

HIDDEN MEANINGS: CREATIVE FICTION, NON-FICTION, AND FACTS

SESSION FOUR—TRANSCRIPT

Stuckey French Transcription:

My name is Ned Stuckey French and I'm an associate professor of English at Florida State University. I'm an essayist and I write about the essay. I think that students, as far as revisions, students don't see that that's where the real work of writing is done. And I think that a part of learning to be a writer is learning to be patient with yourself and patient with the work and let the work emerge. Let the work write itself. Let the piece become what it needs to become. And to trust that it's going to be a constant back and forth, a kind of dialectical or braided move between your unconscious, you're just getting the words to flow and your kind of consciousness. Your manipulation, you're sitting back and looking at it and making hard choices to cut this or to expand that or to move to this mode. So, how do we do that? I think one of the first things we need to do is eventually whether you're transcribing a hand-written manuscript into the computer or you're composing on the computer, you need to some point get out of the computer. Computers are a wonderful thing because they can make revising so easy. Computers are a horrible thing because they can make revising so easy. Now that sounds contradictory, but you can go in with a computer you can spend mornings, afternoons, days revising one sentence and never getting on to the rest of it. So, at any rate, the first step is to be able to see the thing as a whole, whether it's four pages long, or especially if it's, say, 27 pages long. You want to try to be able to take in the whole thing and to get out of that little tight view that the computer constricts you to. So, then what do you do with it? Well you try to look at it in some global or flyover or bigger or complete way. I find that highlighters are a good way to do that. Say that you've written an essay and you think that it's, I don't know, that it's about your family dynamics. You've got a brother and a sister and a mother and a father and you're trying to figure out what was the role of birth order in your family. You know the essay is about that in some sense. But then, say, you might just take the highlighters and apply a different color for each member of your family, let's play with gender stereotypes and say that your dad will get pink, your mother will get blue, your brother will get green, your sister will get purple, and you'll get yellow, whatever. So, any mention of each of those characters, each of those members of your family in the essay, you highlight it with their highlighter color. Then, you stand back and you look at it and you realize, "Woah, my brother who was whatever I just said, green or whatever, he doesn't even appear until page 12 out of 19, and then he doesn't appear again. And I'm talking about birth order and I'm talking about my whole family?" And yet, you may say, "Wow, the pink and the blue that are for my father and my mother, they're there throughout. Maybe this essay isn't even about birth order, maybe it's about my parents' relationship, or my relationship with my parents and my siblings are secondary and I need to think about a different essay for them." Stuff like that happens, those colors will cause things to jump out at you. Now that's in terms that you can highlight and turn to content, that's really what that is doing, or theme or something. But you can also do it in terms of techniques. So, say for instance you want to see where your essay stands formally as far as its use of dramatized scenes that include dialogue and so forth. And in terms of what that interior voice was within the present tense of the events that were, are being dramatized, that what you were thinking then at that moment as your mother served you milk and cookies in the kitchen or whatever the scene might be. And then thirdly, the retrospective voice that I mentioned, who you are now and how you might discuss what occasioned this essay, why are you writing it at this moment or what do you think now looking back looking back with the wisdom of a whoever you are 35, 45, 55 year old person to analyze, look at what you doing back then and thinking back then. So, what you might then do is take three highlighters, one for, I don't know, blue for the immediate dramatization, green for the interior voice of that moment, the reflection, the immediate reflection then, and I don't know, purple for retrospection. And you go through and you realize "oh I go for pages without dramatizing a scene." Well that tells you something. Then you need to look, where are the scenes in

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that twelve pages or whatever that are where I'm not dramatizing anything? Where I summarize a scene or I just hint at a scene and I quote one little snippet of dialogue, or I mention "well if that one time I talked to so-and-so about this," or whatever it might be, then realize "OK I have to crack that scene open and slow it down and investigate and dramatize it" because it's in those details of the scene that you will be given what I would call "gifts by your unconscious," the things that the essay is really about, or things that you really have to tussle with and think about. So, that's some of what you can do with hard copies. Now, then you re-write. Then you add things, then you realize "Ok, these scenes aren't really needed, or these characters are now going to become more secondary than I thought they were, or I need to include more of this, or I need to figure out how to put the retrospection in." And at this point, just do that, don't worry necessarily about transitions or smoothing it out, just hit that space bar maybe three times and just do a section break and just get it in there, don't worry about the transitions. If you worry too much about the transitions or about how I'm going to move from the immediacy of the scene to a retrospective voice, you end up kind of putting a clunky dorky kind of mechanical transition. Everything sounds like "Meanwhile back at the ranch" or that kind of a transition. And so, I would just get it in there and then figure out how to smooth the edges or fold the stuff in. Use it in the way that you want to use it later. Then though, you've got another draft, you've put the changes, the new scenes, you've done the deleting, you've put it back into the computer, work with it a while, then you bring it back out again, I think you do another hard copy. You may have to do three? Four? Eighteen? Twenty-seven hardcopies? Revision can take a long time sometimes. Get ready. Fasten your seatbelts. But at any rate, you do it and you bring it back out and you may want to do other things with it. You may want to again do that kind of reverse outlining or highlighting kind of thing that I talked about. Or maybe you want to actually get away from the metaphorical use of the terms cut and paste that a computer program, word processing program offers you. Command C for copy and command V for paste, and realize "wait, that's a metaphor." You can actually cut a hard copy up and actually rearrange the pieces and actually paste it together again. And that's another wonderful revelation I've found with things that you can do with a hard copy because the materiality of the text and you're moving these pieces around, give you the same kind of overview. Now we get to the final stages, and so the final things I think are that you have to let the stuff sit for a while. You probably want to sit that through each of these stages, but you don't want to say that it's done too soon. You want to let it sit because if you can let it sit at least overnight, but preferably for a week, maybe even for a couple of weeks, and you come look back and look at it, it's weird but things will be in really, you will see things in a new way. It's almost as if it's somebody else that wrote that and you think "Oh, that dialogue sounds really written instead of spoken, or that whole page of repetition I basically said the same thing six pages earlier," and you can be a little more ruthless with your cuts and your trimming and your revising. And the final thing I think you want to do is you want to read it aloud or have it read aloud to you. You've got to hear it. Especially with a personal essay, which I think has a strong tradition of being written in the familiar, colloquial voice, simulating a conversation, that I think you want to try to do that and to do that I think you have to hear it out loud. Now if you don't have any friends or loved ones, then you read it into your iPhone. But I think you probably do have some friends, so you have them read it to you and you just listen or you read it aloud to them and hear it new that way. Or if possible, you go to an open mic night or something and you read it aloud to an audience because it's good to hear it through the ear of strangers too. My wife is a novelist and when she's got a complete version of a novel, which could be 250, 300, 400 pages long, I will read it aloud to her. She'll have a hard copy, I'll have a hard copy, I'll read it aloud to her a chapter at a time and she just listens and makes checkmarks in the margins, she doesn't have to write a full note, she doesn't want to stop the flow. And then she can go back while I'm going to get us another cup of coffee or whatever and make a note about what kind of a change. She'll remember it, all she needs is a checkmark. You can do something similar I think with an essay, but you want to hear it aloud. As far as recognizing the, how long revision takes, it's just learning to be patient and learning to enjoy that.

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To make revision fun. Revision I think is where the fun is, it's where you're really discovering that the first draft is hard, you're battling an empty screen or a blank piece of paper and you're creating something out of nothing. But now you have some, now you have something you can mess with and move with and something you can listen to. "Ok, what was I really saying there?" and that's, to me it's easier and it's more fun and it's where the real complication begins to happen. Now it involves sometimes, it isn't just technical, it isn't just about words, it involves some bravery too I think. Especially when you're, when you're writing in first person and it's non-fiction. It takes some psychological work too, going to "Ok, that was a moment where I flinched, where I didn't go where the scene was going because it was gonna make me cry, or it was gonna make me sad, or it was gonna make me look at a part of myself that I feel is a little bit ugly that I'm a little bit ashamed of." But you've gotta go there, you've gotta go there. But you can go there more easily I think in revision, you're not gonna go right there, nobody wants to go right there. But revision can take you there. And so it's a journey into yourself and a journey into the essay