



## How I Write

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ONE OF THE THINGS I love about writing is how out-of-body it can feel. There are times when I'm writing and my mind is led in unexpected directions by the rhythms of language, or by an unplanned sequence of ideas, or by an image that grows wings. Although I often have an outline of where I want a piece of writing to go, this plan can be hijacked by something just below the level of my conscious, rational mind. When that happens it's thrilling, and afterwards I look back and think, *Did I really write that?* Some of this inspiration comes when writing a first draft, but that's only the start of the process.

I always do part of my writing on paper. When writing poetry, the first drafts are in pen and ink: the physicality of working this way appeals to me, and I'm convinced I think more freely in longhand. I frequently score out phrases, draw connecting arrows between ideas, and play around with the position of words on the page. Using a mouse and keyboard would slow me down. I rewrite obsessively — every few lines I'll start redrafting what I've written so far. Lines can go through dozens of cycles of this process before I'm happy with them.

Once I've got something resembling a poem down on paper, I type it up. This is rarely an exact copy — the action of transferring the words to a different medium exposes them to new pressures, and I make changes accordingly. I print this draft out, then attack the printout with a biro. Then I write out another draft and type it up. Sometimes a poem will travel a dozen times between page and screen.



When I think I've finished, I lay the manuscript aside. The euphoria of completing a piece of writing is to be distrusted — invariably you're convinced you've written a work of world-altering genius. Returning to it a few days later means approaching it with a fresh perspective, and the flaws which initially seemed like transcendent inspiration are more apparent. Eventually, I'm ready to show my work to someone else, and get their feedback. Then it's time to redraft again...

When writing prose rather than poetry, I have a page of handwritten notes beside me, but otherwise I go straight to the typing stage. There then follows several hand-annotated drafts. When I'm struggling to fix a thorny sentence or paragraph, I often decide the best solution is to remove it. I find it psychologically easier to cut and paste into a separate document of reserved material than to delete passages permanently.

It's easier to work with a pre-existing draft than to start from scratch. An empty page can be terrifying, as there's a tendency to feel like any marks you make on that undisturbed white have to be perfect. Getting beyond that trepidation is vital — simply putting words down, regardless of whether they're any good, is one of my initial aims. There's plenty of time to redraft later, and that's where the real work, and the fun, begin.