

Process over product: why does it matter?

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July 7, 2013

Note: I have been teaching a teen literature circle and have been thinking a lot about why it's so hard for some teens to write when they have such wonderful and wise things to say in our workshops. Here is the first piece of advice that I want my students to think about.

When teachers talk to each other about teaching writing, they often talk about “process over product.” Most teachers try to instill this idea through how they teach. I think that teens, who often focus on the product, can improve their writing experience by rethinking their mindset and intentionally focusing on process over product while they write.

What are process and product?

When we are little kids, *process* is everything. What is process? It's getting our hands all sticky and gooey in fingerpaint and the smooth feeling of spreading the paint on paper. Process is telling our parent a long, imaginative story that we made up, which is fun to tell but actually has no point at all. Process is getting on a bike, going a few meters, tipping over, crashing, getting up, and then doing it all over again. Process is grabbing Dad's camera and taking one hundred and fifty-six photos of the mound of dirt we just made.

When we become adults, *product* seems to become everything. Product is getting an A in a tough physics class in college. Product is getting the diploma and the job or the promotion. Product is handing in that research we had to do by Thursday. Product is winning an award, meeting a goal, or earning a title.

Our culture teaches us that product is supremely important—more important than anything else. We read about a musician's award, an actor's pay, a businessperson's stock holdings, and a politician's victory as if the end-product is the most important thing. But is it?

Which is more important, process or product?

Consider a woman who was raised to believe that her self-worth is equivalent to how much money she earns. Because she believes this, she chooses to study a major in college that will lead to a high-paying job. This isn't the major she's interested in, but she reasons that this isn't important because the major she's interested in doesn't lead to a high-paying job. After college, she'd like to move to a quiet, rural setting, but she knows that her industry is based in a big city, and that's where she will find success. So she moves to the big city. She gets a great job, works hard, gets promotions, and soon is earning large amounts of money.

If you ask this woman if she has achieved success—the product she sought—she'd probably say yes. But did she enjoy the process? Is she now a happy, fulfilled person? Of course not. Though she has achieved a product that looks great, in the process she lost everything she loved and was interested in.

Imagine next an actor who is at the top of his game. His recent movies have been blockbusters. The movie he's just about to work on is with a great director. Imagine he turns up for the first day of shooting with one thing on his mind: Will this be a successful movie, too? Will it make a lot of money? The actor ignores everything that has made his acting great—the process—and is focusing only on the end product.

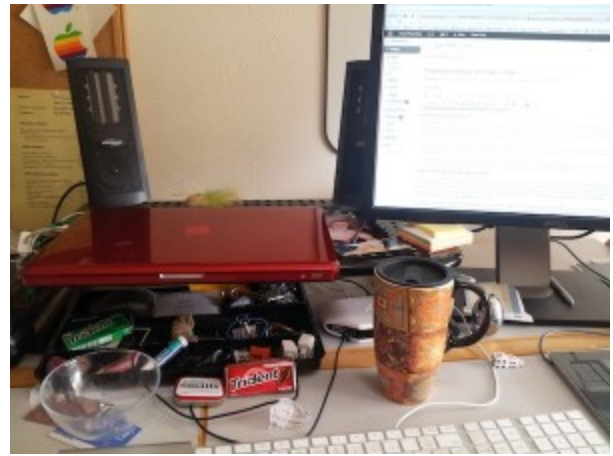
Will the actor be successful this time around? Will he look like he is in character, or will he look like he's thinking about whether this movie will be another blockbuster? Obviously, in focusing on product, the actor will lose what he had in his previous movies. (This in fact seems to happen quite often in Hollywood!) He will seem like he's not really engaged with the part. He will appear as if *the process* doesn't matter to him. And his product will therefore suffer.

One final thought experiment: Imagine you are a concert pianist and are about to perform a wonderful but difficult piece that you have spent months preparing. You also know that a very influential critic will be in the audience, and this may make or break your career. You know that your best performances have always been ones in which you relaxed into the music—the process of playing—but on this night, all you can think of is whether your right hand is playing too loudly, whether the critic would notice that you missed a note, and what you will do if you get a bad review in tomorrow's paper.

Your process, clearly, is misery. And your product? You may be lucky and find that no one noticed how your performance—your product—suffered. But most likely the audience will go away wondering why everyone recommended that they go hear that stiff, self-conscious pianist.

What do teens learning to write have to do with the businesswoman, the actor, and the pianist?

When we hear about successful adults, there is mostly a focus on *product*. We hear about the businessperson's millions of dollars, the athlete's awards, and our neighbor's new job. When we see a picture on the cover of a magazine, we see the product, not the process of making



My process includes a cup of tea, Trident gum, Altoids, and a bowl of nuts (now empty).

the subject of the photo look perfect. When we read about someone's achievements, they look inevitable, as if the award at the other end had always been there waiting.

But if we focus on process rather than product when we study successful adults, we would see that their product was not, in fact, inevitable. Life led them through twists and turns they could not have predicted. And this is exactly like the process of writing.

Rule #1: Don't start with your product in mind

When you ask a teen who is sitting down to write an essay for her English class what she's doing, she might answer

“Trying to get to the end of this dumb essay”

or

“Working really hard because I want an A in this class”

or

“Worrying about whether I can actually write down all the ideas I have.”

In all three cases, by focusing on product she's inhibiting herself right from the start. This is a big part of what people call “writer's block.”

Rule #2: Do start with a brain dump

There are many ways to do brain dumps, so I'm using a neutral term to include them all. Writing teachers usually swear that the one they like is the best, but I'd say the best is whatever works for you. I once had a student who would write sentences on the subject she was writing about on individual index cards. Then she'd lay them out in front of herself and shuffle them around. Personally, this approach seemed alien to me, but I was glad she'd found it.

Maybe your brain dump will be one of these:

- Word associations scribbled on a large piece of paper
- Various thoughts dictated into a recording device
- Doodles and cartoons on the subject
- An outline
- A brainstorming session with a fellow student
- Imagining that you are being interviewed about the topic and typing out your responses

There are countless ways you can dump what you know into some sort of “hard” form. The important part of it is that you get it out of your head and into some external form that you can look at or listen to.

Rule #3: Figure out what you know and don't know

If you're writing about something you really care about, you might just need to look up a few facts and figures. So you can make some notes:

- How many pounds of plastic do Americans throw away each year?
- Was it Henry VII or Henry VIII who had six wives?
- What year was it that our family went on that trip to Costa Rica?

If you're writing about something you don't care as much about (and yes, that happens sometimes), you'll find that you have more blanks to fill in. But again, don't focus on the blanks so much as the process of filling them in. Just be confident that you'll figure it out in the end and stop worrying about it!

Rule #4: Write a roadmap

Some of you are outline people. You really like using the Roman numerals and nesting all your individual ideas. Go ahead and do that.

Some of you are graphic types and you might just want to start putting color-coded circles around each idea you wrote down and grouping them together. Go ahead and do that.

You may even have a teacher who requires you to use a specific method. Go ahead and do that to please your teacher (if you want to), then go back and do it your own way because that's the process that appeals to you. (In my experience, most teachers will accept deviation from their instructions if the student shows that it was a successful alternative process for them.)

In any case, this is where you figure out what all your ideas amount to. It's actually a fun process if you let it be, and part of letting it be fun is continuing to ignore the product. Consider again working with a partner or an imagined partner here. Talking about what you might want to write can be very helpful. Have your partner take notes, or do it in a text chat so that you have all your ideas typed out already, or record it.

Rule #5: You don't know to know where you're going when you write

Lots of people think that professional writers spit out polished prose like water out of a faucet. They don't. They struggle and strain just like anyone else. The difference is that most of them actually enjoy it. They come to like the process of figuring out what they want to say, and how they want to say it. Even if you don't become a professional writer, your writing will improve if you view the task as enjoying the process, *not* as creating a product.

At this point, lots of different things could happen:

- some of you are going to feel comfortable following your roadmap

- some of you are going to veer off of your map and find out you are writing about something else altogether
- some of you are going to skip around and write disjointed pieces

All of these things are fine. All of these approaches are part of your process.

Rule #6: Nothing you write is set in stone

Finally, remember that even more now than when I was a kid, your writing is temporary. You can erase anything you write. You can hit the return key a bunch of times and start over or write something completely different. You can get halfway through, type, “Wow, this is stupid,” and go get a cup of tea. (That’s something I do pretty often.)

No one has to see what your process was. It’s yours, so own it!

When do I start thinking about the product?

Well, at this point, I advise you not to think about it at all. Like that pianist worrying about the critic and the actor wondering about how many tickets he’ll sell, this is simply not the time to care.

This is the time to remember that businesswoman who threw away the subject she loved and the place she wanted to live in order to gain a product she actually didn’t care about.

Your job now is to figure out what you think about a topic. You might surprise yourself. You might think of some really good jokes (and when you do, you’re not going to worry about the probability that you’ll cut the jokes out of the final draft). You might make a parallel between a book by Jane Austen and your favorite video game. You might take the time to text your friend a drawing of yourself holding Jane Austen upside-down by the ankles. You might decide to spell everything really badly. You might write the end of the essay because that’s what came to you first. You might type it all in Comic Sans even though your assignment clearly states that it has to be in Times Roman. Who cares?

You’re in process mode, not in product!

The more fun you make your writing process, the less you actually think about your end-goal, the better your product will be.