

What a typewriter can teach you about writing.

It was shortly after the end of the Civil War, when.

No, strike that. Can't use was, too passive.

It is shortly after the end of the Civil War, when.

No, the time isn't current. Hmmmm? Okay then.

In a time and place, shortly after the end of the Civil War, when the country began its return to normalcy, the journey truly began.

Okay. Okay, it has some flow. No passive voice in there. Might need a little work yet. Now where was I? Right.

Littered throughout those fresh battlefields that soon will become hallowed ground, lay weapons, rounds of ammunition, articles of clothing, uniform pieces, buckles and belts, and most disturbing, decomposing bodies and the occasional body part. It is a scene not for the weak of heart, or of those predisposed to fainting spells. It is a scene of destruction, a scene of utter despair.

The odd building, whether it be a house, barn or some other structure, lay basically in ruin, windows gone, doors ripped out, sides torn open and in most cases nothing more than burned out shells.

Slowly the two women made their way toward what looked like a rather intact house, windows gone, but roof still visible. The younger woman had thrown up so much she had nothing left. As they crossed near another decomposing body, all she had left were dry heaves. The older woman held on to the younger woman coaxing her along. They headed straight for the house.

Wow, starting to sound too much like the other book. You know the one. I better strike the two women and make it a man and woman. Or maybe two men. Or better yet, a family trying to return to their farm. Or.

Now, since I am writing this on a computer, I can just scroll up, erase the passage and just start over. Easy enough.

However, back when I had to type this passage on a fresh white sheet of paper, properly inserted into a manual typewriter as I did my first work, I would have had to literally strike the passage out. Basically, a series of typed capital X's over the existing words. Then start a whole new passage. Or, I may have simply just pulled the sheet of white paper out of the typewriter, waded it up and tossed it away. Then I could completely start a new passage on the fresh blank sheet.

My first attempt at writing became littered with several pages of marked up sheets of white paper, interspersed with pages of lined paper, where I had written notes and changes to be incorporated in the next type through. Yes it would be necessary to completely retype the whole manuscript over again, starting on page one to create a cleaner, but unfortunately not yet final work.

Eventually, after two more first to last page typed through passes, I hired one of the secretaries where I worked to type a final of the manuscript. Hiring out, would be another way most writers would have their manuscripts final

typed out back in the day. Some writers actually wrote their work out by hand. Then had the hand written manuscript final typed.

The stark reality is without the advent of computers, we actually had to take the time to create something. We then had to meticulously type it onto a blank white sheet of paper. Without the luxury of just scrolling back up and keying over those previous words, every word had to be planned and thought out. It meant we reread each word again and again then perfected those words long before we ever began the next type through. There could be no do over. Only a start over!

However, now with the magic of the computer, we can simply scroll back up, erase or write over and start again at will, with no real focus on the words written. No real focus on the sentence. The paragraph. The passage. When you have to retype those words again and again and again, you are forced to focus on each word, because as you recreate those manually typewritten pages you are revisiting each word. Each sentence. Each paragraph. Each page.

While I was creating my second work, a novel, I actually retyped every original word and every new word, on every page of all three hundred plus pages, four complete times. I had to be sure they were the words I wanted to use, because once I started typing there would be no scrolling back and changing. There would only be the necessity of having to retype the whole page again, steadily moving forward one page at a time until I reached the end.

I think, no actually I believe, having lost the basic process, has made us a sloppy, lazy, much less involved, well insert your own word in here, writer. It is just too easy to gloss over words, sentences, paragraphs and whole passages. Especially, since we don't have to redo every word, every sentence, every paragraph and every page after any changes!

When I created the first draft of my second work, I took the stack of white bond paper pages and started picking the work apart. I would line out words, sentences, paragraphs, half pages, whole pages. And I would insert work sheets over pages or behind pages. I would hand write along the margins. On the back, of the page. Or in between lines. New sentences. Paragraphs. Whole pages. Until I had a pile of seriously marked up sheets of paper. The stack was now a dog-eared, multi colored pile of paper. A manuscript.

Once again, I parked myself in front of the typewriter and started pounding away. One page at a time. All the while trying to be as careful as possible. Trying not to screw up my new pages and especially not the sequence of those pages. Remember, I had to manually type the next page number on every newly created page. No auto page numbering here. Always careful to create another pristine copy of the manuscript. Maybe this time I could start submitting. But we all know better.

The process took three more complete type overs before I had a debatable submission ready copy. A stack of fresh unmarked white bond paper I would now need to get copied before I started submitting the original. Many writers

would use carbon paper to create their copy. There weren't many options available. No corner store to get a copy made.

I can tell you though, by the time I started on the final pass of three hundred plus pages, I was committed to the work. The stack of beat up sheets of paper, stuffed into a folder is my work. My hard work. Something I can embrace. Pull out to run through again. Make more notes. Finally park myself in front of the typewriter and insert a fresh white sheet of paper. Wring my hands and strike the keys. Chapter One.

I'm not so sure you can say the same about a work created on a computer. Because really, what involvement do you have? Here are all these words strung together in a never-ending stream of images on a screen. You can't take them with you and curl up in a favorite chair. Or under a tree. Take red pen to paper. Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know you can do all sorts of things on the computer to make notes, corrections and such. But, how can you possibly turn the page? How can you get the feel of those pages? Even now the feel of copy paper doesn't compare to the white bond paper I used back then.

By using the computer to create a work, there is no deconstruction of the pages, no cut and paste in the literal sense. Sure you can move things around, and scroll up or down and change this or that. Run a spell check. But, at the end of the day, you are just manipulating words. I don't believe you are actually writing when you do it.

Even now, after I have finished a pass through, I print the work out and go sit in a corner. I deconstruct those white sheets of paper, making notes on the page, adding pages in between, lining out this or that, adding here and there. Building the work again, using the ability to search back in a previous chapter to check the flow. No trying to scroll back and forth to figure out where the hell I'm at. No just holding the chapter in one hand while I'm referring to a previous chapter in the other hand.

Once I have gone through all those sheets of paper, at least once, usually twice, only then do I sit back in front of the computer and start to enter my changes. Only then do I become mechanical again. The process is a lesson I learned well. Knowing any changes I made, would cause me to have to retype all those three hundred plus pages again.

I wonder if you, as a writer, if you were forced to create your first draft on a manual, or even an electric typewriter, how you would go about doing it? How would it affect your creativity? Your actual work? How much better would you appreciate what you have created? Because this step would be so much more than just filling up those sheets of paper with words. You would have to return the carriage at the sound of the ding. Then remove each page completed with the appropriate page number inserted, ever careful not to type too far down on the page. The stacking of those sheets face down into a pile and on and on.

I wonder if your concept of writing would change and you would learn to appreciate those words you are putting there? Especially, if you had to retype them over and over again? I wonder?

Better yet, try it. Go out and find an old typewriter. Antique stores are full of them. I have one on my bookcase to keep me humble. Create a short story. Or maybe one chapter of about ten pages and correct, fix, add, subtract or just modify the story or chapter and then retype the work again. From start to finish. Page first to page last. Every time you think the work is ready for final. Only then realize you have another change, or two and will once again cause you to type those pages all over again. See if it doesn't give you a whole new appreciation of actually working with those words, sentences, paragraphs and passages you are trying to write.

Remember, writing isn't just pounding out words on a keyboard. Writing is the ability to harvest your thoughts and effectively translate those thoughts onto the printed page. Sitting at a computer and banging out words isn't writing either. It is merely sitting at a computer and banging out words!

When you are typing those words onto a blank sheet of white bond paper, you are actually developing those words, those pages. Because there is no scrolling back up and changing. Typing is the knowledge whatever you write this time, you will have to revisit again and inevitably you will probably have to retype every word again in the next go around. Remember, a single change will destroy the purity of the finished page and there is no other way to fix the page, other than to completely retype the page.

This process will force you to be so much more conscious of what you are creating. If nothing else you are forced to address every word you have typed again, and again and.

Now before this starts to sound like just another whine fest, let me say having progressed through both mediums, I also did a lot of my early writing with pen and paper, I can't imagine trying to write without the computer, especially the flexibility the medium has given me. Given all us writers

But, and a big but here, I still print out every work onto paper and dissect it the same way, lining out and writing in the margins and always adding hand written pages of changes. To me it is the only way I can really focus on those pages, those words. Scrolling through a computer screen, not that my tired old eyes can do it very long anymore, removes the feel of those printed pages. It becomes an abstract work. Not something real. A bunch of words continuously appearing line after line, screen after screen. No reality and for sure no comprehension and above all, no feeling.

I guess what I'm really trying to say here is even though we have the power of the computer, we should not let it take away what we need to effectively create something. Print those pages out, go sit in a corner and dissect the pile. Page after page. Scribble your notes. Add and subtract. Change at will.

Create the pile of papers, multi colored, dog-eared, marked up and generally beat up. The pile of paper is truly your manuscript, not the words on the screen!

Only then, should you sit back in front of the keyboard and screen and start the journey again, from first page to last page. Only then can you have the appreciation of having actually created something. As you work through the stack of pages you will be working on the written word, not the never ending stream of words on the screen in front of you.

Keying a bunch of words into the computer, saving the work as a document and ultimately printing the document out on a stack of paper is not a manuscript. At least not yet. Even if you think you can work effectively using the screen version, I would suggest otherwise. Having the stack of papers in your hand as you go through the work presents a real opportunity to get in touch with your work. Sorry bad pun, but you know what I mean.

Now get up, run down to the office supply store and buy a few reams of plain white paper. Fire up the printer, print out those computer-generated pages. Crawl up in a corner. A library. Or a park bench. Anywhere but near the computer screen. In fact turn it off now.

You will not be allowed to turn it back on until you have gone through every word, every sentence, every page of the stack of paper and maybe twice for good measure. I use two different pens, red for the first pass and green for the second pass, to make sure I'm really ready to start the next pass through. Sometimes a third pass. I want to make sure I'm ready to sit in front of the keyboard and convert my paper into a document.

The stack of mangled paper is your manuscript, not the vision on the screen. So what say we go create a real manuscript. Good luck and good writing.