
Linger with Your Story.

It's a good habit to develop.

by Denis Ledoux



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Many—and perhaps most—people write too fast. I don't mean that they end up with a text characterized by sloppy handwriting and spelling problems. No, what I mean is that they push through the process of writing their stories much too quickly. The result is they end up with only a part of the story they could have written had they lingered.

In the workshops, I have always found it easy to tell those manuscripts that have been lingered over from those that have not. Like somebody's face reveals Irish ancestry or Italian heritage, a piece of writing reveals its past. There is a quality to a piece that has been rushed that is easily discernible to anyone who has learned to linger.

1. When writers don't take the time to linger with their stories, they generally are unable to feel the full import of their stories. You can feel your way into the full depth of a story only when you dawdle with them, live with them a while. Although you may even be impatient with yourself, although others may be asking you for your stories to read, you need to resist trying to finish our story (and creating a final product) until you sense that you have really exhausted the story in your heart and mind. Only when you linger with your stories in this way will you be ready to produce the very best stories that you capable of.

Because you are lingering rather than rushing for closure, you are aware of your changing responses and needs. You keep adding to and deleting from your stories so that over time the facts and the images and the action—everything—blends into the unique recounting you have been striving for.

In the process of writing and lingering, perhaps you get up from your chair and take a walk. Your impetus is not to avoid your story but to be with it in a different way. While you are fussing around like this with your story, you are actually in a pre-writing stage of composition. In the end, it's all writing.

Or perhaps you place your story in a file at the edge of your desk and, every once in while, you pick it up—perhaps in between times of working

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on something else—and you reread your text and keep it in mind as you go about your day. That is lingering and that too is a pre-writing form of composition.

You go back, after a while of having put the story aside (minimally a week, but a month or two are even better), to reread what you have written—like a good cook always taking a sip of the soup to ascertain if all the flavors are blending together to form a unique taste. As you reread, you are aware of the response the story evokes in you and you check whether you are feeling what you wanted the reader to feel. You assess, too, whether the story you have written conveys what you have attempted to convey—emotionally as well as factually.

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2. Look to the example of visual artists for a clear model on how to linger with a work-in-progress. A paper artist I know set a fine example of lingering. Among her work are large collages that include paper (hers and from other sources), wood, metal, etc. When she creates a piece, she invariably brings it to a certain point of completion. The next step may seem elusive, but it has its definite stages.

She brings the piece in from her studio and hangs it up in her living room. Then she lives with it a few days or weeks. As she walks by, on her way from here to there and back, she might take something off the collage and move it to another spot or perhaps take it off all together. Or else she might add something—paper, a twig, a piece of string—and see how that affects the composition or the tone of the piece.

Sometimes the changes are very small, but the difference to the work can be significant. Once she picked up a twig from the wood box, painted it gold, and placed it on a collage that had hitherto failed to satisfy her. *Voilà!* As soon as she had done that she knew she had just added what was needed to make the piece whole, finished, a success.

Other times, she will have to do major reconstructions of a piece—even several reconstructions with periods of creative lingering between each. And occasionally, alas, she will ultimately conclude that a piece will never come together, will never say what she was going to say with it. There is nothing to be done but to abandon the piece and call it a learning experience, a process on the way to some other piece.

3. Lingering provides unexpected benefits.

Once you have grown comfortable with lingering, you may surprise yourself by sharing pieces that are nearing completion (this is not the same as

talking the energy out of pieces you are thinking of writing nor prematurely believing that the piece is finished). Ask others whose opinion is dependable and constructively-expressed to read your work. Your goal is to receive developmental critiques. Editing received at these later stages of writing can be very important.

4. It can happen, at a certain point, that you realize you have run out of new ideas and approaches for your story. You've already followed the suggestions here and perhaps the exercises in *Turning Memories Into Memoirs* and you have incorporated all the insights you gleaned from them. But, you feel you can, and need to, come up with new insights. What can you do now? I offer the following exercise.

Exercise

Read your story aloud to your mate or someone you live with or pass it on to relatives and friends and ask them for their comments about both the form and the content. This, too, can be part of the editing.

Reread the piece occasionally to experience it as a whole. What do you need to pull out and place elsewhere? What do you need to eliminate or replace? What if you did the literary equivalent of picking up a twig from the wood pile, painted it gold, and added it to just the right place? What difference would this make to your story?