



The Importance of Writing Badly is an excerpt from *Genre by Example: Writing What We Teach* edited by David Starkey.
© 2001 by David Starkey

All rights reserved. No part of this material from *Genre by Example* may be reproduced in any form or by electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review.

8

The Importance of Writing Badly

Bruce Ballenger
Boise State University

In my course evaluations, in classes ranging from freshman English to advanced nonfiction, one of the more common comments is that “Professor Ballenger taught me to write badly.” It is intended as a compliment. I take it as one. It is the same thing I might have said nearly twenty years ago after finishing my first course, a graduate seminar in nonfiction writing, with Donald Murray. Don taught me (and continues to teach me) many things, but the importance of writing badly is the idea I most took to heart. It changed my writing forever.

Of course, I don’t mean that I *try* to write badly but that I have learned to create the conditions that make it possible to write badly without feeling badly about it. More to the point, though, is that giving myself permission to write badly makes it much more likely that I will write what I don’t expect to write, and that from those surprises will come some of my best writing. Writing badly is also a convenient alternative to staring off into space waiting for inspiration, a habit many of my students seem to like. As a result, they don’t get much work done. I’ve removed the excuse that “I just wasn’t in the mood” from my own writing process and I want to remove it from my students’ writing processes as well.

There are several conditions that make it possible for me to write badly. One is that I have learned to write fast enough to outrun my internal critic; that is the gift of freewriting. The other condition is that I need to be able to cultivate the illusion that the only audience for my writing is me. I know, in theory, that this is difficult to do, that to some extent *all* writing is performance, and that a writer always invents a reader, even if that reader is the self. But I’m all in favor of serviceable illusions, and that I can write solely for this self seated in this chair and that the writing will be more “honest” because this is a self I

don't need to impress, well, that is an illusion I find helpful. The journal makes this possible.

One reason that I never collect student journals is that I don't want to shatter that illusion that the writer can be his or her only audience. (After the mid-term, I also make journals optional because no matter how infatuated I am with my own methods they simply may not work for some writers.) I've had many, many journals over the years and the only thing that made them finally work for me was the absolute freedom to write absolute crap. When I sit down to write in the journal I never feel compelled to know what I want to say before I say it. I never apologize to myself for blathering on, saying stupid things and asking stupid questions because I know that if I have faith in the process even the most dung-littered trail may lead to surprise.

I've taught the importance of writing badly for some time now, and I find that many students embrace the idea, discovering a new way to think through writing in situations where they want to discover what they think. (Writing badly is far less useful when you already know what you want to say; in that case, an outline might do.) But I've often been disappointed that students seem to ignore the approach when faced with one of the more common academic writing assignments—the research paper. I'm not sure why. Perhaps the default program for the research paper is so powerful that when faced with the assignment students fall back on what they know: be objective, take prodigious notes on cards (but don't explore what the notes mean through writing), dream up a thesis before you start, hunt for examples that support your point of view and ignore those that don't, and generally avoid anything that complicates the steady march toward a conclusion. Or perhaps students didn't make the connection between bad writing and research papers because all of my examples of how bad writing can lead to good writing came from personal essays. What follows is my attempt to remedy that.

Like a lot of people in my profession, I proposed a conference paper well before I wrote it. This year, I offered to talk at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) about how use of the Web is changing how students do research and how they think about it. Though I wrote a paragraph abstract describing what I wanted to do, I really had no idea what I wanted to say. What follows is the essay I will present to the CCCC next spring, and then, working backwards in the process, the journal work from which the essay emerged. I've decided to spare you all of the bad writing that helped inform and shape the essay, but I've included some key pages so you can see the tethers between the finished piece and the raw writing that preceded it, as well as the bad writing that helped move the essay along when it got stuck. I tried to use many of the invention, note-taking, and rehearsing strategies that are typically part of my journal-writing process when I compose a researched essay. These are briefly described in annotations on the very journal page where I used the techniques.

Don Murray, extolling the virtues of process-based writing instruction, once said that you “can’t infer a pig from the sausage.” Here’s the sausage, an essay titled “A Net Full of Nothing?” Later, I invite you to look over my shoulder to see how it was made.

A Net Full of Nothing?¹

Some search engine poetry:²

What is my last name?

gardening gloves

Mariah AND Carey AND me

dirt bag

Where is the best place to get laid in Milwaukee, WI?

display cases

neo geo roms

PITBULL KENNALS

At least it seemed like poetry to me, as I watched the words and phrases scroll by in “Excite Search Voyeur,” a window on the queries that are being entered at any moment on the Excite search engine. I was spying, wondering what nets distant strangers were casting into cyberspace and trying to imagine what they hoped to pull in. Every once in awhile, a query would cross the screen that smelled like homework—“What is the definition of Hare Krishna?” or “+baseball +1920s +history” or “youth knowledge about AIDs”—and I pictured that hopeful fisher of the Web, sitting in a university computer lab or in a darkened apartment on Thirteenth Street or perhaps the second-floor bedroom of a parent’s house, hoping to haul in a bounty to fulfill some urgent research assignment.

I guessed that it mostly wasn’t going well. Many of the queries were misspelled (“New York arcitecture”) or were too general (+religion), and though it seemed as if many of these researchers were futile Santiagos after a big fish in an ocean full of minnows, I couldn’t tear myself away. It wasn’t simple curiosity about the sometimes odd things people wanted to know (“When does poison ivy die?”). No, it was the thought of people across the country hurling words and phrases into cyberspace, one after another in a kind of linguistic free-for-all—that was what appealed to me. I saw a hunger to know that I long to see in my students and don’t see often enough.

But were these Internet searchers wasting their time?

According to a recent study published in *Nature*, there are at least 800 million pages on the Web that can be indexed. Researchers say that number will double in a year. The vast majority of the information (83%) is commercial, and only 6% is scientific or educational. What this means is that when my first-year college writing students go online to find material for next week’s research essay, most of what will turn up will have little value for an academic research

paper. Some of the most promising documents will likely be part of the vast “invisible Web,” the roughly 60 percent of the World Wide Web that is unreachable by conventional search engines like Yahoo! or Northernlight.com.

But even if trolling the Internet produces the big fish, critics of using the Web for student research worry that it “makes research too easy,” encouraging cut-and-paste jobs that preclude a thoughtful analysis of the information. “Screen after screen shows you where you can find out more, how you can connect to this place and that,” writes David Rothenberg. “The acts of linking and networking and randomly jumping here to there become as exciting or rewarding as actually finding anything of intellectual value” (A44). He argues that the research papers that result from this frenetic and haphazard search through cyberspace characteristically lack any “in-depth” treatment of their subjects, substituting instead glitzy graphics and unattributed quotes.

Granted, there’s a lot of information out there on the Web, critics wonder whether students distinguish between information and knowledge on the Web, between isolated fragments of information and information put to work in the service of an idea or claim. “Schooling is not about information,” says Yale computer science professor David Gelernter, “It’s getting kids to think about information. It’s about understanding knowledge and wisdom” (qtd. in Oppenheimer 22). What the Web seems to do is strip the context from much information, making it difficult to evaluate against what has been said before about the topic, who said it, and whether that might be a person worth listening to.³ Web documents typically lack the usual markers of how their information fits into a body of knowledge about a subject, things like a bibliography or even an author’s name. Few are peer reviewed. And since students can enter a Web document anywhere, they may miss the crucial review of the literature or summary of the current conversation about a topic typically found in the beginning of an academic essay.

In contrast, when information is seen as part of the structure of what is known and what *might be said*, then the information becomes a part of knowledge-making. Giving students a taste of what it means to be knowers, rather than mere reporters about what’s known, has been a project of mine as a teacher and a scholar for some time. That has led me away from teaching the conventional research paper and toward the researched essay as an introduction to academic inquiry. Now it appears that the Internet may undermine the effort. Or does it?

I recently asked my students what they thought about the Web.⁴ In a brief survey I asked thirty-two students—half in an English composition class, and the other half in an upper-division literature class—how often they turned to the Internet as a source for term papers and how much they trusted what they found there. By and large, the results demonstrated that most of my students—from freshman to senior—are sober about the Internet’s limitations. The vast majority of students reported that they trust Internet information only “some” and would prefer to read the same article in print rather than online. When asked

to use an analogy to describe their Internet fishing expeditions, half the students offered a negative comparison. It's like "being in a foreign country with no map and the road signs are in Taiwanese," wrote one student. Another compared Internet searching to "trying to move through rush hour traffic, sometimes fast bursts of speed but usually tedious and halting." I should add that students are no more enthusiastic about library searches, but at least my students don't seem to be suffering from Internet seduction.

Paradoxically, the major weaknesses of the Internet for academic research—its unreliability, disorganization, and fragmentation of information and texts—may represent its greatest virtues to writing teachers who assign research papers.⁵ The Web document is many things that the journal article is not, but some of these differences work to support the things I want my students to understand about knowledge and authority in academic inquiry.

In a fascinating look at hypertext and critical theory, George Landow notes that readers of Web documents can choose a path through the material based on their own interests. This sense of purpose is often missing when my students encounter library materials, particularly books and other more lengthy treatments that are structured to be read in a linear way. Navigating her way through a hypertext, following promising links back and forth, the student writer is constantly measuring her sense of what the research question demands against the information she encounters. And while she does this, it becomes apparent not only that documents are linked but that ideas and even disciplines are linked, too. Landow notes that the hypertext document is a "borderless text" (78), one that a reader may enter anywhere and that is also connected to other texts, other writers. This connection is often implicit in a print document through attribution and citation, but on the Web these connections are literally alive. A mouse click may take a reader from the Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral Center to a National Institute of Aging study on memory loss to a *Washington Post* article on a new genetic finding related to the disease. If college students report that their university experience does not help them to see how the knowledge they gain in one class relates to another, as the recent Boyer Commission study suggested, then the Web may offer a useful glimpse at the connections between disciplines, information, and knowledge.

Students seem to recognize that Web information is unreliable.⁶ This is good, too, because it creates a new teaching opportunity to raise the questions about what makes a source authoritative, questions that we have been raising for years about library material but which never seemed as compelling or interesting as they are now with the wonderfully complicated rhetoric of the Web page. Students have to reckon with the seduction of graphics, the sophisticated persuasion strategies of commercial interests, and the fragmentation of texts, which makes it more difficult to assess the full weight of a writer's reasoning. Even more exciting, students can initiate conversations with the authors of Web documents and ask *them* the questions that will help to establish the authority of the work.

I don't think most of my students think that the Internet makes research easier. It makes research more *convenient*, and that's why students' first instinct these days is to pull up a chair in front of a monitor rather than journey into the stacks. For the foreseeable future, the campus library will remain the best place to cast a net for term paper sources, but I'm coming around to seeing that the Web may be an even better place to practice how to evaluate their catch. Can the Internet's weaknesses as a source of knowledge tutor students in the opportunities for knowledge-making? I'm not sure yet. But as those search queries scroll past me tonight—one after another in an endless stream—I sense that there is something here I can surely tap.⁷ After all, inquiry begins with questions and a reaching out into the world in search of answers. More than anything I've seen in years, the Web seems to inspire such a gesture—and when you least expect it, perhaps a little poetry, too.⁸

Notes

1. The title came from a brainstorm list. It was the last thing I did in the journal. (See note 11.)

2. This “lead” was the best of four I rehearsed in the journal. It was also the first I tried. (See note 9.)

3. This idea and even the language surfaced in a fastwrite a week or so after I began working out the essay in the journal. (See note 10.)

4. The idea to survey my students' attitudes toward the Web emerged from my first fastwrite. A week later I worked out some of the details of the survey instrument in the journal. (See note 7.)

5. I wrote my way to this idea in an exploratory response to Rothenberg's “How the Web Destroys the Quality of Students' Research Papers.” My conclusion here is in opposition to what Rothenberg argued in his essay.

6. This is an insight I gained from my survey.

7. My notes from that night of “spying” on search queries are reproduced on journal pages 3060 and 3061.

8. I also rehearsed the ending to the essay in my journal, playing with lines and words until I got it right.

Works Cited

- Boyer Commission. “Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America's Research Universities.” 5 May 1998. 8 Nov. 1999 <<http://notes.cc.sunysb.edu/Pres/boyer.nsf/>>.
- Landow, George P. *Hypertext 2.0*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997.
- Lawrence, Steve, and Lee Giles. “Accessibility and Distribution of Information on the Web.” *Nature* 400 (1999): 107–09.
- Oppenhiemer, Todd. “The Computer Delusion.” *Atlantic Monthly* July 1997: 25 pp. 22 Oct. 1999 <<http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/97jul/computer.htm>>.

Rothenberg, David. "How the Web Destroys the Quality of Students' Research Papers."
Chronicle of Higher Education 15 Aug. 1997: A44.

* * *

On October 22 I began writing "A Net Full of Nothing?" in my journal. I had no clear idea what I wanted to say about the Web and student research papers—just a tentative title (not the one I ended with) and a short abstract, both required by the CCCC as part of the proposal. Nine days and twenty-seven journal pages later I knew enough to write the draft you just read. What follows are the twisted trails I followed in my journal. Each day I began with the same expectation that keeps me reading any good story—the desire to find out what's going to happen.

3057

10/22/99

"Do you have another transaction?" . ATMs, PINs, and Steeler
Research Writing in the 21st Century.

First thoughts:

Okay, let's see. What has drawn me to this topic is my interest in the way students in my research classes are drawn to the Net as a source of information. I know the obvious problems: the unreliability of Internet sources and the difficulty in evaluating and citing them. But I'm interested in the less obvious implications of unreliable - good or bad - that is so freely available in electronic form and what that means about the way students think about information and the making of knowledge. To one thing, because so much stuff on the Net is interactive, I wonder if the "dialogic" nature of knowledge-making might come through? And the idea of early publication might entice students into thinking that they can make a contribution to knowledge-making. But this seems a bit, well, far-fetched. On what basis can I make those claims? I don't really know the scholarship of computers and writing. I do know more about the nature of research writing, and things about the genre. Is there something about the genre as to history that might be a starting point for thinking about Web-based research? Or perhaps something about the developmental issues (something I also know something about?)

Maybe I can think about the issue of authority, something that students struggle with as they deal w/ outside sources, particularly if that source

How to begin? Anywhere. "First thoughts" is an open-ended fastwrite, an attempt to discover what I might want to do in the piece. Pretty quickly I learn that I'm interested in the "less obvious implications of knowledge . . . that is so freely available in electronic form and what that means about the way students think about information and the making of knowledge." This is an idea I keep returning to during the next nine days; I already sense that it's important and underline the passage. How did I know? Because I wrote what I didn't expect to write. I am always alert to surprise in my bad writing, the things that tell me what I didn't know I knew.

3060

Third thought:

"No visible presence in the world." I was originally attracted to the idea that words disappear when someone downloads info. from the Internet — their words can be transferred from one "account" to another, then an electronic storage place somewhere distant into someone's computer, and finally, onto their paper.

I'm watching "searchvlog" on the Excite search engine page. Scrolling across the page of the keywords that are currently being used by people who, at this very moment, are searching the Net. A list:

garden; gloves
Paris culture
display cases
Draft horse
tjayshawks tband
'pamela'
thaw twyland tait tparmp
"brilteny spears"
tmanufacturement horns
flat breasted
used strolgers
mariah AND carey AND me
tfirst t grade t web t s. us
Where can I learn Filipino customs
w/ family names
Name a movie w/ the name Puzos
in it
"office trucks"
neo geo roms
"h-cm
"tra hily windows wallpaper"

Three episodes of fastwriting on October 22 generated several useful ideas, including a plan to survey students on their attitudes towards Web information. I ended that day with quick notes from my observation of "Excite Search Voyeur"—a window on the queries from all over the world that are being entered into Excite's search engine at that moment. I began making the list here of the queries as they scrolled by. These are later incorporated in the lead of my essay.

3061

Where is the best place to get land in
Milwaukee, WI?

+ mixed + drink recipe

What is my last name

distance from phoenix to flagstaff

what is the definition of the lensman?

earthquake resistant house

John bag

pike fishing in the UK

blackmagez in the 1840s

I need Trumpet accessories

How tall is Mario Cuomo

Where can I find a list of all children show

animals?

PITBULL KENNELS

As I madly jotted down the search queries as they scrolled by, the words and questions begin to collide in interesting ways. "I see poetry here," I see myself say.

I see poetry here. I see misspellings, a lot of
commercial activity. I also see the stuff of school
term papers: "What is the ~~off~~ definition of that
kissing?" What do I make of this?

10/23

I'm struggling with this. Not sure why. I think what
I need to do is return to the questions that inspired
my interest in this topic in the first place.... A

list:

What might it mean that so much information is
available at the click of the button?

What might it mean that valuable information
is mixed w/ unreliable information, and

that most of the web's content is commercial?

What might it mean that someone else's words
can be cut and pasted and dropped into one's
own text?

If we want students to understand the dialogic
nature of knowledge, does the Internet w/ its

October 23 begins anxiously. "I'm struggling with this," I write. Questions often help drive my fastwriting in new directions. Here I make a fast list of them, trying to find one that will tell me what I want to know.

10/24/99

Oppenheimer, Todd. "The Computer Delusion." Atlantic Monthly
 July 1997. <<http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/97jul/computer.htm>>

4 Atlantic's ed., Dir. of Learning
 Research and Development Center at
 U of Pitt: The computer is
 an "amplifier," involved both
 sound "study practices and
 thoughtless ones." Which of the
 two will predominate?

• How computers "the filmstrips
 of the 90s"?

Clifford Stace, author of Slick
 Scale Oil: "We loved them
 because we didn't have to
 turn for an hour, teachers
 loved them because they didn't
 have to teach and parents loved
 them because it showed their
 schools were high tech. But
 no learning happened."

• Children w/ disabilities show
 most evidence of impairment
 of computer use.

• A number of reports argue that
 visual learning produces much
 less than sensory learning.

"The senses have little status
 after kindergarten."

This article opened some of my thinking
 about the virtues of computer technology
 in the schools. Where were most helpful
 for my project, though, were the
 comments about the need for learners
 to engage in sensory activity, and the
 idea that computers do not seem to
 encourage creativity. I'm not sure
 that the analysis holds for the
 activity of research, which unlike
 some of the examples, mostly
 high school and elementary, seems
 directed towards a whole range of
 teacher-guided instruction. The
 trend of collecting research off the
 web seems more directed at papers.
 But maybe not.

One quote really stands out: "Schooling
 is not about information, it's about
 using information." Also here this
 seems relevant. The web offers the stark
 the illusion that she's getting something
 if she simply collects information
 something that is easy to do surfing
 the web. Like the photocopying
 machine, the web will help the
 student, researcher - accumulate more.
 but at what point will she think
 about it? How much does the student
 for example, have to read before
 decided to click the print
 icon? At least w/ the photocopy
 machine, the change was an

My list of questions yesterday made it clear that I need to begin reading. I wanted to know things I was sure other people had thought about. On the 24th—the second day into the writing—I read a recent article called "The Computer Delusion" and used Ann Berthoff's double-entry journal method to explore my thoughts. On the left, I cull ideas, facts, or quotes from the article. On the right, I think through writing about what they might mean. It's a dialectical process. It's also an amazingly active way to read.

10/26

I had a conversation w/ a few students today after my 101 class, and they both expressed skepticism about the value of the Internet. In particular, they wondered about the social isolation it seems to encourage — the solitary user sitting in a dark room in the green glow of a computer monitor. I was fascinated by their comments because both students are serious computer-philes. One works at HP and the other at an ISP locally. Sophisticated users of any technology will be more aware of its faults, I suppose, and maybe that explains the skepticism. But I found myself wanting them to convince them of the Internet's virtues, somehow, that surprised me because I don't really believe I've made my mind up yet. (I guess I really haven't). What did I want to tell them?

After a day of reading and exploratory writing, I felt ready to do a focused fastwrite, trying to refine my ideas about what I might want to say. I found myself writing about one of the texts I'd read, trying to work through the idea that Web documents are "borderless texts" which give readers more control than printed materials over the path of investigation. Towards the bottom of the page, I try to push these ideas into the context of teaching research writing to discover what they might mean for my project. The journal allows me to suspend judgment and explore ambiguities, take an idea and turn it this way and that, in turn play the "believing game" and the "doubting game." That way, I get closer to the truth of what I feel and what I think.

① I guess I'm intrigued by the "borderless text," the way in which information (knowledge) blends together, or is linked together ~~or~~ in an interconnecting way. This is not something that student will notice, however, unless it's pointed out to them.

② If one of my aims as a writing teacher is to help student control their texts, an issue particularly in the case of the rp, then the ability of the writer to direct ~~his own~~ the path of his own investigation — by following links away from an initial document or s.d. — as well as double-back, if desired, strikes me as appealing. The danger, of course, is that this journey has no discipline, that the researcher does not spend the time to comprehend the significance of a document or the author's argument (if there is one), but is simply distracted by links. I can imagine some web browsers acting like coach potatoes w/ the TV remote — clicking mindlessly, after an appealing image. That danger seems quite real. Again, I wonder if the control of the path of the investigation is something that should be pointed out — and perhaps suggestions should be made about the care w/ which one travels. Stopping, for example, to actually read and reflect

Hmm... What ~~is~~ 3079
 ? I think I'm
 moving tentatively towards seeing the Internet as a
 valuable resource for beginning research writers, but
 only if it is surrounded by a curriculum that
 foregrounds its problems, but even more important
exploits its unique properties, particularly those features
that reinforce useful ideas about knowledge &
depth.

Eight days after I began, I'm closing in on what I want to say? It's a question I repeatedly ask myself in writing until I'm finally satisfied with the answer.

Rehearsing Leads

A postmodern poem:

What is my last name?
 Where is the best place to get laid in Milwaukee?
 gardening gloves
 display cases

①

What is my last name?

gardening gloves
 mariah and carey and me
 dirt bag

Where is the best place to get laid in Milwaukee, WI?

display cases
 no go rooms
 pitbull PITBULL KENNALS
 +first +grade +web +sites

②

Searching the Web, ~~and~~ says one of my students, is
 like "being lost in a huge house and just trying
 every door looking for the exit, ^{and} most doors lead
 to more doors." ~~Though the metaphor she uses if~~
~~the Web, ~~each says~~, is a vast home with too many~~
~~doors~~

I sense it's time to begin composing openings to the essay. I like rehearsing multiple leads because each suggests a different path into the material, a different tone, a different relationship between writer and subject. I composed four leads, but finally it was the first I chose to begin the piece. Why? I simply liked the "search engine poetry" idea, and wanted to see what would happen if I followed it.

10/31/09

3081

Stuck in the middle of the piece. I've drawn a one-paragraph outline of the argument that one critic (Potter) makes about Internet & research papers (poor guy, he keeps getting used as whipping boy) and now I think I want to shift the argument to come at various features of the web for highlighting issues about knowledge as now it's made. I considered pushing the next guy with a review of his survey into which I think suggest, among other things, that students have a pretty sober attitude about the web and its reliability. Then I think I want to explore that key distinction between information and knowledge, the idea that seems to be surfacing in what I've read so far. What is it about that distinction do I want to highlight? Well, information is not of equal value — it may not be knowledgeable (hmm... what do I mean by that?) Is the distinction between information & knowledge the same as between merely reporting and interpreting, between the research report and research essay? Is knowledge information that is used in a purposeful way? Also what seems key is that knowledge is information seen in context. What context? Well, in context of the on-going conversation about that topic, what other people say or have said. It is also understanding the relationships between the information, its value. This partly has to do with the process of evaluating a source (who is the author, when was it said, etc) but also where it fits in in the hierarchy or structure of knowing in a discipline. What the hell do I mean by that? I think I'm getting at the notion that certain theories/ideas have more authority than others. What is interesting about the

Too often we give students the impression that journal work is mostly useful as a prewriting strategy. I often find it just as helpful in the middle of the process when the wheel rolls into a rut and I can't seem to push it out. That's what happened on the 31st, several pages into the draft. In the past I might have cursed, kicked a tire and walked away. But I've learned to trust that I can get things rolling again by returning to the journal to talk to myself through writing about what I seem to want to say in a draft.

The turning point here occurred several minutes into the fastwrite, as I began to write about the distinction between knowledge information as a matter of context.

9084

Titles

Big fish, small fish, no fish: Net-casting on
the web

Net-casting for Information

The Road Signs are in Taiwanese

Knowledge and Information on the Web:
Where the Road Signs are in Taiwanese

~~Navigating the "borderless text"~~

A Net Full of Notnits?

12/3

Research essays I'd love to read

- history of campaign button
- walking an Alzheimer's
- testing man-a
- Japanese intermen
-

The last step for me is to brainstorm titles. I rarely know right away what the title should be. Sometimes my list of possibilities is a page long. This time I find it quickly, and recognize immediately it's the right title. It asks a question that suggests my purpose, it's simple, and it introduces the metaphor that helps bind the essay together. There's something deeply satisfying about finding a title at this point; it's a way of honoring the things I've discovered, the insights I've earned.