

# The Body's Ink

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There is energy to the hand, an energy of blood, of truth, of knowledge that is deeper than skin. Blood is the body's ink. We write our lives in it.

There's something visceral about holding my pen – my favorite pen with the cobalt blue ink that flows off the rolling ball—the Pilot fine tip, the kind that tends to explode when you take it on airplanes. I so love to write with it on the creamy white paper in my Levenger notebook that I always risk taking several on each plane trip, no matter what the consequences\*.

Writing with this pen involves both my character and identity. It makes me think about my views of the word as well as of the world and makes me wonder about the human readiness to preference speech over writing. The belief that speech was closer to thought and that writing, which was considered lifeless, and would destroy memory has persisted in some cultures (and, actually, in some of my own classes) since the time of the ancient Greeks.

We writers understand, however, that it is writing, not speech, that should be privileged. We love the words so much that at first, right after we craft them, we want to keep them close to us, in touching distance, not on the computer screen. Donald Murray has written, "I began to understand why I usually write the first drafts of poems by hand; then when they seem ready to be tested—to stand by themselves—I type them. It is, I suppose, the first stage in the process of detachment which must take place if a piece of writing is going to move toward its own identity."

My grandmother was once the secretary for Mark Van Doren, the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and critic as well as father of the infamous Charles Van Doren of "Quiz Show" fame. She was very proud that she could type 120 words a minute when she worked for him. I adored my grandmother. When I took typing in high school, I vowed to see if I could get to be as good a typist as she was. I didn't quite make it then, but by the end of college I could match her speed, if not her accuracy, even on my little plastic aqua blue Smith Corona typewriter that came in its own matching case. It was so little that it looked like a toy.

I had a roommate who used to give herself one hour per page when she was writing her papers.

She would roll a piece of paper into the type-writer and go at it, thinking, then typing, then thinking, then typing. Of course, at that time, using this method allowed for no possibility of revising, but it seemed to work for her. I tried it a few times—she was really smart and got good grades, so I thought, hey, if it works for her... but I never could do it. I had to write my first drafts by hand. I realized that for me, it's not good to think as fast

— Julia Cameron



as I can type. Writing by hand slows down my thinking. It's better for me when I curl up in a corner of my couch, wrap myself up in a quilt, and stare at the ceiling for ideas, maybe sip some tea while I'm thinking. I've also tried writing directly on the computer. That doesn't work for me either. 120 words a minute was great when my grandmother was typing someone else's ideas, but it's not good for me when I am trying to capture my own first thoughts as they spiral up somehow from my brain and then settle down on my writing paper.

Most of my students now compose directly on the computer. I can't help but think that there's a possible loss there, unless they are recording business matters or writing factual reports to convey information. Are they too ready to give their identities, their words, away? Do they not give themselves the opportunity to grow attached to their words, as Donald Murray describes? Perhaps they don't yet realize that their choice of writing implement and writing method is not neutral. Through these choices, we transform ourselves. If we only write with whatever is at hand and only for the purpose of creating a finished product, we may never learn new ways of conceiving who we are.

Maybe I am some sort of an anachronism. Or maybe it's just individual for each writer. My students were raised using computers, so to them, sitting in front of the monitor and typing is natural. My six year-old granddaughter has her own email account, for Pete's sake. Her holding a mouse is as natural as my holding a pen. And maybe it really doesn't matter as long as we get it down.

"How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" wrote E. M. Forster. There is a man after my own heart, one who realizes the value of writing things down, who implies that writing is saying. It is a way of opening ourselves up to new ways of being. I wonder if he would have chosen the computer to write his novels if one had been available to him. He may have embraced

it and thrown his antiquated fountain pen into the Thames, or he may have scoffed at it and curled up on his own couch at Howard's End.

So how do you write, with pen or keyboard? Write to me—I'd like to know.

\*I have since learned that if you remove the cap from the pen and store it so it is standing with the tip up, the pen will not explode. There's even a helpful hint on the box about avoiding these mid-air explosions.



Judy DeCraene '98, Meg Tipper '83, Diane Curry '99, and Barbara Bass '88 at the Deacons' Wives Writing Retreat at Coolfont in West Virginia. Who's holding the pen?