

Day 2

Writing As Discovery



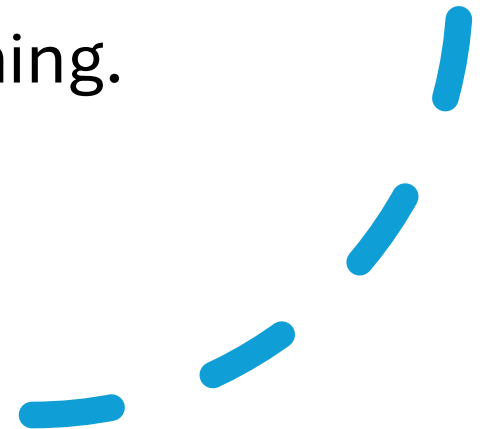
Getting Started

- "I don't have any good ideas."
- "I don't know what to write about."
- "My life is boring."
- "Nothing interesting has ever happened to me."
- Sound familiar?



Not knowing
what to write
about is
often a
creative
advantage.

- Not having "any" ideas can be an excellent beginning to generating creative work that is truly fresh and original and exciting precisely because the writer has ventured out of familiar (and comfortable) territory.
- He or she is exploring, not retelling an old tale.
- He or she is learning, not teaching.





The things that make exploration and encountering the new so riveting to the writer can, under the best of circumstances, carry over to the reader.

As Robert Frost so famously wrote, "No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader."

What Do You Know?



"Write about what you know."



Why is this good advice?

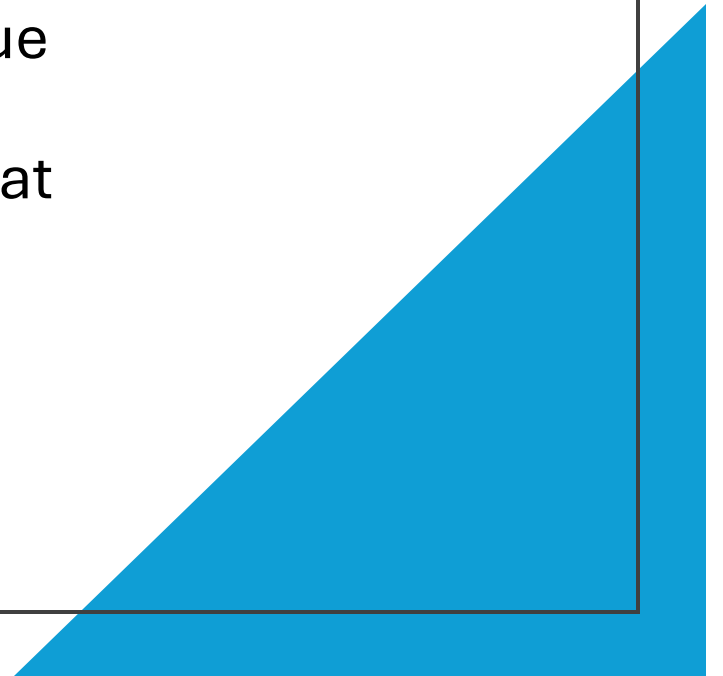


Because it simultaneously grounds you in the concrete sensory world that is all around you, and discourages you from clichéd rumination on abstract topics.



There is infinite value, and beauty, and meaning in the ordinary. You don't have to write about love or despair and heroic, exotic, or sensational topics that reflect popular culture more than honest human experience.

- One of the first difficult lessons any writer must learn is how to trust his or her own personal insight and unique skills of observation, even when these conflict with accepted wisdom and the mass-produced images that bombard us daily.



Author Raymond Carver said in his book *Fires*: he starts out by saying that talent is commonplace – that he doesn't know many writers who are without it. What *does* distinguish certain writers as being above the crowd is a "unique and exact way of looking at things," as well as a way of expressing that way of looking (page 60).

Carver talks about the need to "carry news" from your world to that of your readers. So what do you know? What "news" -- about events, people, emotions, thoughts, within your personal experience is worth exploring creatively and telling others about?



- The kind of experience worth writing about is not necessarily a matter of what you've done (or had done to you), but the depth and breadth of what you've noticed – and your emotional response to what you've taken note of.
- Experience isn't about climbing the tallest mountain, dancing with the Rockettes, or traveling to every country. "It is a matter of sensibility and intuition, of seeing and hearing the significant things, of paying attention at the right moments, of understanding and coordinating." Aldous Huxley



"Experience is not what happens to a man; it is what a man does with what happens to him." Huxley



Our ability to write truly moving fiction and creative nonfiction ultimately derives from our ability to transform these very deep and very true experiences into language that effectively arouses deep, true emotions in others.

Creative Nonfiction:
Making the Ordinary
Extraordinary
(page 61)

Write about what you *don't* know about what you know." Eudora Welty

With this, we can begin to put together a basic understanding of what we, as creative writers, are trying to accomplish.

It's great to work with material that is closest to you, but there must be a sense of mystery in the material.

- We don't just write about contemporary urban life because we're familiar with it. We write about it because it *interests us*, because despite its familiarity, there are aspects of it that remain mysterious, unknowable, and *worth exploring* further.
- Just possessing knowledge about a person, place, or thing is not going to take you far creatively.
- There have to be things you don't know about the person, place, or thing that you are interested in to the point of obsession in finding out more.





Jane Kenyon
put it this
way:

- What do you want to write? What is behind this crazy impulse? The wish to connect with others, on a deep level, about inward things. The pressure of emotion, which many people prefer to ignore, but which, for you, is the very substance of your work, your clay. Here's the need to make sense of life behind the impulse to write.
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On Rendering, Not Solving, the Mysteries That Surround Us

- 'It is the business of fiction to embody mystery through manners, and mystery is a great embarrassment to the modern mind,' Flannery O'Connor told a group of college students.
- The mystery O'Connor is referring to is "The mystery of our position on earth," she says. What does that mean? Just that in every hour in every day, we are confronted by mysteries; by things we don't know, by things we don't understand.



Although O'Connor viewed the world (and wrote about it) through the prism of a deep religious faith, her point is also valid from a secular perspective.

The 'mystery' in that case would encompass all the things in the world that we don't fully understand – not just large philosophical issues, but such questions as: why was your mother so irritable at dinner? Or, what motivated your girlfriend to suddenly drop out of school.

We are surrounded by mysteries, large and small, and as we discussed yesterday, our very first responsibility as writers is simply to *notice* them. Everything follows from that.

All this is to say that we should write about what we *don't* know about what we know.

Without using this sense of not-knowingness, or mystery, as a starting point, anything we write will be lifeless and predictable.

What's next?

- Okay, you've identified a mystery, a gap in your knowledge of a certain situation that you feel is worth exploring. What then?
- Here's what *not* to do: Don't try to solve these mysteries. As writers, we're not looking to provide a lesson or a moral; we're not therapists looking to cure our characters of pain or neurosis.
- **Our job, as writers, is simply to render what *is* using precise, concrete detail.**



- Don't tell us *why* something is, show us how it is.
- Don't give us easy answers. Rather, help us understand the precise nature of the questions.



Moving from "Triggering" to Real Subject

- We've now covered the single most important step a writer must take when generating new work: to identify potential material – whether fiction or nonfiction – by paying attention to surrounding mysteries and seeking out those mysteries that resonate loudest for him or her.
- What then?

Moving from the "triggering" subject to the "real" subject by Richard Hugo



"Writing off the subject."



The uncertainty that is arguably the most difficult aspect of the creative process for all writers, no matter what skill or experience level – is the driving force behind a creative work.

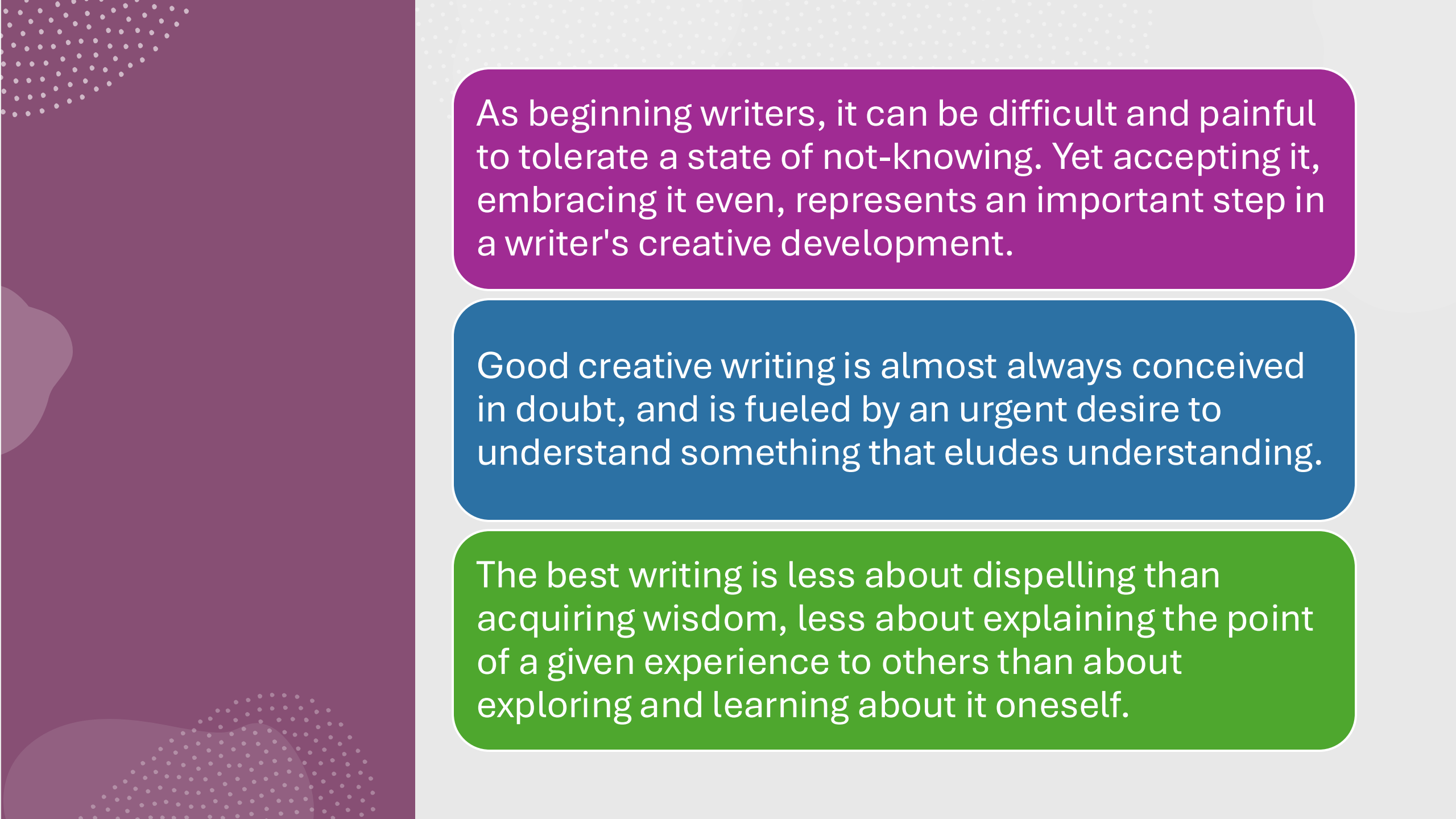


We are always on a path of discovery – if not, the result will be absolute dullness for the reader.

Surprise Yourself, Interest Others

"Bad books are about things the writer already knew before he wrote them," the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes says.

What does he mean by this? Simply that without a sense of discovery, a creative piece will lack urgency and interest.



As beginning writers, it can be difficult and painful to tolerate a state of not-knowing. Yet accepting it, embracing it even, represents an important step in a writer's creative development.

Good creative writing is almost always conceived in doubt, and is fueled by an urgent desire to understand something that eludes understanding.

The best writing is less about dispelling than acquiring wisdom, less about explaining the point of a given experience to others than about exploring and learning about it oneself.

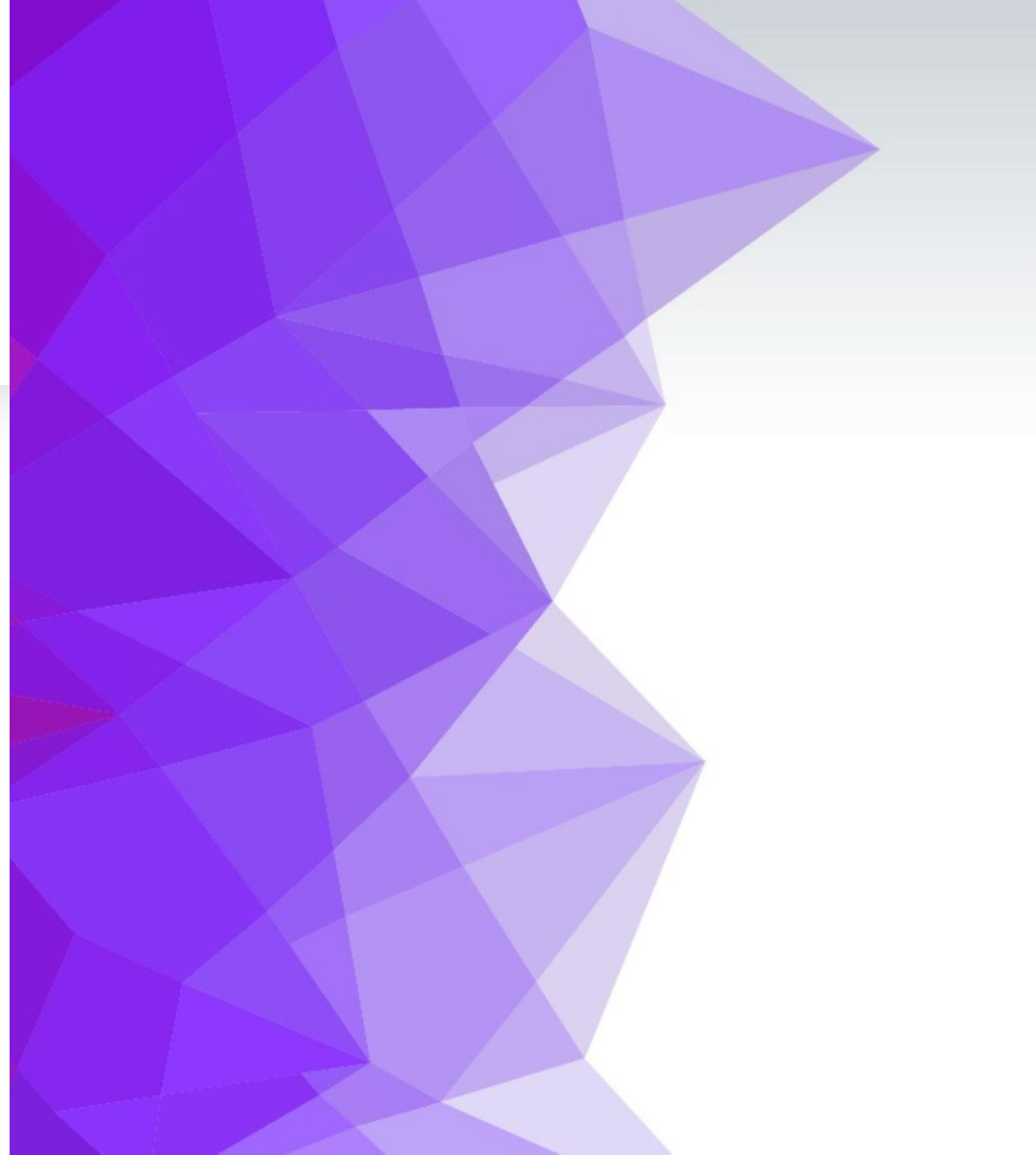
Obsession as a Creative Virtue

- A successful creative work has three distinct phases, according to Poet Phillip Larkin.
- "A person becomes obsessed with something to the degree that he is "compelled to do something about it," i.e., write. (inspiration)
- The person writes down words that attempt to reproduce the original emotion in "anyone who cares to read it." (craft)
- Other people, who can be from all places and walks of life, read the words and "set off" a device that re-creates what the writer originally felt and/or thought. (readers)



Exercise (sample on page 71)

- Goal: To identify interesting gaps in your understanding or knowledge to generate raw material for stories.
- What to do:
 - Create a list of at least ten items that fit into the category of things you don't know. "I want to know why." Important: impose constraints to avoid abstraction or otherwise "large" topics. For example, you might want to limit the things not known to the events of that week, or to family encounters.
 - Do a freewrite based on one of them.



Reference

- LaPlante, Alice. *The Making of a Story: A Norton Guide to Creative Writing*. WW Norton & Company Inc. , 2019.