

Writing as a Means for Understanding  
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Recently I was sorting through some of my favorite books and ran across the following passage in the Preface of Parker Palmer's book, *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring*.

It is a mistake to imagine that writers are experts on the things they write about—at least, it is a mistake in my case! I write about things I am still wrestling with, things that are important to me but that I have not yet figured out. Once I master something, I put it behind me. I lose the passionate curiosity that writing a book requires. I write to explore vexing questions and real dilemmas, to take myself into territories I have never seen before in hopes of understanding myself and the world a bit better.

This view of writing as a means of understanding is quite different from the view of writing as a technical means for communicating what one already knows or understands. Nothing clarifies this difference more than the advice to prepare an outline before one starts writing. This presumes the writer knows what he or she wants to say and is making sure the ideas are well organized. While this, in itself, can be challenging, it pales in comparison to sitting in front of a blank computer screen and jumping into a “vexing question” or dilemma. At that point, one has no idea where the writing will take the author, what ideas will emerge, what insights will be gained. This form of writing is marked by false starts, blind allies, and frustrating confusion—and by the exhilaration that comes finally with an “ah hah” moment.

For Scholar-Practitioners, both forms of writing are likely to be necessary given different purposes and audiences. For example, preparing a grant application or proposing a program requires clear, concise and persuasive writing. On the other hand, within graduate programs (particularly at the doctoral level), writing as a means of understanding may be far more appropriate.

Help for technical writing is fairly easy to find in the form of books, workshops and courses. More difficult to find are resources on writing for understanding. Particularly challenging is making a transition from grappling with ideas through writing to sharing the results of that writing with a larger, public audience.

Because writing for understanding is an intensively reflective process, there are no simple how-to guides to follow. Instead, it can be helpful to read materials that give a sense of what this writing entails. In this regard, several books may be useful.

**Vivian Gornick** is a writer and teacher with a background in journalism. *The Situation and the Story*, written in the style of memoir, not only offers advice about crafting stories from life experiences, it serves as examples of such writing. *Approaching Eye Level* is a collection of short essays and offers an example of how personal reflections can be developed for a public audience. It should be noted, that Gornick is writing for a general audience, and therefore, is not constrained by institutional expectations as students writing in a graduate program might be. Nevertheless, her writing gives a sense of the freedom one may exercise in weaving together stories from experience.

Vivian Gornick. *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative* (New Edition for Writers, Teachers, and Students). NY: Farrara, Straus and Giroux, 2001.

Vivian Gornick. *Approaching Eye Level*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.

**Robert Nash** is a professor of education and social services who offers very useful advice, particularly to students in graduate program, on crafting conceptually sound, personal narratives. He provides a rationale for the personal narrative as a form of scholarly writing and offers tentative guidelines for writing in this genre.

Robert J. Nash. *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2004.

Laurel Richardson was among the early pioneers of narrative writing in the social sciences. Her monograph, *Writing Strategies*, helps to clarify characteristics of scientific and narrative writing. She touches on many stylistic and rhetorical issues that writers of narrative need to consider.

Laurel Richardson. *Writing Strategies: Reaching Diverse Audiences*. Qualitative Research Methods Series 21. Newbury Park, NJ: Sage, 1990.

**Brenda Ueland** as described in Wikipedia,

... published two books during her life. The first was *If You Want to Write: a Book about Art, Independence and Spirit*, first published in 1938. In this book, she shares her philosophies on writing and life in general. She stresses the idea that "Everyone is talented, original, and has something important to say." Drawing heavily on the work and influence of [William Blake](#), she suggests that writers should "Try to discover your true, honest, un-theoretical self." She sums up her book with 12 points to keep in mind while writing. [Carl Sandburg](#) called *If You Want to Write* "the best book ever written on how to write." It was republished in 1983 by the Schubert Club of St. Paul, Minnesota, and then picked up by Graywolf Press, for which it remains their bestselling title.<sup>[4]</sup>

Ueland can be an inspiration to those who are so inhibited by the idea of writing that they avoid it at all costs. The vitality and courage with which she writes is as fresh today as when the book was originally published.

Brenda Ueland. *If You Want to Write: A Book about Art, Independence and Spirit*. Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1938.