

The Courage to Write

Are you afraid to write? Good, says this veteran writer of books and articles. "Mastering techniques will do far less to improve your writing than will finding the guts to put on paper what you really want to say."

BY RALPH KEYES

John Cheever called the life of a serious writer "quite a dangerous career." I agree. During a quarter-century of writing and teaching writers, my admiration has grown for those who set out on this perilous trek. They are apprehensive and should be. Yet too many writers think that being scared is their own shameful secret weakness.

They are mistaken. Fear is felt by writers at every level. Anxiety accompanies the first word one puts on paper, and the last. "I write in terror," said Cynthia Ozick. "I have to talk myself into bravery with every sentence, sometimes every syllable."

What terrors are we talking about? Here are some: Can I pull it off? Do I have anything to say? Will I be exposed as a fraud who set out to write *War and Peace* and ended up with *Dick and Jane*? Will readers ridicule my pathetic efforts? Will they peer deep inside me and see nothing there? Will I look within and discover things about myself I'd rather not know?

Whenever I start writing a book, my own anxieties follow those predictable paths. First I'm scared that I won't finish it; that I'll be revealed as an impostor

who said he could write a book but couldn't.

When I do complete a manuscript, I'm afraid my publisher won't accept it. If my publisher does accept the manuscript, I'm worried that critics will hate it. If critics don't hate it, I'm sure no one will buy my book. And even if readers do buy my book, there's the danger that they won't like what they read. They might find it laughable. Worst of all, someone I care about may scorn my efforts.

These are the types of fears that keep me, and anyone who presumes to write for public consumption, awake at night.

Come to Terms With Your Anxieties

A state of anxiety is the writer's natural habitat. Any time we put so much as a word on paper we're in jeopardy. (Suppose someone thinks it's the wrong word?) Nonetheless, this inevitable fear of writing is normal, manageable, even desirable.

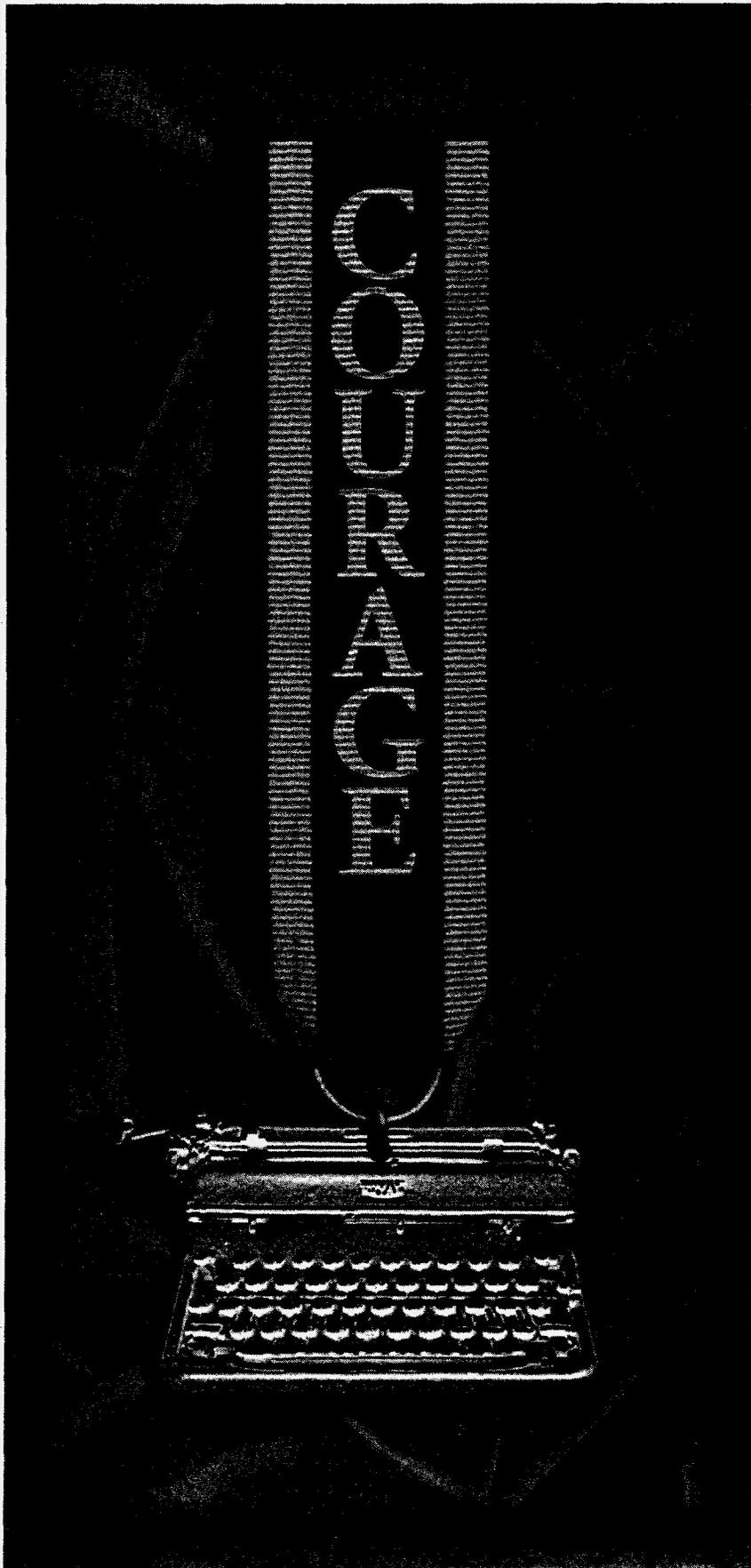
Let me explain. Working writers aren't those who have eliminated their anxiety. They are the ones who keep scribbling even as their hearts race and their stomachs churn, and who mail their manuscripts with trembling fingers.

The key difference between writers who are paralyzed by fear and those who are merely terrified is that the latter come to terms with their anxieties. They learn how to keep writing even as terror tries to yank their hands from the page.

Over time, writers don't just come to terms with fear, they even come to depend on it. One way writers know they're writing about something important is that they're scared. "When you stiffen," said Toni Morrison of anxious moments while writing a novel, "you know that whatever you stiffen about is very important. The stuff is important, the fear itself is information."

What makes writing so scary is the perpetual vulnerability of the writer. It's not the writing as such that provokes our fear so much as other people's reactions to our writing. Every word we put on paper to be seen by others is subject to scrutiny—not just of anonymous readers but of colleagues, reviewers, friends, classmates, spouses, parents, children and our Aunt Emily in Omaha. What are they going to think? And by this we don't just mean what are they going to think about the quality of our work, but what will they think about *us* once they read our writing?

This is a particular problem for novelists and short story writers. Being



asked "Did that really happen to you?" is an occupational hazard for those who write fiction. Readers who don't ask this question tend to assume the answer is "yes" anyway. Even if they're persuaded that the author invented her characters and stories, the question remains: "How could you even *think* the things you wrote about?" The corollary to that question is, "I'm not sure how I feel about someone who has thoughts like that in her head."

Just before her bestselling first novel *The Midwife* was published, Gay Courter wrote me a letter about the evolution of her fears. In it she said:

First, I was afraid it "would never sell," and I was "wasting my time," and everyone would know I wasted three years on the typical, stupid New Jersey housewife's ambition to "write the great American novel." Now I'm afraid that the book is going to sell and a) everyone will find out I'm a lousy writer; and b) everyone's going to see my innermost self through the book and know things I don't want them to know. The latter is already a problem as people who've read the manuscript ask if sex is really like that for me, or what character my husband is, or do I really feel that way about my mother.

This type of problem puts writers in a bind. To write well, they must write honestly. But honest writing lays the writer bare, and may jeopardize important relationships. Conversely, being nice trims the writer's wings. Nice seldom reads well.

So here's the dilemma: One can write honestly and risk being not-nice; or write guardedly to protect others; or not write at all (just to be on the safe side). At one extreme we can write and be damned; at the other, skip writing altogether for fear of hurting someone.

There are various paths out of this bind for those who do want to write. One is to put off writing indefinitely; have it be something one plans to get to "some day, when the time's right." (It never is. The time is always wrong.) Another alternative is to write for one's own eyes only, or the eyes of a few trusted others. A third option is to write under a pseudonym.

The most popular option is to write, but not well. Obscure, evasive writing can be very self-protective. If people can't figure out what you're trying to say, they have a harder time drawing a bead on your writing, and you. By con-

trast, a clear, direct, honest style risks a clear, direct, honest response. That might be, "This stinks!" Or perhaps, "Whoever wrote this piece of garbage is not someone I'd care to know."

Good writing—which is to say, clear writing—raises the stakes of an already daring activity. "It is always a thrilling risk to say exactly what you mean," wrote Patricia Hampl, "to express exactly what you see." Bad writing—which is to say, opaque writing—provides a safe haven. If readers can't decipher your message, they'll usually blame themselves, thinking they're too thick to grasp such profundity. Writers who generate verbal fog seldom hesitate to suggest to confused readers that the problem is theirs.

I think this is the real reason—far more than ignorance of technique—that we see so much more bad than good writing. It provides a camouflage, a mask, a shield of technique behind which we hide, hoping no one sees through to the frightened little writer cowering inside.

Silencing Your Censors

The writing problems most of us confront have little to do with craft. Most writers know the basic principles of their calling: show, don't tell; use active verbs; be sparing with adjectives and adverbs; make effective use of detail. It's important to learn and relearn these lessons; to review *The Elements of Style* on a regular basis.

Yet it's puzzling how little assimilating the rules of good writing does to improve our prose or our poetry. There's a reason for this. Mastering techniques will do far less to improve writing than finding the will, the nerve, the guts to put on paper what you really want to say. And it does take guts to come out from hiding, as a writer must. "A writer gives himself away all the time anyway," said W.H. Auden. "He has no important secrets."

Trying to hide out on the page is a futile exercise, rather like a soldier in the desert scrambling about for a tree to hide behind. This is why writing is scary, and should be. Who among us is bold enough to sit casually at a desk and let his secret self escape from the lock-box in his head and run out through his fingers onto paper, then wend its way to a publisher, a newsstand or bookstore and end up on coffee tables around the country for readers to discover and judge. Imagine your best, most candid writing in printed form sitting on the coffee table of—your parents! or your kids! or your next-door neighbor!

I recently watched a successful young author waiting to talk and sign books for an overflow crowd at a Dayton, Ohio, bookstore. This book—a first novel—had been reviewed favorably in prominent media. Its author had just returned from making publicity appearances in New York. "I'm glad I did New York before this," she whispered nervously to a friend. "As kind of a warm-up."

"That's funny," laughed the friend, "considering New York a warm-up for Dayton."

"But I didn't know anyone in New York," explained the writer as she surveyed the crowd. "Here I see lots of familiar faces. There's my mother, my grandmother, my sister. Oh, God."

Anxiety about the reactions of others can cripple a writer. If it's expressed at all, this fear usually is articulated as, "What will people think of me when they read what I've written?" But it's not "people" we're most scared of. It's specific individuals. The opinion of fuzzy thousands (or millions) of readers isn't what inhibits us most as we ponder our choice of words; it's the frown on a few familiar faces we see most clearly.

I sometimes ask writing students to picture privately the person whose response to their writing worries them most. Usually it's a spouse or parent. Sometimes it's another relative, a child, a friend or an old teacher. It could be an admired colleague, or someone the writer doesn't like but finds intimidating.

Whoever's opinion concerns us most is our Censor in Chief. That person can feel like a scowling Torquemada scrutinizing every word we write. Neutralizing one's fear of that person's reaction may not be possible. But imagining how we'll deal with our Censor in Chief is helpful. Simply identifying who he or she is can be a revelation. We don't always realize how much that individual is directing our productions. And, if we can temper our fear of that person's opinion, everyone else we're worried about will become a piece of cake.

When she was alive, my mother censored me most (rather, I censored myself as I imagined her reading my writing). Although I'm not proud to say it, I became a better writer after she died. And I've become better still since my father joined her.

Others have discovered the same thing. After interviewing me about one of my books, a television reporter confided that he had a novel in the works. Except he hadn't worked on it in a while. In fact it was buried in a desk drawer at

home. I asked why he didn't complete his novel.

Because he'd made the mistake of telling his mother about it, the reporter explained. Since then she kept asking to see his work-in-progress. He tried to put her off by explaining that it was half-baked; meaningless. Why not let her judge that, said his mother. After this, she became an unwelcome guest at her son's writing sessions. Soon, those sessions grew farther and farther apart. Then they stopped altogether. That's why his unfinished novel sat in a desk drawer.

Of course it's not others per se who censor us so oppressively. Rather it's our fear of their imagined reaction. In reality, writers often find that those people they're so concerned about turn out to be not so concerned themselves.

I'll go further. Much of what we assume to be anxiety about the reaction of others to our writing turns out actually to be anxiety about our own reaction to ourselves. Unlike the more conscious fear of other people, fear of our own inner world tends to be repressed. It often shows up in disguise. The most common disguise is fear of *them*, *their* opinion of us, when it's actually our *own* opinion of ourselves that we're worried about.

Any writing lays the writer open to judgment about the quality of his work and thought. The closer he gets to painful personal truths, the more fear mounts—not just about what he might reveal, but about what he might discover should he venture too deeply inside.

But to write well, that's exactly where we must venture. Herman Melville admired most the writers he called "divers," those who dared to journey within and report what they found. Frederick Busch thought the need for inner exploration was what made his calling so dangerous. "You go to dark places so that you can get there, steal the trophy and get out," said Busch. "That is more important than to be psychologically safe."

Express Your Convictions With Courage

Aspiring writers are often advised to write what they know. Speak from the heart. Just relax and be yourself. Relax. Relax? How can I relax if I'm putting my own bleeding tissue on display to be voted up or down (down, most likely)?

Let's go further. Suppose I don't know who I am and am scared to find out? I once urged a reticent writing student (a man in his 40s) to be more open

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in his prose. Why are you scared to write what you feel? I asked him.

"I'm not scared to write what I feel," he replied. "I'm scared to *feel* what I feel."

We all keep thoughts to ourselves in a zone of privacy. The bigger that zone, the worse our writing. Because within our protected self lies the richest vein of material to mine. The emotional mother lode is usually buried in the deepest caverns. Writers' best topics are usually ones that make them vulnerable. Like a tongue searching out cracked fillings, an inner scan for ideas makes a beeline for tender parts of the writer's psyche. That's where the most potent material hides out.

We all know what we'd really like to write about. But it's exceedingly hard—nearly impossible—to find the courage to expose such topics in a candid, courageous way. Should I write about feeling too fat to please my mother? It might kill her. How about that time I got caught shoplifting? Uncle Steve would never speak to me again. Maybe I could plumb my fantasies of making love on Principal Hargrove's desk (but only when I'm ready to leave town).

Writers are always hungry for compelling topics to explore. The problem is that the best ones are mortifying. The warm flush of embarrassment is like a divining rod pointing its quivering tip insistently at deep wells of rich material. When our cheeks feel hot with mortification, we've probably hit the mother lode. "The best work that anybody ever writes," said Arthur Miller, "is the work that is on the verge of embarrassing him, always."

This is where the real courage comes into play, and the best writing. That writing comes from those who put their whole poke on the table; the ones who dare to dive and report what they find.

The more I read, and write, the more convinced I am that the best writing flows less from acquired skill than

convictions expressed with courage. By this I don't mean moral convictions, but the sense that what one has to say is something others need to know. The writer who grabs my lapels early, insisting "You've got to hear what I'm about to tell you," is the one I keep reading. The polished, elegant, diffident author is the one I put down. I'd much rather read a bold, clumsy writer than an evasive, glib one. "I prefer a man who is unskillful," said Henry Miller, "but who has something to say, who is dealing himself one time on every page."

There's one student I look for eagerly in my writing classes. It's usually a woman. She sits close to the door, to make for an easier getaway. This student seldom says much. She often accosts me after class to say she's about to drop out. "I'm too scared," she tells me. "I can't do it." I always urge that student to stick around. I know she'll produce some of our best work.

During one workshop, a computer programmer named Lisa kept warning me that she was about to jump in her car and drive back to Pittsburgh. Luckily for us, she didn't. When assigned to write a profile, Lisa spent two hours circling the home of an artist she'd chosen to portray, working up the courage to knock on his door. The visit she described was filled with the spilled turpentine, half-squeezed paint tubes, partly smoked reefers and empty matchbooks that brought her subject's surroundings to life. Lisa wrote about this artist's studio with the exquisite awareness of a victim in a torture chamber. To her that's exactly what it felt like.

Students like Lisa have already won half the battle. They've peeled back defenses to let their anxiety bubble to the surface. If they can put that anxiety to work, writing may be in their future. A willingness to confront the fear of putting words on paper is an excellent basis for becoming a writer.

If you're not scared, you're not writing. That's the key message I would like to leave with you. Everyone is afraid to write. They should be. Writing is dangerous. Talent helps you undertake this task. Bravery helps even more. Katherine Anne Porter said that for any artist, courage was "the first essential." To love writing, fear writing and pray for the courage to write is no contradiction. It's the essence of what we do. "If we had to say what writing is," said Cynthia Ozick, "we would have to define it essentially as an act of courage."

There are two ways to respond to this message. One is: "Oh, my God, it's worse than I thought. I could never do

anything that scary. Maybe I should take up photography." A second is: "Gee, if all these other people—including successful writers—are as scared as I am but find the courage to write, maybe I can, too."

That's the attitude I encourage. I've written for my whole adult life, and am glad I did. But—like most writers—I've been anxious every step of the way. I've had to learn how to write despite my fears, and try to get them working for me. One never enjoys anxiety. But nerves are integral to the writing process, perhaps even essential. "Part of the investment a writer makes is an investment in anxiety," said Martin Amis. "I don't think a novel could be any good at all if you weren't violently up and down about it."

That's what most working writers eventually come to accept. With experience they learn how to moderate fear, keep it in its place, and—most importantly—capture fear's energy and put it to work.

Openly anxious writers have been among our very best: Joan Didion, Frederick Exley, Cynthia Ozick, Raymond Carver, Raymond Chandler. Anxiety gave their writing intensity. Fear is a strop against which they honed their prose to a fine edge. Writing that doesn't keep the writer up at night, said James M. Cain, won't keep the reader up either.

So we've come full circle. We started out discussing the "problem" of writing fears, only to conclude that they're not necessarily a problem at all. Knowing this doesn't make writing nerves any more pleasant to deal with, of course. Valor is called for on the part of anyone daring to put words on paper. But your bravery will be rewarded. Because the very best writing grows out of our fears.

Put another way, for a writer, fear is nothing to be afraid of. ■



Ralph Keyes has written articles and essays for *Self*, *Esquire*, *Harper's* and others. His eight books include *Is There Life After High School?* and, his latest, *The Courage to Write*

(Henry Holt), which inspired this article.