



How I Write

Lucasta Miller

I'M WRITING THIS in the garden, with my laptop on my knee. Owing to chronic sciatica, I have to keep moving and trying out different positions. Sometimes, I'm standing with the computer on a chest of drawers; or I'm half-recumbent on the floor, my back against the sofa. I always start off at my desk, but soon find myself migrating.

I used to write only at a table. When I started out, thirty years ago, my first drafts were always in longhand, and then I'd type them out on an ancient junk-shop typewriter, editing as I went along. So it was just the two drafts. I sometimes regret that I don't do that any more. Perhaps I'm just nostalgic, but I like to think that one had to think a bit harder before putting pen to paper. It represented more of a commitment. There wasn't a delete button.

You probably thought that I was going to answer the question 'how I write' with a disquisition on paragraphing or narrative technique. Instead, it made me think of the physical 'how' of writing. As a literary biographer, I don't think I'll ever lose the sense of thrill I feel when I come face-to-face with an original manuscript in the hand of one of my subjects. In a letter to his brother, written in 1819, Keats describes his exact bodily position as he is writing, with his back to the fire, one foot rather askew on the rug and the other dangling over it. He considered it would be a great delight to know the exact bodily position in which Shakespeare sat when he began 'To be or not to be'.



Proust wrote in a cork-lined room. Elizabeth Gaskell wrote at the dining room table, while fielding questions from the cook and supervising her children's homework. When I was young, I worked at a tiny desk squeezed into the corner of the bedroom I shared with my boyfriend. Now that I actually have a 'room of one's own' in which to write, and my father's old desk to write at, it seems churlish that I'm constantly on the move away from it.

It's only recently that I've realised that the back pain that's dogged me, following an injury, has been made worse by my lifelong, unconscious addiction to tensing my whole body when I'm concentrating: contorting myself, one leg crossed over the other, and remaining rigidly in one position, potentially for hours, in the mistaken belief that I can somehow power myself through any stressful impasse. From a musculoskeletal viewpoint, the advent of the computer keyboard has only made things worse.

By living only in the mind when writing, I ignored and neglected the body. It's hard to take regular breaks when you're on a roll, but it's worth getting into the habit before you're forced to. To my surprise, I've found that getting up and moving around has helped not just with the pain but with untangling gridlocked sentences. Whenever I re-settle, I find a new way in.