



How We Write: The Varieties of Writing Experience

By Hilton Obenzinger



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How We Write: The Varieties of Writing Experience is based on the series of “How I Write” public conversations with faculty and other advanced writers conducted by Hilton Obenzinger at Stanford University since 2002. These conversations explored the nuts and bolts, pleasures and pains, of all types of writing. “How I Write” conversations were informal, with no pretense of plumbing the depths of anyone’s scholarly expertise or art, although much was revealed. Rather, these talks probed what the writing part of these scholars’ and artists’ work entailed—whether their field was physics or anthropology or fiction—in an easygoing fashion. Participants included such authors as Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Adam Johnson and historian David Kennedy, physicist Leonard Susskind, poets Evan Boland, Gwyneth Lewis, and Diane di Prima, literary critics and biographers Arnold Rampersad and Diane Middlebrook, novelists Abraham Verghese, Valerie Miner and Irvin Yalom, playwrights David Henry Hwang and Amy Freed, philosopher Richard Rorty, historian Ian Morris, environmental scientist Terry Root, cultural critic Rebecca Solnit, anthropologist Renato Rosaldo, and neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky. The chapters of How We Write follow the major line of topics that came up in the conversations: Chapter One, the different ways people learned how to write; Chapter Two, their attitudes and feelings toward writing and what motivates them; Chapter Three, what happens when a writer gets blocked; Chapter Four, the different ways people work—their physical environment and how they handle time, relationships, and more; Chapter Five, how writers get ideas and how they launch into a project; Chapter Six, the ways writers fashion arguments or create ideas, images, and stories; Chapter Seven, how style is driven by field or genre; Chapter Eight, how research connects to style; Chapter Nine, the different approaches writers employ to revise their work; and Chapter Ten, a final reflection. How We Write: The Varieties of Writing Experience is not a textbook or a handbook on how to become a writer. It’s primarily a conversation, a medley of voices celebrating a craft that delights and dismays each of us, and a conversation the reader is invited to join.

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