

Strategic Writing, Strategic Living

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I'm afraid that if my two oldest granddaughters could see me here today, they would be a little disappointed. My daughter heard them telling their other grandmother that I worked at BYU (even though she already knew it). When she asked what I did here, they said I took care of the Y.

"Oh," she said. "What does she do with it?"

They told her my job is to protect it and keep it white. (I don't know if I could even make the hike up there!)

So, I'm apparently off the job right now. I actually think their grandpa added those extra details in talking to them once—and I think they thought it sounded much more interesting than what I really do: teach and write. They know teachers, and, although they like their teachers, teaching is not anything special. And about the writing, they know I have books published, but Lauren, the seven-year-old, is writing a book of her own. So, no big deal.

Actually, Lauren's book fascinates me. First is the title: *The Never-Lasting Love*. That really is a catchy title. When I was last at my daughter's home, I asked Lauren if I could read her book. "It isn't done yet," she said. But she let me read what she had written so far. She brought me a sheaf of papers numbered from 1 to 15. Her

writing stopped at the top of page 11; the other pages had page numbers on them but nothing else written yet. I read her story—as far as it went. It is a story of a poor girl named Ges who lives with her parents in a faraway time and place. Ges is a nice girl, and the family is a happy one, except that they don't have any food (well, except for birthday cake and ice cream). They have interesting daily routines such as saying good night to each other at the end of every day. One day Ges meets a prince. That's as far as the story went that I got to read. She has now finished it, and I think it ends "happily ever after."

Lauren's story shows what she knows—and it tells us some interesting things about writing and the writing process. Lauren loves Disney movies, especially fairy tales and stories with princesses and princes in them. Her life has routines at bedtime and cake and ice cream for birthdays. What Lauren knows and likes finds its way into her story. Probably the most fascinating thing about Lauren's story is that she already knew how long it was going to be:

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15 pages. That’s a lot when you’re a six- or seven-year-old writer. It’s a lot when you’re your age, right? But Lauren wasn’t intimidated by the length; she worked on it a bit at a time when she was able, knowing that it would be done someday.

Many years ago researchers looked at the writing processes of experienced and able writers and compared them to the processes of less experienced or less able writers. Not surprisingly, they found differences. They hypothesized that if less able writers could practice the processes of the more able and experienced writers, those less able writers would become better. They named their findings “the writing process,” and they labeled certain broad aspects of it: prewriting, drafting, and revising. You’ve probably heard something about that before. Within each aspect of the process was a wide range of subprocesses that could occur, but the use of those processes depended on the situation, the task, and the writer. Also, the processes didn’t occur in a line—they recurred. That is, writers generally did not complete all the activities that might be labeled prewriting before they began drafting. And they may have done some revising before they were finished drafting. They also may have gone back after a draft was completed and done more inquiry or prewriting activities. The parts of the process weren’t sequential.

Teachers in schools wanted to use these ideas, so they taught a form of the writing process—most often as a line that fit with school and most often not connected to a specific task or situation or writer. In other words, what most of you learned about the writing process probably includes these ideas:

- We use it for every paper.
- We do it the same way for every paper.
- We always start with brainstorming or clustering or freewriting.
- We begin to draft right after our brainstorming.

- We don’t correct our writing while we draft.
- We share our writing with peers to have them tell us what they think.

The understanding of the writing process that seemed to develop in schools was not much like what the original researchers anticipated. And, from my experience as a teacher in public schools, as a trainer of teachers, as someone who works with practicing teachers, and as a mom watching my own children, I can see that this false impression of what the writing process is and how it works has not benefited less experienced writers very much at all. Many students often don’t even make use of the writing process to aid them in their writing. In fact, many students—none of you, I’m sure—have strained the process by attempting to live up to its supposed principles.

- They have done their cluster or outline or whatever *after* they wrote the paper.
- They have printed out two copies of the same paper and written *rough draft* on the top of one as “evidence” that they used the process.
- They have printed out two copies and then made cross outs and arrows and scribble marks all over one so that it looks as though they have revised, even though they haven’t.
- They have sat in peer groups and told each other “good job” without even reading the papers—and then had a great conversation about the prom or the football game or something else more interesting than each other’s writing.

The writing process is information about writing that writers can use to help themselves as writers to improve the quality of their written product. It is meant to adapt to each writer’s needs in each writing situation. Let’s face it: you don’t use prewriting or revising when you text someone, do you? You may use a little editing or revising in an e-mail to

a professor (maybe), but you probably don't in an e-mail to a friend. When you wrote your essays for your application to BYU, you probably went through several drafts, and you probably asked other people (teachers, friends, or parents) to read them and give you some feedback—feedback that you could choose to use or not. What you know at some level is that the aspects of the writing process are meant to be applied strategically—you already do it to some degree, but maybe you haven't thought about it all the way through yet. Maybe, as my son Joseph told me once, you are still thinking that the writing process is this pointless thing high school teachers made you do, so you've ignored the potential benefits to your current situation as university students. There might be ways to make the writing process more strategic for you—and there are correlations, I think, between the way we use the writing process and the way we live our lives.

Your teachers might have talked about prewriting as the first stage of writing. Prewriting is important, but it's much more than brainstorming or clustering. Those are strategies that help you come up with a topic or narrow a topic. Freewriting may help you explore what you already know about a topic. But the important thing about prewriting is inquiry—it's the investigation that is essential to all good writing. If we don't know enough, our writing will never be very good. And writers who know their subject well can write about anything in an interesting way.

I have read a lot of nonfiction about topics I don't have any particular interest in: violins (which I don't play), lobsters (which I don't eat), salt (which I take for granted), and Chicago (which I was going to visit). But the writers knew enough about the topics that they could make them interesting even to someone like me—someone who is just curious. Inquiry is an important part of being a strategic writer. You need to know when you need more information and how to get that information.

Lauren's writing is a good example of one aspect of inquiry. Some of our inquiry comes from our life experiences. Hers did: she watches Disney movies, reads fairy tales, and lives in a family with happy routines. These all came through in her story. And much of our inquiry in some situations comes from our own life experiences: when we give a sacrament meeting talk, when we write in our journals, and when we write letters home from our missions. But for some writing we need to learn more before we are ready to write effectively. So we need to know where to go for that information. We can go to books, certainly. Many of you probably go first to the Internet when you want information. That can work, too. We can talk to people who are knowledgeable about our questions. There are a number of ways to inquire and gain the information we need so that we can write effectively. Knowing that we need to know more, knowing where to go to find out, and knowing how to keep track of what we've learned—these are all parts of being a strategic writer.

It's similar in life. We also have to do the groundwork. As in writing, there are strategies for living well, for living fully, and for creating the best life. You know many of them: pray, read our scriptures, attend our meetings, fast, serve others, be in the right places, obey. We prepare for living in the same way we prepare for writing: by learning what we need to learn and by doing what we need to do. In chapters 48 to 50 of the book of Alma, Moroni prepared for the possibility of war. We are told that he was not a man of war; indeed he was "a man that did not delight in bloodshed" (Alma 48:11). We are told that he gloried "in doing good, in preserving his people, yea, in keeping the commandments of God, yea, and resisting iniquity" (verse 16). Nonetheless he prepared for war. He used strategies to get the most information he could about both the physical and spiritual aspects of his situation, and he used that information to guide his life. And we

all know the kind of man he was and the kind of life he led.

Just as we need to know our subject thoroughly in order to write well, we need knowledge—a wide range of knowledge—in order to live to our fullest potential. Certainly knowledge of things of the Spirit is part of that. We are constantly encouraged to study our scriptures for that very reason. But the scriptures also tell us to study other subjects as well. In the Doctrine and Covenants we are told to study

things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms—

That ye may be prepared in all things when I shall send you again to magnify [your] calling. [D&C 88:79–80]

Like Moroni, we are admonished later in that same section of the Doctrine and Covenants to prepare ourselves and, as part of that preparation, to establish “a house of learning” (D&C 88:119). Certainly inquiry and learning are essential to writing, but they are also essential to living fully and being prepared for the Lord’s plan to work in our lives. Think how often learning that we didn’t know we would use becomes essential to an assignment or calling we have been given. To live well, we need to learn everything we can and then live close to the Spirit so that Heavenly Father can reveal to us specific details of His plan for our lives.

When they start to write, many writers, like Lauren, think of writing as filling a certain number of pages. When she started, she numbered 15 pages—that’s how long her story would be (although it ended up being 17). How many of you, when you are given a writing assignment, first ask how long it’s

supposed to be? You use the same strategy as Lauren: You think to fill a set number of pages—the fewer the better. But life isn’t like that. Life is about filling all the time that we are blessed with. And how we fill those pages of our life matters. How we fill those days and years will create a product that has nothing to do with length and everything to do with quality. Living strategically means making sure our life’s time is meaningful, not fluff.

When we start to write, knowing how to shape our writing for the situation is also part of being strategic. If you haven’t already, you will find out soon enough that writing isn’t always the same. Good writing in psychology isn’t the same as good writing in history or good writing in economics. Each discipline has its own way of gathering and presenting information. Beyond school, that same thing is true. A letter to the editor isn’t the same as a letter asking for a job interview. Part of being a strategic writer means figuring out the appropriate shape and expectations for each writing situation. More current research in writing theory has focused on this social aspect of writing—what theorists call genre theory. Some genre theorists claim that the only way to write well in a situation is to be a part of that situation, and they claim that we learn by assimilating the ways that knowledgeable people in a situation write. So we need to learn to ask questions, to observe, and to read widely and carefully in order to find out how to shape writing as we draft.

In a similar way we often “draft” our lives by observing and imitating the lives of those around us and by following the examples we see in those lives. I have three grandchildren who are three years of age. They are wonderful children—fantastic, actually—but when two of them get together, they remind me of Thing One and Thing Two from *The Cat in the Hat*. They encourage each other to higher and higher levels of silliness. They remind me how important the influence of the people around

us can be. Do we place ourselves in the best places to choose examples that will shape our lives in the way we want them to be? Do we have as friends and associates people we want to be like—people who help us become our best selves? We are blessed to live in a time and place where we have the prophet and apostles and other Church leaders on our television screens (if not in our Church meetings or devotionals) on a regular basis. We have examples of other prophets in the scriptures—and of course the scriptures also give us the example of the perfect model, Jesus Christ. How much advantage do we take of these opportunities to shape our lives after these wonderful examples and to learn to think and act and believe as they do?

When he was in junior high, my youngest son spent one evening working on a poster that was part of an oral presentation for his English class. As I drove him to school the next morning, I glanced into the backseat of the car, looking for the poster. When I didn't see it, I asked him where it was, thinking that he'd left it at home. He replied that it was in his backpack.

"In your backpack?" I was astounded.
"How?"

He made folding motions with his hands.
"Folded? It will be a mess for your presentation!"

He shrugged. "Other kids fold theirs."

I asked him: "The kids who get As?"

"No."

"The kids who get Bs?"

"No."

"The kids who get Cs?"

"No."

"So you model yourself after the students who get Ds and Fs?"

Now for Joseph it was really a matter of being cool. As far as he could see, cool junior high kids in Washington didn't walk into school carrying their posters protected from the rain in large plastic bags. But the point for me was who he was choosing for his models.

President Thomas S. Monson, in his recent First Presidency message, noted the same thing: "All of us need points of reference—even models to follow" ("They Marked the Path to Follow," *Ensign*, October 2007, 5). In the same way I look to models of writing to learn how to shape my own writing, I am living strategically if I make sure that I have good models around me and if I make sure that I consciously try to pattern my life after them. If I choose good models and work at following their examples, then I have hope of earning the kind of life that will be appropriate for the situation I want for eternity—a life with my Heavenly Father.

For some writing we don't have to worry about much but just getting something down on paper or on the screen. I've mentioned text messages and e-mails. Much of the writing we do—notes, lists, applications—is just getting something down. There isn't a lot of prewriting or inquiry (except the kind that comes from living), and there isn't really a need for revision. But, sometimes, our writing needs revision. And there are strategies for that, too. We can have others look at our writing and give us feedback. If these people care about us, they will be honest but kind so that they help us become better writers. We can compare our writing against standards such as grading criteria or models of similar kinds of writing. We can read our writing out loud to ourselves to hear how it sounds. These are just a few of the ways we can find out what needs to be improved in our writing.

I'll be the first to admit that revising is hard and feedback can be tough. Last fall I was working on a manuscript for a book that summarized and interpreted new theory so that teachers could use it in schools. I had a contract for the book, but the editor was not entirely happy with the initial full draft. He wanted it revised for audience and tone. When I had written the early drafts, I had cared too much about my secondary audience—the theorists themselves—and not enough about my primary

audience: teachers. He was right—the tone was wrong. I needed to revise. I had a good friend and colleague, Penny Bird, read the manuscript. She came to my office, confirmed the editor’s evaluation, and suggested some possibilities for my revision. I rearranged some of the parts of the text and gave her another draft. Again she didn’t think it worked. We went through this routine several times, each time with Penny asking me important questions about the subject and about what I was trying to do. Finally, after she left one day, I sat down in front of the computer. I had wrestled and wrestled with this text—moving parts around, rephrasing a sentence or paragraph here and there, thinking of teachers more—but I still didn’t have something I could send to the editor. It wasn’t working. As I sat there with the latest version on the screen, I realized I was going to have to do what I had been avoiding. I was going to have to do what I tell my students revision really is: it is re-seeing. I had to start over again. After all that work, I opened a blank screen and I started writing. That manuscript will be published in March.

My youngest sons used to hate revising their papers. Paul used to ask, “Why can’t you see everything I need to change the first time you look at it?” Instead, I would make suggestions, he’d make changes, I’d make more suggestions for revising the next draft, and so on. I told him it isn’t easy to see everything at once. When we change one thing, we are able to see what we couldn’t before. Thus revision isn’t always easy—or fast.

When our oldest son, Michael, was getting ready to be baptized, we had a family home evening lesson about baptism and the covenants involved. I had cut footprints—maybe more like shoe prints—out of construction paper and had placed them across the floor as though someone had walked there. As we had the lesson, we explained to our children, although only Michael and Aimee were able to understand fully, that baptism was a promise

to follow in the Savior’s footsteps. I encouraged them to walk in the footsteps as a way to show that promise. As they practiced, they noticed that sometimes they stepped to the side of the footprint instead of directly on it. When I told them that we have to try to be exactly like Him, I’ll never forget their response. They looked at each other, clutched each other’s hands, and said, “What if we don’t?” They looked ready to cry. “What if we step outside?”

I explained that when that happens we can repent.

To this they said, “Whew!” then looked at each other and repeated with joy, “We can repent!”

Repentance and revision have much in common.

When they revise writing, strategic writers know that they aren’t just making cosmetic changes. They know that revision, at its core, reshapes and reconstructs the writing. Revision in life—repentance—isn’t always easy either. Repentance isn’t about simply rearranging surface features of our lives. It’s supposed to change us, to change our natures. Alma asked the Nephites:

And now behold, I ask of you, my brethren of the church, have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances? Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts?
[Alma 5:14]

Like effective revision, repentance isn’t done at once, either. Like my son’s papers, sometimes as we remove one level of the natural man, we find other levels that we might not have noticed before. We refine ourselves, seeing more and more detail as we revise our lives. Elder David A. Bednar, in his most recent conference address, pointed out that becoming the kind of person we want to become—the kind of person who will live again with our Heavenly Father—doesn’t happen in one revision either:

Small, steady, incremental spiritual improvements are the steps the Lord would have us take. Preparing to walk guiltless before God is one of the primary purposes of mortality and the pursuit of a lifetime; it does not result from sporadic spurts of intense spiritual activity. ["Clean Hands and a Pure Heart," Ensign, November 2007, 82]

In other words, it is a process. One that cannot be shortchanged.

In writing, part of our revision occurs when we compare our writing against standards or grading criteria. In comparing, we know what we need to change in order to meet those standards or criteria. In living strategically, we do the same thing. We go to temple recommend interviews so that we regularly check ourselves against a standard. We listen to and follow a prophet, using his example as a standard. We read our scriptures so that we can see the perfect example of right living: the Savior. Then we make corrections as they are needed.

I am a writer who (mostly) uses what we know about the writing process strategically. I write lists, e-mails, letters of recommendation, lesson plans, articles, and books—and I can do it because I know how to use the writing plan effectively. Heavenly Father has given us a plan for living that is meant to help us succeed in life. His plan isn't one that will necessarily tell us whether we should eat corn or green beans for dinner or which shoes to wear with a certain outfit, but it is one that can help us make the important right choices in our lives if we let it. Like the writing process, it isn't a plan that's imposed on us. It's there for us to choose to use in order to make the best use of our life's options.

When our son Paul was young, I bought him antiperspirant for the first time. I tossed

it to him and went into the kitchen to put the rest of the groceries away. Several minutes later I passed him in the hall. It was summer. He had on shorts but no shirt. Across his forehead, down his cheeks, down his chest, and down his arms were stripes of white. He looked like a warrior going into battle. When I asked him what he'd put on himself, he said it was the antiperspirant. He figured if it stopped perspiration, he should put it wherever he sweat. It was logical, but it was also funny. Over the years since then, we have told this story many times. For our family it is a reminder that true principles should be applied liberally. That's how I think a comparison to the writing process can apply to our living processes.

I know Heavenly Father's plan for us can get us where He wants us to be in this life and in the next if we use it in the way we are supposed to. His plan is a process, a plan of growth. I hope we don't use it the way we sometimes use the writing process—skimping on the details of the process and thinking that it's good enough. I hope we don't start with a page limit in mind, a kind of boundary that doesn't allow Heavenly Father's plan for us to work. I hope we know that we have to put in the groundwork with our own effort and learning. I hope we know that there are examples out there for us to follow so that we don't have to draft blindly. And I hope we know that we can revise our lives when we aren't doing what is right, when we aren't making the best decisions. With His plan, what is offered is worth a lot more than what we get when we write, so we should use the plan that much more effectively than we use the writing process. The final draft will be well worth it. I know that. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

