we can write declarative sentences, and we can write declarative sentences because we are less interested in being irrefutably right than we are in the dignity of language itself.

–Richard Hugo, *The Triggering Town*



An Art Form Changed by Science

The essay as an art form is a peculiar example of our “forgetting” what writing is:

Long before postmodernism drew the reader’s attention to the naked machinations of literature, there was the essay, laying itself bare, the curtain between the writer and reader already pulled back. The writer, caught in a kind of intellectual flagrante delicto, struggles, tests, sounds things out, finds ideas and discards others. For the reader, the very thrill and energy of the essay comes from this intimate exposure, the art of a writer intensely in dialogue with him or herself, the “dialectic of self-questioning,” as essayist Phillip Lopate calls it. O. B. Hardison Jr. sees this self-realization extending even further, to an almost metaphysical level: “The essay is the enactment of the process by which the soul realizes itself even as it is passing from day to day and from moment to moment.”

–Michael Depp, *On Essays: Literature’s Most Misunderstood Form*



Essay

That acting out, that attempt, is the essay's vital center. And so it was coined in the 16th century by Michel de Montaigne, whose own prose works on matters philosophical, literary, and moral seemed to find no place among prescribed forms or genres of writing because of their self-effacing, antiauthoritative posture. He called his effort essai. (The modern translation from the French corresponds simply to "attempt.")

–Michael Depp, *On Essays: Literature's Most Misunderstood Form*



Essay

If Montaigne didn't, strictly speaking, invent the form, he certainly gave it its tincture, laying out some of its broad parameters, setting the stage for the later identifiable informalities it would accrue. He rejected systemic thinking and hefty, authoritative rhetoric. He showed readers the colliding intersections of his own thoughts. He didn't begin with conclusions, and often he never found them.

Which is why it's so ironic that for many readers, the introduction to the form begins with a high school homework assignment to write a five-paragraph essay, with its standard introduction, three body paragraphs, and conclusion. Robert Atwan, founding editor of the annual Best American Essays (Houghton Mifflin), points out that this is a perverse inversion of the form. In his foreword to the 1998 edition of the series, which began in 1986, he writes, "It not only paraded relentlessly to its conclusion; it began with its conclusion. Its structure permitted no change of direction, no reconsideration, no wrestling with ideas."

A real essay, Atwan says, never begins with its end.

—Michael Depp, *On Essays: Literature's Most Misunderstood Form*



Who Changed the Essay Form?

...Sir Francis Bacon

Montaigne's essays suggest how the mind feels as it seeks by constant adjustments to find a path through a labyrinth, Bacon's method is to assert the existence of the path whether one is there or not.

—O. B. Hardison Jr., *In Praise of the Essay*



Practice

How do you improve (as a writer)?

Scholars seem to assume that if you can read you can write. It's sad to see someone with a fresh PhD coast for a few years, understandably after such a grueling period of work, then embark on a book. It is a struggle because the scholar doesn't realize one simple thing about writing: it is like shooting a basketball. You've got to stay in shape and practice to do it well. It is not a natural reward of study, and having an education does not mean you can write well whenever you want.

—Richard Hugo, *The Triggering Town*



Practice

In sports and in writing:

Once a spectator said, after Jack Nicklaus had chipped a shot in from the sand trap, "That's pretty lucky." Nicklaus is [supposed] to have replied, "Right. But I notice the more I practice, the luckier I get." If you write often, perhaps every day, you will stay in shape and will be better able to receive those good poems, which are finally a matter of luck, and get them down. Lucky accidents seldom happen to writers who don't work. You will find that you may rewrite and rewrite a poem and it never seems quite right, Then a much better poem may come rather fast and you wonder why you bothered with all that work in the earlier poem. Actually, the hard work you do on one poem is put in on all poems. The hard work on the first poem is responsible for the sudden ease of the second. If you just sit around waiting for the easy ones, nothing will come. Get to work.

—Richard Hugo, *The Triggering Town*



Practice

The “famous” Art & Fear story:

*In the book **Art & Fear**, they tell a story—which may be true, maybe not—of a university pottery class broken into two halves. One half was told their grades depended on the quality of the one pot they each handed in, and other was told their grades depended on the total weight of all their semester’s pieces. That is, each person in the first group would work however they wanted, but that person’s grade was determined by the quality of a single piece; each person in the second group would work all semester, and at the end each person would put all their pieces on a gigantic scale: 50 lbs and up was an A, 40–50 lbs was a B, etc. The best pieces of course all came from the group going for weight. The reasons are probably that the second group had no reason to fear the artistic process while they were learning craft techniques, and that they were practicing and experimenting through repetition.*

–Richard P. Gabriel, **Lower Standards**



Practice

I write a poem a day and have since March 2000; here is how I do it:

- Usually I start with an image that pops into my mind, typically something I've seen during the day or something I've thought of during the day. Sometimes when an image like that pops in early in the day, I'll write it down and work from that (e.g. **Bag Thoughts**)
- Another common thing is to sit in front of the computer, put myself in poetry-writing mode, and write down the first of the phrases or lines that comes rapidly to mind *that seems strange enough*. I use this as a trigger and go from there. A lot of times that phrase or the first stanza will not make it—I think of this as pulling away the scaffolding once the poem can stand on its own. (E.g. **TransWork**)
- I find I am now willing—which I wasn't before—to respond to an existing poem. I'll sometimes respond outright (e.g. **Our Numb Circle**, which is made from the images from Rilke's **The Panther** in backwards order and making a different point than Rilke). This seems to work better the less I understand the poem and its images.



Practice

- Quite a few of the poems have been constructed by taking 2 or 3 haiku and creating an arc between their images. I call this form a *multi-ku*. (E.g. **Multi-Ku (1)**, **Multi-Ku (2)**, and **Multi-Ku (3)** as well as many others.) In most cases I need to add some element—a narrative or some overarching images—to have this make sense.
- Sometimes I'll invent a form, like taking a song lyric and making those the first words in each line (e.g. **Gee Whiz**), or like every word starts with the same letter (e.g. **T Party** and **Pastische**). Other times I'll set some constraint on the titles, like the series of 19 I wrote whose titles began with "In..." (e.g. **Inutile Reflection**).
- Sometimes I will write the same poem over again from different viewpoints or with different images or stances or re-envisionings. (E.g., the series of goodbye poems to a fictitious lover, including **End of the Road, Baby, in a Georgia Roadtown**, or the series on panties.)
- Sometimes I try to simply not make any sense at all in the classical surrealism mode (e.g. **Hung on Skeletons of Detail**).



Practice

- Occasionally I'll do a found poem or use found text as the trigger (e.g. **Unnormalized Models**).
- I'll lift images from other disciplines (e.g. **Dandy Candy**)
- Sometimes I write while reading technical or scientific books (e.g. **Ars Poeticrap**)
- I'll grab images from the surroundings and trying to put a spline between them (e.g. **Panties at the End of the Mind**)



Practice

- Practice means lots of practice
- Poet Janet Holmes remarking about reading a selection from poems 1–500 versus a selection from poems 501–900:

I think your poetry is more even than last year, undoubtedly because of the daily poems. (More even, I mean, craft-wise; I enjoyed the range of subjects & (for want of a better word) voices in this newer material.)

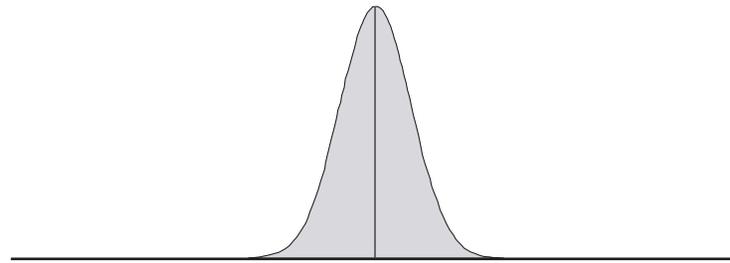
My gut reaction is that the new poems seemed more effortless and confident, less labored-over. It seems more as if you're "used" to being a poet now. Not facile, but authoritative.

–Janet Holmes, *Humanophone*



Selection Versus Perfection

- Do a draft and then revise like hell to make it as good as you can
- Write a lot of drafts, select the best, and revise them a bit





Selection & Practice

In photography:

The number of photographs taken to get some good shots can be staggering. For one piece in National Geographic Magazine using 22 photographs, the photographer took about 40,000 photographs—this is over a thousand rolls of film to select just 22 photos.

—Richard P. Gabriel, *Writers' Workshops & the Work of Making Things*

The standards are incredibly high. For a photo story on Nebraska that ran in the November 1998 [National] Geographic [Magazine], [Joel] Sartore had eight weeks total to shoot, which he broke up into several one and two-week intervals over two years of time. Of the 31,320 photos he shot for the Nebraska story, only 16 ran in the magazine.

—Richard P. Gabriel, *Writers' Workshops & the Work of Making Things*



Selection & Practice

In film making:

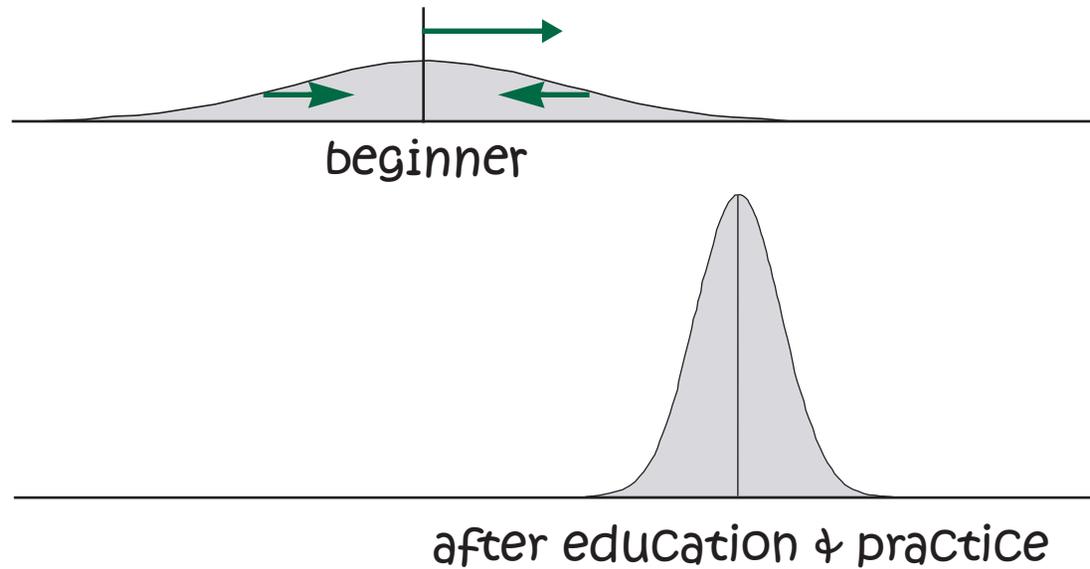
*The movie **Apocalypse Now** runs about two and half hours. To get those hours, the filmmakers shot 250 hours of film. That means that for every hour of film on screen in the final version, over 100 hours of film were shot. Once the film is shot and selected, the work of perfection goes on in the darkroom, perhaps on a computer workstation, and then in the editing room.*

–Richard P. Gabriel, *Writers' Workshops & the Work of Making Things*



Selection & Practice

- In learning to write, you practice and generate lots of work
- Then you have knowledge and experience to fall back on
- Your mean is improving, and your standard deviation is shrinking





The Writers' Workshop

- Ten or so writers speaking of each others' work
- Gift effect
- Rituals and rules to protect the safety of risky makers
- Workshop leaders who teach
- Brainstorms, critiques, charrettes, pair programming, open source software projects, even master classes



Discovery

Detail

I was watching a robin fly after a finch—the smaller bird chirping with excitement, the bigger, its breast blazing, silent in light-winged earnest chase—when, out of nowhere over the chimneys and the shivering front gardens, flashes a sparrowhawk headlong, a light brown burn scorching the air from which it simply plucks like a ripe fruit the stopped robin. whose two or three *cheeps* of terminal surprise twinkle in the silence closing over the empty street when the birds have gone about their own business, and I began to understand how a poem can happen: you have your eye on a small elusive detail, pursuing its music, when a terrible truth strikes and your heart cries out, being carried off.

—Eamon Grennan, *Still Life with Waterfall*



Learning to Write

The MFA process:

- A series of mentors who are writers
- Revision under direction of the mentors
- Learning a process of writing
- Craft-oriented, critical writing on work by other writers
- Learning what and how to “steal”
- Learning how to write by writing while reflecting on it

Then:

- practice like hell
- read like hell
- writers’ workshops
- revise like hell



Twelve XP Practices

- **The Planning Process:** sometimes called the Planning Game. The XP planning process allows the XP “customer” to define the business value of desired features, and uses cost estimates provided by the programmers, to choose what needs to be done and what needs to be deferred. The effect of XP’s planning process is that it is easy to steer the project to success. [**Triggers**]
- **Small Releases:** XP teams put a simple system into production early, and update it frequently on a very short cycle. [**Practice, Workshop**]
- **Metaphor:** XP teams use a common “system of names” and a common system description that guides development and communication. [**Narrative Structure, form**]
- **Simple Design:** A program built with XP should be the simplest program that meets the current requirements. There is not much building “for the future.” Instead, the focus is on providing business value. Of course it is necessary to ensure that you have a good design, and in XP this is brought about through “refactoring.” [**Triggers, Discovery**]
- **Continuous Integration:** XP teams integrate and build the software system multiple times per day. This keeps all the programmers on the same page, and enables very rapid progress. Perhaps surprisingly, integrating more frequently tends to eliminate integration problems that plague teams who integrate less often. [**Practice, Workshop**]
- **Testing:** XP teams focus on validation of the software at all times. Programmers develop software by writing tests first, then software that fulfills the requirements reflected in the tests. Customers provide acceptance tests that enable them to be certain that the features they need are provided. [**Workshop**]
- **Refactoring:** XP teams improve the design of the system throughout the entire development. This is done by keeping the software clean: without duplication, with high communication, simple, yet complete. [**Revision**]



Twelve XP Practices

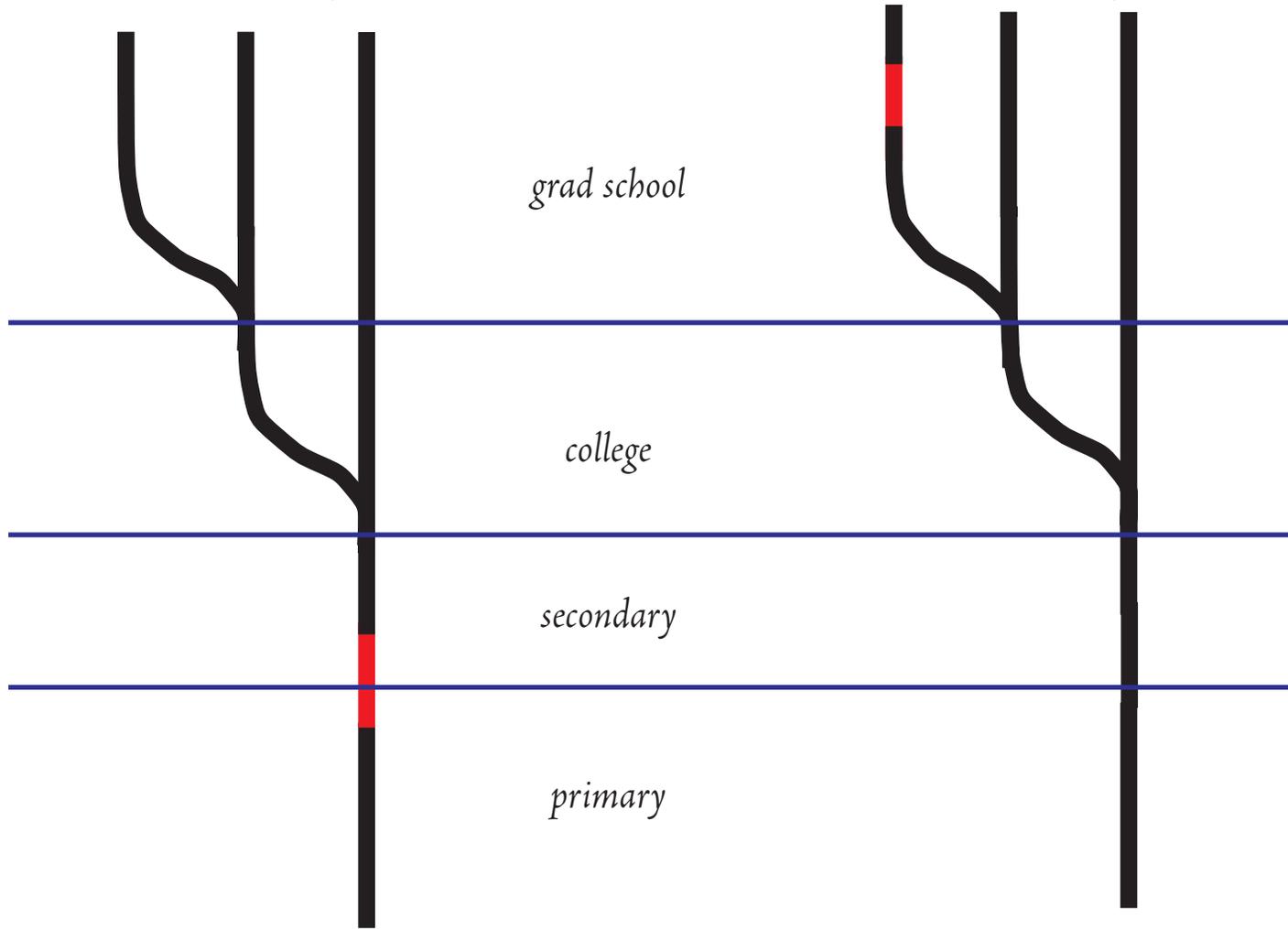
- **Pair Programming:** XP programmers write all production code in pairs, two programmers working together at one machine. Pair programming has been shown by many experiments to produce better software at similar or lower cost than programmers working alone. [Workshop]
- **Collective Ownership:** All the code belongs to all the programmers. This lets the team go at full speed, because when something needs changing, it can be changed without delay. [Workshop, Literature Building]
- **Continuous Integration:** XP teams integrate and build the software system multiple times per day. This keeps all the programmers on the same page, and enables very rapid progress. Perhaps surprisingly, integrating more frequently tends to eliminate integration problems that plague teams who integrate less often. [Practice, Workshop]
- **40-hour Week:** Tired programmers make more mistakes. XP teams do not work excessive overtime, keeping themselves fresh, healthy, and effective.
- **On-site Customer:** An XP project is steered by a dedicated individual who is empowered to determine requirements, set priorities, and answer questions as the programmers have them. The effect of being there is that communication improves, with less hard-copy documentation - often one of the most expensive parts of a software project. [Triggers, Workshop]
- **Coding Standard:** For a team to work effectively in pairs, and to share ownership of all the code, all the programmers need to write the code in the same way, with rules that make sure the code communicates clearly. [English]



We Once Learned to Write

until 20th century

mid-20th century onward





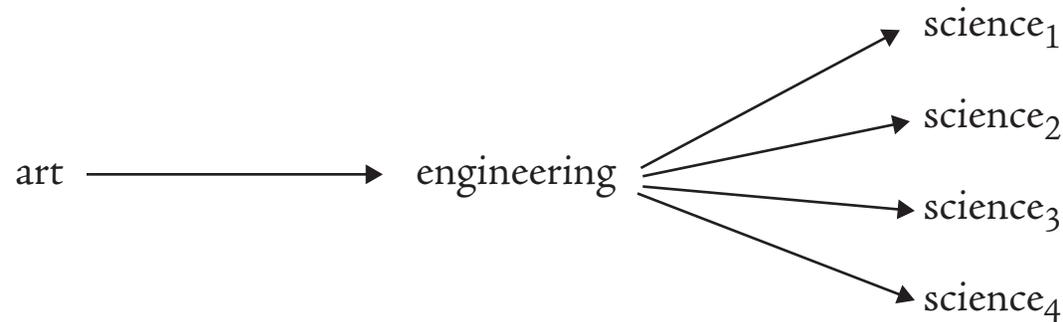
Learning & Education

- Throughout our education we learn to write scientific, technical, and argumentative papers
- We learn that “art” means “uncertain” and hence “unreliable”
- Is it any wonder that almost every paper written by PhDs sucks, especially those written by computer scientists?



Art vs Engineering vs Science

- Does engineering precede science?



- Fire—humankind has always been able to manipulate fire even as many theories of fire came and went—early manipulators of fire were magicians or artists
- If art is exercising the imagination, what of mathematics, which is the ultimate product of the imagination?
- Need to manipulate materials and the world to understand it
- Making instruments to produce “facts” for science
- Does art, therefore, precede engineering?
- —Or are the three tangled in a complex co-dependency?



The Four Winds of Making

artist important/boring	scientist true/false
designer cool/uncool	engineer good/bad

-Rich Gold



Learning How to Write Software

- We need to learn how to write software “before” we worry about development methodologies—using principles and approaches of a fine arts education in creative writing
- XP—one of the agile methodologies—reinforces many of the teachings there:
 - triggers
 - use of workshop approach
 - reading as a way to learn
 - practicing
 - narrative structure
 - form
- Perhaps XP and the other agile methodologies work because they are enacting part of a missed education



A Simple Proposition

- When we took writing education away from most people in the 19th century, scholarly and scientific writing started to suck
- We never had software writing education, so most software ... sucks



Learning & Education

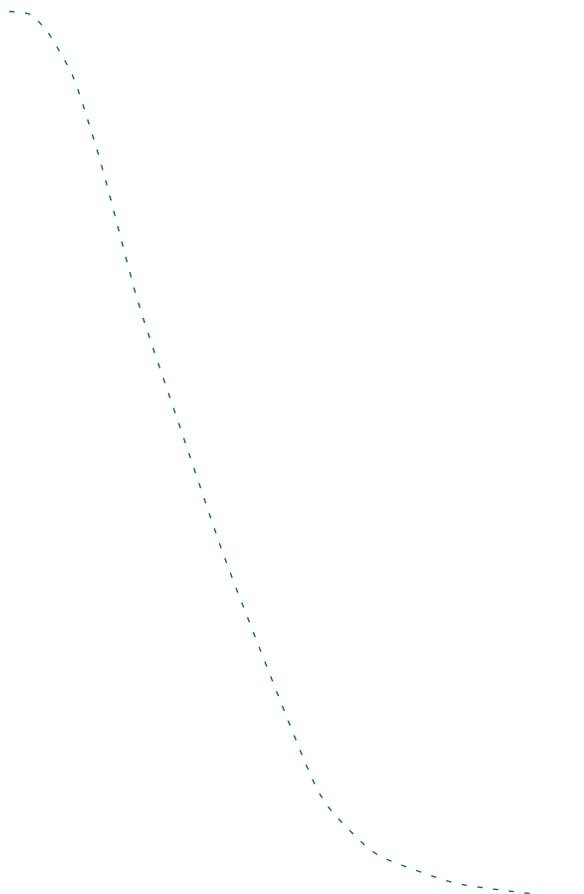
Maybe learning to write software takes

- writing lots of it: 500–1000 programs
- having a literature available to read and critique
- having a critical tradition
- having a master-writer based teaching structure



And Finally...

I'd really like us to take art seriously



again.



Where I'm from the birds sing a pretty song

and there's always music in the air

—The Little Man