

# The writer's labyrinth: A reflection on the principles of academic writing - II

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### The writer's pruning tools

*Nothing more or less than what you really mean  
is the art and joy of writing —C.S. Lewis,*  
(cited in Till We Have Faces Quotes, n.d., para 21)

**Hemingway said that the 'hardest thing about the writing endeavour is 'getting the words right'. But 'right' can mean different things to each writer and reader. It is understandable how writing may be received as positive prophecy by some or critiqued in the extreme as apocalyptic poison by others. Our cultures and conventions are often confusing in life as in writing and our readers come from such diverse backgrounds and perspectives.**

This afternoon as I walked, I chose not to follow the footpath – sidewalk. It turns out that when Americans name things, they mean you to do what the name suggests. Sidewalk means you only walk on the side (the actual concrete pathway) not through the middle of a field. Feeling guilty I turned my head to see if anyone was watching or following – green grass was grown to walk on in New Zealand where I was raised. Americans have a stronger respect for conventions than New Zealanders (in my opinion). While we speak the same English there are differences in our naming and pronouncing of things. When I say 'knackered' – meaning 'I'm really tired' – my American friends think I'm saying naked. I have received some rather curious looks! We need to be mindful of our audience as speakers and writers by leaving little room for misunderstanding. I am adding another language to my repertoire: American English.

Grammar, punctuation and editing are all tools I use but not properly, especially for American styling. This was shown in the poor mark I received for recent tests in punctuation and grammar. Editing done well builds self-respect. This is what I tell myself. You are presenting yourself in your paper to the reader – it is important that it meets the standard writing conventions. Read out loud. This is how you find the missed out, miss-spelt, miss-matched or misplaced words. And 'when you're done you've just begun'. You revise and edit and edit some more: swapping a

phrase here and switching a paragraph or point there. The editing on my papers was quite excessive, and for this I am truly grateful! Commitment to self: learn more about the fine details of grammar and punctuation. I am stepping up. Review constructive criticism. This is one way I hone my craft as a writer. It is hard work. Ideas that flow have been born out of some kind of struggle in order to have their day in the sun. Which ideas should survive?

I have applied the metaphor of the vine and the pruning process to the editing process. Dr Cloud, a renowned psychologist, compared the reasons for the severe pruning process of grape vines to the training required to produce fruitful leaders. A vineyard manager painted a picture for him of the pruning process and what could happen if it was not applied in a timely manner.

Even some very healthy branches may get pruned so that the best vines get to have all the resources. ... pruning makes the vine prosper and yield the best grapes, ... irrigating can help the vine too much. When the vine does not have to work for its water, it becomes weak and will not be able to stand tough weather and other elements. The roots do not have to go down far enough to find water, so the vine fails to build a foundation of strength for more growth and survival in the future. ... The vine needs to build a lasting foundation of strength for more growth and survival in the future. You have to let the vine work to find what it needs and not make it too easy. (drcloud.com, 2017)

Nature artistically inspires, reminds and clarifies life's lessons for us. Just like winemakers who tend their vines, hoping for a great harvest to create their best wine – writers also need to tend their craft in order to reap the reward of publication. Nature's principles apply to writers just as they do for the winemakers.

Writers – like vines – can experience loss when editors cut treasured paragraphs in order to bring clarity to the finished manuscript. The roots must go down deeper, to develop strength and substance to the writing. Perhaps the writer needs to research further to find a new perspective or to bring better evidence as support for their thesis. Pruning also ensures that the vine doesn't grow wild, rampant

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and fruitless over boundary fences. Boundaries are helpful when one is trying to grow a vineyard. Editors are like the vineyard manager who carefully prunes the vines. Just like the vine I must develop my strength and talent over time by building upon a strong foundation. Pruning – great editing – is part of this process.

I have revised this paper many times and continue to make changes. Even in this last edit I want to slip in the advice of C.S Lewis who aimed for clarity by preferring the plain ‘never use an abstract noun when a concrete one will do’ and proportionate diction ‘don’t use words too big for the subject ... good writing does not aim at being clever or artificial’ (cited in Latta, 2016. pp. 5, 6). I think I need to edit that 10% again through reworking and nit-picking. But perhaps I will leave that to my editor! I appreciate feedback from well-versed critics. I hope truth upholds my hope that old vines make the best wine!

## Writers write:

*A writer is someone who is able to write  
and has written something*  
([vocabulary.com](http://vocabulary.com), n.d.)

*Writing is easy:*

*All you do is sit staring at a blank sheet of paper  
until drops of blood form on your forehead.*

– Gene Fowler

(Quote Investigator, n.d. para. 34)

The very young and those more mature in years are seen making their way through the labyrinth staying with the process and allowing the ebb and flow of the original design to guide them at their own speed and in their own time—each thinking their own thoughts.

C.S Lewis (cited in Latta, 2016) claimed that “Writing a book, is much less like creation than it is like planting a garden, or begetting a child. In all three cases we are only entering as one cause into a causal stream which works so to speak in its own way!” (p. 165). While the committed labyrinth walker remains in constant motion—committed writers remain in constant composition. Writing is thinking. Learning to write by writing makes sense of course—we learn to read by reading and to talk by talking. Borrow a phrase from here—a quote from there—weaving thoughts as unique as works of art. Creativity takes place in the act of writing. Flowing through ten fingers, paragraphs merge and stories are slowly exposed or created.

The world is full of untold stories many of which need to be told. C.S Lewis claimed:

There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilisations – these are mortal, and their life to ours is as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit – immortal horrors or everlasting splendours. (cited in Latta, 2016, p. 232)

As a writer I make a choice with respect to how I value people everyday and how I translate their stories into writing.

In *The Writing Life*, Godwin (Olsen, Ed., 1995) makes a moving statement about the commitment to start writing:

In my experience, the angel does, almost always, come – if I keep faith. On some days, keeping faith means simply staying there, when more than anything else I want to get out of that room. It sometimes means going up without hope and without energy and turning on my computer.

There are all kinds of writers’ blocks – avoid them when possible: technology, distracting tasks, endless snacking, and busy work. Too easily—nothing gets done. Pablo Picasso warns us to “Only put off until tomorrow what you are willing to die having left undone.” Lewis (1962) describes the enormity and potential of each moment in our day, “the present is the point at which time touches eternity” (p. 75). There is so much to write about and so little time to do it.

## Writers read, research and reflect

*The reflective mind ... improves its reading  
by reflectively thinking about how it is reading.  
It moves forward and then loops back upon itself  
to check on its own operations. It checks its tracks.  
It makes good its ground. It rises above itself and  
exercises oversight on itself.*

(Elder and Paul, n.d., para. 6)

The *Thinker’s Guide to How to Read a Paragraph* (Paul & Elder, 2013) has been a great help to me both for my own development as a reader and writer but also for the guidance provided to inform the professional practice of pre-service teacher education students. In many ways my reading and writing skills have developed naturally with little attention to guided conventions or interventions. I read and reflect on this article with a renewed sense of purpose. Writing and reading are twin processes. Just as the pathway of a labyrinth winds forwards and backwards so is our conversation between reading and writing. Reading for purpose and mapping knowledge are critical processes for thinking and writing. Labyrinths, as illustrated above have many different forms, as does each reading and writing task. Yet these tasks should be characterised by

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focus, order and clarity to enable readers and writers to follow the process to the end with engaged and reflective interest. There are other parallel purposes for writing and labyrinth walking: ‘sheer pleasure’—with no particular skill level; to figure out a simple idea by engaging in a process; to gain specific technical information (like how to move around corners); to enter, understand, and appreciate a new world view (each labyrinth is different); to learn a new subject (perhaps the labyrinth has new embedded learning). I am honing my skills of summary, synthesis and analysis, effective paragraphing, outlining, drafting and revising for the next 500,000 words (a dissertation) and counting.

## Writing is worship

*Beauty descends from God into nature:  
but there it would perish and does  
except when a man (woman or child)  
appreciates it with worship  
and thus as it were sends it back to God:  
so that through this consciousness  
what descended ascends again  
and the perfect circle is made”*

(Collected Letters 1. 931-932 in Latta, 2016, p. 145)

Lichtenwalter (2008) suggests:

Listening is a spiritual act far more than an acoustical function. Revelation calls us to the act of listening. ... If I love Jesus I will be glad that He has something to tell me about the time and place and circumstances of my life, the church and the world, ... I will love Him because he is there already speaking—affirming, correcting, motivating. How better to respond to His love than to hear and heed and hope? (p. 82)

Perhaps to respond through writing.

## Writers—hear his voice

*Writing is undeniably spiritual. ... Writing isn't an ephemeral endeavour. It's an essential one taken up by those made for eternity. ... Words spring from minds destined for immortality.*

(Latta, 2016, p.145)

We all know the feeling of being lost. I was lost as a two-year-old but I didn't know it. I didn't know what lost meant as I always had parents or grandparents who were looking out for me. I was following my father down the shingle road in my short black gumboots. Apparently my parents and grandparents were really worried as they had not seen me go and so I was missing to them for over 2 hours. They searched the farm scouring every creek and water

trough. I have vague memories of shuffling along in the dry dust kicking at the stones that formed a ridge along the centre of the road. Small stones dropped one by one into my gumboots bringing my bold adventure to halt. A shadow appeared over me as I sat in the middle of the road, emptying out the bothersome stones. Looking up I saw the bright loving eyes and kind smile of my wonderful Papa as he helped me to put my gumboots back on. He picked me up and put me on his shoulders so that my parents who were constantly scanning the horizon could see that he had their lost treasure.

Knowing that a father or kind Papa is looking out for you brings assurance in life but also more specifically in leadership and in writing. I can feel quite lost in the writer's labyrinth unless I realise that there is a third dimension shining a guiding light as I make my way in and out of the maze. Just like the walkers on a journey through the two-dimensional labyrinth, many writers reflect a shallow earth-bound and earth-framed horizontal perspective. Gazing upward into our Creator's plans provides a multi-dimensional perspective for reconciling past experiences, managing our present realities and imagining a more fruitful future.

John by his words identifies Jesus as “The Word”. The fingerprints of God are not only found in and upon everything He created but are also identified through His voice: and His voice was heard from the beginning of creation. “In the beginning was the Word (Logos), and the Word (Logos) was with God, and the Word (Logos) was God” (John 1:1). In the Greek worldview, ... the use of the term Logos was thought of as a bridge between the transcendent God and the material universe ... bringing forth the idea of a mediating principle between God and the world” (biblehub.com). Christian leaders may view their role as writers in the same way that Jesus was received as the Logos: a bridge or a mediating principle between God and the world. His role as the Logos or bridge was to lead others into a relationship with Him who is also identified as “the Way, the Truth and the Life” (John 14:6). Our words can be powerful and inspirational when they lead our readers to the One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Lichtenwalter (2008) asserts the Word of Jesus is as good as the voice of Jesus.

Randy Seibold (2017) believes that “God puts his fingerprints on everything He creates”. As Christian leaders Randy encourages us to reflect on the ways God has given leadership gifts to us in order that we might develop a heart for the things that move Him. Opportunities and possibilities are endless with regards to the ways I could acknowledge God's fingerprints more frequently in my writing. Unobtrusively at times, but boldly when a voice for

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justice should be heard. Blessing, by empowering and affirming others, including through writing, is a unique part of 'the ultimate service'. It becomes a fulfilling purpose.

Published writing brings satisfaction with tangible 'mission' accomplishment. Just this morning, I received word that an article written for an online magazine for children, youth, parents, artists and educators has been distributed in four countries. It wasn't an academic journal but I am looking forward to seeing it in print, in the form others will view it. Further, personal reflection suggests one of the most important academic contributions made through my leadership in early childhood education, was to develop a philosophy document to provide leadership for early childhood educators in New Zealand and Australia. The document was used for many years in our teacher education programmes at Avondale University College and as leadership documents for professional development in early childhood services. Having presented at Christian Early Childhood Conferences, my current writing is developing papers to present at the inaugural conference for the Association of Christian Early Childhood Educators of Australasia. These conference papers will be submitted to TEACH Journal of Christian Education. If accepted for publication my hope, trust and goal will be fulfilled—being for Him a blessing and inspiration to other educators.

## Writers review

*God is the source, inspiration,  
and empowerer of revolutionary love*

*To love is to act intentionally, in relational response to  
God, others, and creation more generally, to promote  
overall wellbeing*

(Oord, 2019, para. 58)

Self-reflection is an important discipline for writers and for teachers and leaders. During my writing retreat on the edge of the woods, I had time and space to focus on why I choose to write and how to make it happen. I know it will take at least '10,000 hours' as Gladwell boldly stated about the theory of expertise (Gladwell, 2008). In reflecting on this process one of my main aims has been to make my writing engaging (Course Syllabus, 2017, p.23).

Referring to the various pictures of labyrinths as a way of guiding my thought processes has provided a meaningful structure to my writing while enabling me to capture and illustrate key ideas through visual images. The images provided a lens to reflect deeper into diverse learning processes and purposes and to study the design of good writing. The labyrinth is a way of creating mystery and has prompted stories

to flow in and out of my past, present and future experiences. I was careful to choose precise and specific words – many of which have been pruned or regrafted. Some of my questions I left unanswered realising that we each discern a different purpose and position. While I have recalled memorable details for my own learning I trust that some details will also be memorable for others.

Just as the labyrinth has an entry point, I have described my early beginnings as a writer, identified my struggles and pinpointed places for improved commitment. But the centre of the labyrinth has drawn me to reflect upon the source of creativity and drawn me to recommit to the focus of my writing: my love for God and His love for me. I view writing and reading as a way of tracing His love through the past, present and future. I realise that my attempts may be like small fingers making invisible marks on cold glass. But I trust that God in His love and by His Spirit will breathe upon my efforts. This is my grateful worship for having been found and caught up into the never-ending circle of His creative love. **TEACH**

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