THE ESSENTIAL
DON MURRAY
LESSONS FROM AMERICA’S GREATEST WRITING TEACHER
edited by
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afterword by CHIP SCANLAN,
The Poynter Institute
To Donald Graves

Dear friend of Don Murray and an inspiring educator
who changed the landscape of writing instruction—
and opened doors for us all
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Introduction

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look though the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books,

You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself.

—Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself”

If Don Murray had been able to hang around a couple of months after his death in December 2006, he would have been gratified by how much writing it called forth. There were the official obituaries, of course, but also hundreds of contributions to the websites of the University of New Hampshire journalism program and the Poynter Institute. He was a character, a giant, literally larger than life; for many of us he was the most public person we knew, an egotist to be sure, but one who made his life and writing processes so available to us. His stories called up our own. His obsession with writing stimulated us to put words on paper (or screen). And he offered these invitations to everyone, from writers on the Boston Globe to school lunch attendants who said they were interested in writing (he would invariably take their addresses and send them a packet of articles a couple days later). Grad students or sixth graders, it didn’t matter. It was probably no exaggeration when Roy Peter Clark of the Poynter Institute called him “America’s greatest writing teacher.”

The title of this collection plays on the double meaning of essential. In one sense, we confidently make the claim that Donald Murray’s writing is essential for all who are interested in the writing process. No one studied the writing process as obsessively as
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Murray did, and no one wrote about it as eloquently and incisively. His very lucidity, we feel, may have caused some contemporary scholars to diminish the intellectual work that is represented in these essays. We hope that this collection will allow a new generation of writing teachers and aspiring writers to appreciate both the utility and depth of Don’s work. We also believe that a healthy rereading of his work will establish his significance at a time when he has been marginalized by the field of composition that he helped create, an exclusion that he felt keenly in the last decade of his life. In one infamous rejection he was criticized for being too “Murrayesque.”

In the late 1980s James Berlin put forward a taxonomy of composition rhetorics in which he claimed that each rhetoric has a tacit ideology—an often unspoken set of political orientations—that he was making explicit. Through a selective reading of Murray’s work, he classified him as an Expressionist, with a focus on the inner reality of the writer, and a disregard for wider social realities. The intense individualism of expressionism, so the argument went, caused it to be politically ineffectual (an odd charge to make against someone who had won a Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing). In one version of this taxonomy, he claimed Murray was a Platonist because his belief in an inner reality the writer could somehow consult. Murray found this criticism so baffling, even incomprehensible, that he never really responded to it. Calling him a Platonist is a little like calling a garage door repairman an antinomian—probably untrue, but in any case not particularly relevant to the work he sets out to do.

When this taxonomy was first proposed, many of us felt confident that any fair reading of Murray (or the others in this category) would surely undermine the taxonomy. Unfortunately Berlin provided a convenient shorthand for conceptualizing the field, and the term stuck. It is beyond the scope of this introduction to make a full response here, but we believe that a reading of Don’s work, which we hope we have represented fairly in this collection, will demonstrate the futility of such pigeonholing. Of course he is aware of a social dimension of composing. Of course he sees the writer operating in a system of genres that have their own histories
and constraints. Of course the writer attends to an “other self” that reflects the voices and expectations of a wider public. No professional would claim the radical and irresponsible freedom to write according to some purely inner directive. And Don was, above all, a professional.

In fact, Don’s mission, his calling, was to demystify writing by revealing as much as possible the communal habits, attitudes, and processes of practicing writers. In Frank Smith’s phrase, he invited all who were interested to “join the club.” There is an ancient saying that “the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.” In this sense, Murray was a hedgehog, obsessed with the knowable and the unknowable aspects of the composing process. All his life he collected the testimonies of writers, publishing a selection in *Shoptalk*. He was fascinated with the tools writers used—the right pen, the right-size notebook, and later, the right word processing program. (On a page of his daybook we have included a list of his favorite pens entitled, “Some pens I will follow.”) He was notorious for adding program upon program to his software, crashing regularly. He was fascinated by writing schedules, writing productivity—for years he kept his own daily word counts which he shared with all of us. And practically everyone in Durham had a laminated strip with Pliny’s maxim “Nulla Dies Sine Linea” that they received from Don.

Even more important were the generative accounts of the process itself. He began his work in composition at a time when outlines were king; when the thesis set rigid boundaries. The structure of a piece of writing resembled those elaborate hierarchical business structures at places like General Motors. The act of writing itself was depicted as little more than the implementation of a plan. The bestselling textbook from the 1950s, James McCrimmon’s *Writing with a Purpose*, give this warning:

A student who clearly understands his purpose is not likely to be trapped by an accidental sequence of ideas, for he will recognize when he is going astray. A good deal of writing is censorship—keeping irrelevant thoughts out of the paper. Many
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of the ideas that arise in our minds have little relation to the purpose of our writing, and the habit of following impromptu ideas may result in a jumble of pointless remarks. (8)

For Murray, it was precisely this possibility of surprise that caused him to embrace these accidents. It was precisely this self-censorship that he encouraged his students to outrun.

His favorite piece of counsel was probably from William Stafford on the need to lower standards to allow writing to happen, which became almost a mantra to him. The job of the writer, Stafford argued, was to embrace a standard that allowed writing to happen; it required self-acceptance and a willingness to suspend judgment, to see where the process is leading. Murray had little (actually no) patience with those who claimed to be suffering writer’s block—the writer was a workman like a plumber, or tree cutter, or roofer. Writer’s block was as unprofessional as roofer’s block or electrician’s block. In one of his (many) versions of “A Writer’s Canon” he advises, “Don’t look back. Yes, the draft needs fixing. But first it needs writing.”

Murray’s own process was a complex mix of very orderly rituals and habits that allowed him to enter a state where he could be responsive to the suggestions of writing itself. As much as he worked to codify this advice, as much as he would define and redefine the elements of the writing process, it was the mystery of composing that ultimately attracted him. The evolving text was never, for Murray, purely a creation of the writer—it was an active participant in the process itself. He would speak of “listening to the text,” or “the informing line”; he would describe the thrill of writing outrunning intention and entering new territory. This text itself was a player in the act of writing—if the writer was alert to cues and possibilities, and not tied to an outline or a plan. In his writing canon that we have included he assures us, “Be patient, listen quietly, the writing will come. The voice of the writing will tell you what to do.” In the mysterious way that memory and association work, a single word could call up a whole new mental territory.
Proust writes about his famous madeleine and the entire world of Combray opens up to him.

Don’s daybooks, bits of which we reproduce in this collection, were the starting point for almost all his sustained writing. During a workshop in the late 1980s he shared pages of them with a group of UNH teachers—we were each given a few pages and asked to respond in writing. Then someone else in the group would respond to the response. Tom was fortunate to be paired with Don himself, and even this short exchange between them suggests the complex generative view Don had of writing:

TN: A number of impressions come to mind. To write like this is to take your life seriously. To take memory seriously, to be obsessive, to take relationships seriously, to take impressions seriously. Many starts, minimal poems, many not fleshed out beyond that point. I like the mix of things in this—quotes clipped, poems pasted in, free drafts, papers delivered at conferences, and surrounding this work is his calculation and daily lists. Lists of all kinds. . . . Why lists? There is the freedom of order—there needs to be no structure. There is the generatively, one item leading to another. There is the illusion of control—things to do, crossed out as they are done.

There is in this work the paradox of control, a process of writing open to surprise, confined by, surrounded by, the forms that emphasize control. The poem next to the “to do” list. Maybe this, more than anything gets at the tension of the writer’s life. Rigidity and openness, control and lack of control. . . .

DM: The idea that I take so many things seriously is insightful (interesting word for writing as visual—Art Book). It is obvious, as all truths—important truths—are but I never knew it before, not in that way.

And the tension between freedom and control—the necessity of control to achieve freedom, the way I take control seriously so I can escape it—burst through it. Again I never saw my need for control in that way—home, school, army, career—work against control—no freedom without control.
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There was always something akin to the meditative practices of Eastern religions in the way Don approached writing; it was a mysterious opening up that could only occur amid a set of inflexible habits and procedures. There was something paradoxical and Taoist in his invitations to “know unknowing.”

Another meaning of essential would imply that we, as editors, have been able to review all of his published and unpublished work and pull out the work that was truly enduring. We obviously have no such pretension, and could imagine one or more entirely different books that are just as essential (one hopes that his columns might be collected). In making our selection we created a few ground rules. The focus of the collection is on writing, which meant that we did not draw extensively from his columns (though we include one on Orwell) or the two memoirs he wrote. We also excluded sections of his textbooks, making only the exception of his exquisite essay, “I Still Wait for the Sheets to Move,” which appeared in early versions of Write to Learn.

We begin with Don’s groundbreaking essays “Teaching Writing as a Process Not Product” and “Writing as Process: How Writing Finds Its Own Meaning.” Toward the end of “Writing as Process,” he says:

By the time this is published I will, I hope, have moved on. There are those who may be concerned by what they consider inconsistency or disloyalty to my own words. No matter, I have no choice. The pieces of writing I have not yet thought of writing will become different from what I expect them to be when I propose them to myself. My constant is change.

In a sense Don was both loyal and disloyal—loyal to his questions about the writing process, and disloyal to his provisional answers. We found it impossible to split the book into sections, since there is so much overlap and connection between the parts. Change, surprise, and discovery are the threads that tie together all the work presented here. In the daybook pages he writes, “It must
be fun to make this continual, daily book. Tonight I have rediscovered something of the wonder of writing—back to basics.” Throughout the book he questions what he’s known before and moves into new territory. He discusses delay and rehearsal, obstacles to getting writing done and ways to get past them, ways to listen to drafts, revision, and of course, ways to teach our students to do all of these. He takes us through his process, reseeing that process again and again—as does this book—from waiting and need to planning and drafting to the celebration he describes in “Where Was I Headed When I Left?” Always he comes back to what a writer is, what making writing is, as in “Getting Under the Lightning”: “Writing is primarily not a matter of talent, of dedication, of vision, of vocabulary, of style, but simply a matter of sitting. The writer is a person who writes.”

In the last essay in the book, “The Importance of Making Snow,” he is back where he started, the magician who says, “There is always magic in this for me, and wonder because I do not know what I am going to say until it is said. The writer within is always a stranger, with a grin, a top hat and long, quick fingers which produce what was not there before. I shall never know this magic man well, although he has been within me for sixty years. He entices me with his capacity to surprise.”

While our main focus was on his published essays, we did not want to be limited to that set of work—even though that would have made our job much easier. So much of his teaching was carried out in the form of handouts, one-pagers, excerpts from his daybooks, photocopies of the New York Times essays. In his last years he would host potluck dinners for grad students, and even those would come with handouts. We have collected some of these from former students and friends, and the Poynter Collection contained folder after folder of them. For a man in love with lists, the handout is a near-perfect genre. In assembling this book, we have interspersed these handouts, drawings, and daybook entries among the more recognizable published and anthologized essays. We found one of these handouts, given to Paul Matsuda’s writing class, especially poignant. It sums up some of the enabling
and disabling advice he has been given. In the latter category, labeled “The three stupidest things I’ve done as a writer,” he mentions the belief that there is a hierarchy of genres:

1. [I] believed that there was an aesthetic genre hierarchy: 1. Poetry, 2. Literary fiction, 3. Essay of literary criticism, 4. Drama, 5. Popular fiction, 6. Screenwriting, 7. Essay of personal experience, 8. Journalism. At age 77 I realized that I am a storyteller who must tell the stories life has given me. The genre must come from the story to be told not from the literary ambition of the writer.

We suspect that even as he wrote this, late in his career, he had trouble believing it. For the last thirty years of his life he was working on a novel, which he never published, though he often wrote about it, and even gave readings from it. After all, he came of age as a writer when the true test of skill was the creation of an artful and successful novel. Many of us found it odd that someone so obsessed with deadlines and finishing would linger on a project so long. And we suspect that his failure to complete the book weighed on him.

But artfulness can take many forms, as he was trying to convince himself in this late handout. He virtually reinvented the academic essay, proving to all of us who followed him that one could be serious without being solemn. That academic writing could have voice and even humor. In the “The Listening Eye,” for example, he imagines the shame of his colleagues discovering that he actually likes giving a writing conference where the student takes the lead:

It doesn’t seem possible to be an English teacher without the anxiety that I will be exposed by my colleagues. They will find out how little I do; my students will expose me to them; the English Department will line up in military formation in front of Hamilton Smith Hall and, after the buttons are cut off my Pendleton shirt, my university library card will be torn once across each way and let flutter to the ground.
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No one before had written like this, in *College English*, no less. He had made the choice to be an academic (attracted, he said, by the health benefits), but he brought to his academic writing the gifts of a skilled narrative writer, and his own irrepressible humor. We would argue that the cumulative brilliance of these essays—their artfulness, their humor, their deceptive complexity—may be the best proof of Don’s point about genre. In the lowly essay he had found the place for exploring his great obsession—the writing process.
nulla dies sine linea
Never a day without a line
– Horace 65-8 B.C.
Teach Writing as a Process Not Product
(1972)

Most of us are trained as English teachers by studying a product: writing. Our critical skills are honed by examining literature, which is finished writing; language as it has been used by authors. And then, fully trained in the autopsy, we go out and are assigned to teach our students to write, to make language live.

Naturally we try to use our training. It’s an investment and so we teach writing as a product, focusing our critical attentions on what our students have done, as if they had passed literature in to us. It isn’t literature, of course, and we use our skills, with which we can dissect and sometimes almost destroy Shakespeare or Robert Lowell, to prove it.

Our students knew it wasn’t literature when they passed it in, and our attack usually does little more than confirm their lack of self-respect for their work and for themselves; we are as frustrated as our students, for conscientious, doggedly responsible, repetitive autopsying doesn’t give birth to live writing. The product doesn’t improve, and so, blaming the student—who else?—we pass him along to the next teacher, who is trained, too often, the same way we were. Year after year the student shudders under a barrage of criticism, much of it brilliant, some of it stupid, and all of it irrelevant. No matter how careful our criticisms, they do not help the student since when we teach composition we are not teaching a product, we are teaching a process.
And once you can look at your composition program with the realization you are teaching a process, you may be able to design a curriculum which works. Not overnight, for writing is a demanding, intellectual process; but sooner than you think, for the process can be put to work to produce a product which may be worth your reading.

What is the process we should teach? It is the process of discovery through language. It is the process of exploration of what we should know and what we feel about what we know through language. It is the process of using language to learn about our world, to evaluate what we learn about our world, to communicate what we learn about our world.

Instead of teaching finished writing, we should teach unfinished writing, and glory in its unfinishedness. We work with language in action. We share with our students the continual excitement of choosing one word instead of another, of searching for the one true word.

This is not a question of correct or incorrect, of etiquette or custom. This is a matter of far higher importance. The writer, as he writes, is making ethical decisions. He doesn't test his words by a rule book, but by life. He uses language to reveal the truth to himself so that he can tell it to others. It is an exciting, eventful, evolving process.

This process of discovery through language we call writing can be introduced to your classroom as soon as you have a very simple understanding of that process, and as soon as you accept the full implications of teaching process, not product.

The writing process itself can be divided into three stages: prewriting, writing, and rewriting. The amount of time a writer spends in each stage depends on his personality, his work habits, his maturity as a craftsman, and the challenge of what he is trying to say. It is not a rigid lock-step process, but most writers most of the time pass through these three stages.

Prewriting is everything that takes place before the first draft. Prewriting usually takes about 85 percent of the writer’s time. It includes the awareness of his world from which his subject is born. In prewriting, the writer focuses on that subject, spots an audience,
Teach Writing as a Process Not Product

chooses a form which may carry his subject to his audience. Prewriting may include research and daydreaming, note-making and outlining, title-writing and lead-writing.

Writing is the act of producing a first draft. It is the fastest part of the process, and the most frightening, for it is a commitment. When you complete a draft you know how much, and how little, you know. And the writing of this first draft—rough, searching, unfinished—may take as little as one percent of the writer’s time.

Rewriting is reconsideration of subject, form, and audience. It is researching, rethinking, redesigning, rewriting—and finally, line-by-line editing, the demanding, satisfying process of making each word right. It may take many times the hours required for a first draft, perhaps the remaining 14 percent of the time the writer spends on the project.

How do you motivate your student to pass through this process, perhaps even pass through it again and again on the same piece of writing?

First by shutting up. When you are talking he isn’t writing. And you don’t learn a process by talking about it, but by doing it. Next by placing the opportunity for discovery in your student’s hands. When you give him an assignment you tell him what to say and how to say it, and thereby cheat your student of the opportunity to learn the process of discovery we call writing.

To be a teacher of a process such as this takes qualities too few of us have, but which most of us can develop. We have to be quiet, to listen, to respond. We are not the initiator or the motivator; we are the reader, the recipient.

We have to be patient and wait, and wait, and wait. The suspense in the beginning of a writing course is agonizing for the teacher, but if we break first, if we do the prewriting for our students they will not learn the largest part of the writing process.

We have to respect the student, not for his product, not for the paper we call literature by giving it a grade, but for the search for truth in which he is engaged. We must listen carefully for those words that may reveal a truth, that may reveal a voice. We must respect our student for his potential truth and for his potential voice. We are coaches, encouragers, developers, creators of
environments in which our students can experience the writing process for themselves.

Let us see what some of the implications of teaching process, not product are for the composition curriculum.

**Implication No. 1.** The text of the writing course is the student’s own writing. Students examine their own evolving writing and that of their classmates, so that they study writing while it is still a matter of choice, word by word.

**Implication No. 2.** The student finds his own subject. It is not the job of the teacher to legislate the student’s truth. It is the responsibility of the student to explore his own world with his own language, to discover his own meaning. The teacher supports but does not direct this expedition to the student’s own truth.

**Implication No. 3.** The student uses his own language. Too often, as writer and teacher Thomas Williams points out, we teach English to our students as if it were a foreign language. Actually, most of our students have learned a great deal of language before they come to us, and they are quite willing to exploit that language if they are allowed to embark on a serious search for their own truth.

**Implication No. 4.** The student should have the opportunity to write all the drafts necessary for him to discover what he has to say on this particular subject. Each new draft, of course, is counted as equal to a new paper. You are not teaching a product, you are teaching a process.

**Implication No. 5.** The student is encouraged to attempt any form of writing which may help him discover and communicate what he has to say. The process which produces “creative” and “functional” writing is the same. You are not teaching products such as business letters and poetry, narrative and exposition. You are teaching a process your students can use—now and in the future—to produce whatever product his subject and his audience demand.
Teach Writing as a Process Not Product

Implication No. 6. Mechanics come last. It is important to the writer, once he has discovered what he has to say, that nothing get between him and his reader. He must break only those traditions of written communication which would obscure his meaning.

Implication No. 7. There must be time for the writing process to take place and time for it to end. The writer must work within the stimulating tension of unpressured time to think and dream and stare out windows, and pressured time—the deadline—to which the writer must deliver.

Implication No. 8. Papers are examined to see what other choices the writer might make. The primary responsibility for seeing the choices is the student. He is learning a process. His papers are always unfinished, evolving, until the end of the marking period. A grade finishes a paper, the way publication usually does. The student writer is not graded on drafts any more than a concert pianist is judged on his practice sessions rather than on his performance. The student writer is graded on what he has produced at the end of the writing process.

Implication No. 9. The students are individuals who must explore the writing process in their own way, some fast, some slow, whatever it takes for them, within the limits of the course deadlines, to find their own way to their own truth.

Implication No. 10. There are no rules, no absolutes, just alternatives. What works one time may not another. All writing is experimental.

None of these implications require a special schedule, exotic training, extensive new materials or gadgetry, new classrooms, or an increase in federal, state, or local funds. They do not even require a reduced teaching load. What they do require is a teacher who will respect and respond to his students, not for what they have done, but for what they may do; not for what they have produced, but for what they may produce, if they are given an opportunity to see writing as a process, not a product.
I will keep this daybook with me and use it whenever I can find a moment for observation, exploration or reflection. This should make productive use of fragments of time during a busy schedule. When I have more time, I will write from this notebook.

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**Sagorical Book (a)?**

1) **On writing**

2) **On teaching writing**

Put articles, quotes, talks and notes into separate notebooks.

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Do we discover by writing

or does writing make our discoveries visible?

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It must be fun to keep this continual, daily book. Tonight I have rediscovered something of the wonder of writing -

Back to Basics (Dr. Eun)

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