CHAPTER THREE

Keep Going

> *The precondition for writing well is being able to write badly and to write when you are not in the mood.*
>
> —*Peter Elbow,* Writing With Power

Once writing is under way, with something to say and a plan for saying it, you should make satisfactory progress on your own. Not only would you be better off left alone, I doubt that you would take time to read something like this, because it is addressed to a problem you do not have. Keep in mind that each individual writing assignment takes a unique direction. The best advice I have for any writer already writing is conveyed in my working chapter titles: Once you *Get Going,* then *Keep Going.* (I remind you that these are intended only as working titles. If I can make you conscious of the need for editing in *my* writing, maybe I can make you conscious of the value of editing in yours.)

In addition to being an act of arrogance, writing is a test of one's tolerance for delayed gratification. Even when the writing seems to be going well, there could hardly be gratification enough to warrant the time and commitment necessary to keep on keeping on. You work without feedback or encouragement. As Professor Aubrey Haan reminded me years ago from personal experience, writing is a labor of love. Your only measure of progress may be the diminishing number of subtopics still to be addressed and a slowly mounting stack of pages with text of uneven quality that probably falls short of

your original aspirations. The number of pages may cause you concern, whether too few, raising doubts as to whether you are providing adequate detail and explanation, or more likely, too many, an indication that you may be creating a new problem. Eventually, you will have to do some cutting to stay within your intended page limits. Don't be distracted about length too early. For the present, just keep plugging away. Regardless of whether you are underwriting or overwriting, you *are* writing. As Charles Darwin wrote to his friend more than a century ago, "It is a beginning, and that is something."

I can suggest a few pointers that may help you to keep going, but the issues I raise are more important than the resolutions I propose. "Anything goes" that results in a tangible written product moving you toward a working draft that offers a toehold for subsequent editing. For analogy, let me suggest the criterion used by most of my Chinese acquaintances around the world whenever I ask if I am using chopsticks the proper way: "Harry, is the food getting to your mouth?"

In writing, results are what count; the end justifies the means. How much coffee you drink, sleep you lose, days you "waste," even how awful your first drafts look—none of these matters really matters. Be ever mindful of Becker's wise counsel, "The only version that counts is the last one" (1986:21).

STAY WITH IT

If you have engaged in substantial fieldwork, be prepared to spend from several months to a year or more to complete your writing. Rosalie Wax's sage advice was to allow as much time for analysis and writing as time spent in the field—and even more, if you are "really astute and can get away with it" (Wax 1971:45). From the outset, pace yourself for an activity in which it is critical to *sustain* interest, not merely to capture an occasional burst of energy of the sort that gets you through class assignments (term papers included). "The precondition for writing well," Peter Elbow observes in the epigraph quoted above, "is being able to write badly and to write when you are not in the mood" (1981:373). Set reasonable expectations, but be demanding of yourself. Think how you could churn out books if you wrote only one page every day! Make and keep this commitment: that in your daily or weekly schedule, the time you allocate for writing will receive top priority. I read that authors who make a

living at it attend to their writing not only on a daily basis but for a seven- rather than a five-day week.

You understand that here I use the term "writing" in more than its literal sense of putting pen to paper or fingers to keyboard. Not every moment you devote to the preparation of a manuscript will result in the production of text. In spite of what I said earlier, writing covers a constellation of activities, including planning, organizing, and analyzing, as described in the previous chapter. Additional new demands arise as a manuscript begins to take shape: rereading, re-sorting, refining, rechecking, revising, and time for just staring into space ("ruminating," if you share my fondness for alliteration). Friends who try to be encouraging don't necessarily confer a favor with their incessant inquiries, "Well, how's the writing going?" Maybe you can cool them off with a reminder that writing entails more than simply putting words to paper, but my guess is that first you have to convince yourself.

THE "EMPTY FOLDERS" APPROACH

During the early 1970s, when qualitative approaches were really catching on, I served as an "outside consultant" for a nationally funded field-based study of educational change in which a number of qualitatively oriented researchers, all with backgrounds in anthropology, sociology, or educational research, were hired to conduct long-term studies in ten rural communities throughout the United States. A major responsibility for each of these resident researchers (on-site researchers, or OSRs, as they came to be known in project lingo) was to develop a monograph describing the community, the schools, and the nature and consequences of the effort at educational change that was the distinguishing criterion among the participating rural school systems.

From the outset, project directors of this independent and long-term evaluation effort were concerned that not every on-site researcher would actually complete the requisite monograph (for more on the project, see Sturges forthcoming). As an outsider, I was asked to think of ways that would foster success without infringing unnecessarily on the enthusiasm, independent spirit, and effort of each fieldworker. The directors also recognized that preparation of the case studies had to compete with numerous other responsibilities

imposed on the researchers, such as gathering survey data for a cross-site study and continuing to do fieldwork throughout the duration of the project. Nor did the project want to impose a rigid schedule of deadlines that required everyone to submit manuscripts in lockstep fashion on a predetermined outline of topics.

As the directors correctly anticipated (and feared), it was long after the project ended before the last of these final reports was finally submitted. That eventually they all were completed reflects favorably on the integrity of the researchers: you cannot force people to write. You can tie remuneration to receipt of a completed report in funded research, but, given the long duration and multifaceted nature of this project, these researchers were on annual salaries. There was no way to threaten them by withholding funds without threatening the success of the project. Under such a threat, any researcher experiencing difficulty drafting the case study might have found an excuse to quit the project and escape from what was, for some, looming as an onerous task. Most had only recently completed their dissertations; the prospect of another major writing assignment "under pressure" generated unanticipated anxiety for several of them.

I recommended that each on-site researcher initiate the writing assignment by proposing a Table of Contents for the monograph to be prepared for that site. (Does that surprise you?) With that task completed, a collective review of the proposed Tables of Contents for all ten sites might constitute the agenda for a major project seminar. At that seminar, researchers could discuss, elaborate on, and defend their ideas. The project coordinators could also suggest (or impose) any standardization of format deemed necessary for the project as a whole. True, that might have precipitated some critical and delicate negotiation, but the research organization did have contractual obligations to meet, as well as a commitment to treat the fieldworkers as competent professionals. Following that negotiated agreement, the preparation of individual monographs would begin.

Next, I proposed that each fieldworker prepare a set of folders, one for each intended chapter of his or her projected case study, plus extra folders as needed for keeping track of miscellaneous materials, topics for local research, names of people to contact, possible bibliographic resources, and so forth. For the purpose, I thought a set of "hanging" folders would be ideal, so that not only computer printouts but other accumulating materials—original letters, photos, handwritten notes, even whole documents—could be dropped into

the proper folder.[1] Eventually, of course, the relevant text material would be entered into a computer format, but the hanging file folders could continue to serve their repository function and provide a place for collecting supplementary materials as well as printouts of earlier drafts.

The contents of each folder would evolve through a roughly comparable sequence, beginning with brief memos or jottings or a set of data cards, progressing either to a tight outline for the chapter or a rough first draft, and thence, through revisions as necessary, to a completed draft of a chapter ready for inclusion in the evolving monograph. The problem of employee accountability, under circumstances that I dubbed "contract anthropology" (HFW 1975:110; see also Clinton 1975, 1976; Fitzsimmons 1975), was revealed in such "hypothetical" questions posed at headquarters as "How do we know whether the fieldworker is really at the site?" or "How do we know whether progress is being made on the monograph?" Those pervasive concerns could be alleviated simply by periodically asking each fieldworker to forward evidence of progress *in any one folder.* Meanwhile, fieldworkers would have wide latitude from one reporting period to the next in deciding whether to devote their current effort to preparing an outline for a proposed chapter, to writing a first draft of a new chapter, or to revising and refining earlier drafts of chapters as the anticipated monograph began to take shape.

Built into this production scheme was a recognition that no two researchers were likely to be, or needed to be, working on the same topic or at the same speed. It also allowed for periods when formal productivity might be low. At times, for example, efforts on the individual case studies were sidetracked by project-wide assignments or by attendance at professional meetings when the fieldworkers reported on their work in symposia directed at audiences of peers and patrons.

Although the procedure as described was never formally adopted for the project as a whole, I know it proved invaluable to some of the researchers individually, and I still think it was a very practical suggestion. I continue to tout it as eminently workable, as useful for a lone researcher as for someone coordinating a large-scale project involving parallel studies at multiple sites.[2] I realize that the folders that I envisioned could be created on the computer now, but the critical problem remains: how to ensure that everyone's work moves forward, however slowly, rather than allow it to come to

a standstill.[3] The idea is something of a writer's adaptation of the first law of motion: Authors with a manuscript in motion will keep it in motion, authors with a manuscript at rest. . . .

In addition to place holders assigned for each major chapter, one's set of folders for a work in progress—whether the "folders" themselves are real or only imagined—ought to include a place for anticipated short assignments like preparing a draft of the acknowledgments or updating the list of references. The full set of folders for a project might also include proposed symposia or seminar papers, as well as articles intended for separate journal publication. I emphasize the idea of researchers with chapters at various stages of development.

KEEPING UP THE MOMENTUM

A major writing project such as a monograph or thesis does not proceed with every section at the same stage of development. The more ambitious the total project, the more advantageous to have different sections at different stages of development, so that chores can be varied, and time and mood accommodated. Unforeseen delays should bring neither the research nor the writing to an abrupt halt. Anticipate (and expect) delay and be prepared to turn to other tasks, perhaps even the preparation of the first draft of your *next* article, proposal, or project. Hard to imagine just now, but there may even come a day when you can do this kind of scheduling with a number of "irons in the fire." If you have writing tasks at several stages of development, you can remain productive in spite of delays in the review process or production schedules.

Opinion varies as to which stage is hardest. In my experience, the first draft of anything I write is always the most difficult one. Provided that I am off to an adequate start, I find pleasure in feeling that my manuscript is taking shape through the subsequent revising and editing, even when the increments are small. No question that revising and editing are critical tasks. To some, these tasks are the most difficult, but I do not concur with Peter Elbow that they are the most unpleasant (Elbow 1981:121). For me, writing enervates and editing exhilarates. The only unpleasant feature about editing is in acknowledging how awful some of my sentences are as originally written. (I started to collect examples of some of my worst sentences but decided that I did not need to convince you that I am as capable of writing them as anyone.)

I cherish the advice recalled by Denise Crockett while she was struggling with her dissertation: "If you can't write well, write shittily." You have to have *something* written before you can begin to improve it. In *Bird by Bird,* author Anne Lamott not only recognizes the *possibility* of writing "shitty first drafts" but insists that most writers begin with them: "The only way I can get anything written at all is to write really, really shitty first drafts." But that does not bother her. She consoles, "All good writers write them. This is how they end up with good second drafts and terrific third drafts" (Lamott 1994:21–22).

Sometimes the writing goes excruciatingly slowly. On days when it doesn't seem to be going at all, you might devote some time to bringing the reference section up to date. That leaves you armed with a ready reply, should some insensitive but well-meaning colleague raise the anxiety-provoking question, "Well, how did it go today?"

A suggestion that experienced writers offer in order to regain momentum when you return to your writing again (i.e., tomorrow) is to pay close attention to where you decide to stop as you come to the end of the day's writing session. The advice is to stop at a point where you know you can easily start up again. At the least, jot some key words that capture your train of thought. If you are in the middle of a paragraph that you know you can finish, stop there. If you are copying a long quote from an academic source or an informant, stop at the *beginning* rather than at the end, so that when you start again you can get right to work.

(In actual practice, however, I usually do just the opposite. You probably do, too. I stop when I am stuck and return somewhat hesitantly to see if I can work my way out of the mire the next time—thus the old adage, "Do as I say, not as I do." And I often begin my day's writing by reviewing and editing what I wrote the previous day. Admittedly, that is a slow way to get a fast start, although the advice to begin by reviewing what you were writing the previous day is also heard frequently. I think I begin that way because I find editing more satisfying than writing the first draft.)

Editing obviously can become an escape from writing, or at least a hindrance to getting through a first draft. On days when the sentences do not flow, looking back over yesterday's work does offer a way to get warmed up. Having struggled with particular words or ideas on an earlier attempt, I sometimes see a better resolution on my next try. The editing-reviewing may take up to an hour—about one

quarter of the minimum time I try to set aside for writing. It also violates my Puritan ethic, which holds that the pleasure (editing) should come *after* the pain (writing), not before. But it is a concession I make in order to accomplish my major objective: to keep at it, once the writing begins. Try to make some measurable progress in the development of your manuscript every writing day.

WHEN IT'S TIME FOR DETAILS, GET THEM RIGHT THE FIRST TIME

The proper form for citations, references, footnotes, margin headings, and so forth required by your discipline, your institution (if writing a thesis or dissertation), or your intended journal or publisher should be clearly in mind as you work. Your default mode should be the accepted standard for your discipline, a style with which you need to be thoroughly familiar. When preparing material for publication in a format with which you are not familiar, have at hand a recent issue of the journal, an authoritative style manual, or the web page address for access to the journal's style manual.

You may think it unimportant to bother with such picayune detail as proper citation form in your early drafts. "First things first," you rationalize; why worry about little details until you have some text in place? That might be true if you are tempted to check every source or hunt down every quotation when you first introduce it. Better to push on, concentrating on the gist of what you are writing rather than getting bogged down in detail. But it is easy to note details that need checking, perhaps by marking them in some special way for attention (e.g., with **boldface** or <u>underlining</u>). I assure you that your time will be well spent if, at whatever point you do attend to details, you do so carefully, correctly, and fully, in the form in which the piece is to be submitted. The earlier you get these things recorded correctly, the better.

In the old days, there was always the likelihood of introducing new errors into previously correct copy every time a manuscript had to be retyped. A comforting aspect of working with the computer is that once you get something written—barring rare technical glitches—it is going to stay that way. So get it right the first time.

The more details you attend to in the early stages, the more you can direct your attention to content as the writing progresses. You

also free yourself from having to look after such details during final revision(s) when your attention should be on whether you have your words and ideas in a proper sequence, not worrying about someone else's. When feasible, I recommend that you retain a copy of any material that you might later want to quote at length, regardless of how remote the possibility. That way you can quickly double-check or respond to a copyeditor's last-minute query, "You sure it was *exactly* like this in the original?" When I may want to quote printed material that carries over to a second page, I also note where the page break occurs. Should I later decide to use only a portion rather than the entire quote, I know how to cite it without having to go back to the original to check pagination.

Developing a Style Sheet

Are you aware of the variation in the spellings offered in different dictionaries, the citation forms preferred in different fields (as well as preferences from one journal to the next in the same field), and the options about the form and placement of footnotes or endnotes? When you do become aware of such niceties, you will be amazed both at the number of decisions that need to be made (for example, in capitalization, hyphenation, use of the serial comma) and at the extent of indecision that surrounds certain choices as to preference in style. An example from recent experience is the phrase "participant observation." The flagship journal of the American Anthropological Association, *American Anthropologist,* has its style sheet available on a web page and it shows *participant-observation* as a hyphenated phrase. Yet the *Anthropologist* treats the phrase as two words. For you as budding author, this ambivalence is both bad news and good. The bad news is that there is no ultimate authority in language usage for English. The good news is that in cases where no one seems to be in charge, you can take charge yourself, at least to some extent, in writing a book. Here's how.

If you have never published, you may not realize that copyeditors develop an **individual style sheet** for *each* book-length manuscript. That style sheet provides a record of all decisions pertaining to your specific manuscript that are not already covered by an existing style sheet for that publisher. There is usually a current style sheet for major journals as well. Even if there is nothing in print, *somebody* in an editor's office exercises final authority on all decisions that are not

left to the author. A style sheet records the decisions about spelling, hyphens, commas, formats for headings and subheadings, footnotes, and anything else that needs attending to, in order to ensure that usages within the text are consistent and the overall text is consistent with the publisher's preferences. If you are writing an academic thesis, you will discover that your graduate school (or some comparable office) has assumed responsibility for this function, so it, too, has a style sheet, the institution's final opportunity to impose its authority. Prepare yourself for some firsthand experience with institutional rigidity should you deviate from its so-called guidelines.

It is a good idea to develop your own style sheet for a manuscript, even if it consists of nothing more than a sheet of paper with your decisions (or indecisions) about spelling, hyphens, and capitals. Keeping a style sheet encourages you to track troublesome words as you become aware of them (e.g., adviser or advisor, gaining entry or gaining entrée, judgment or judgement, macro-culture or macroculture: which form are you going to use?). Your style sheet may not guarantee your authority in any decisions to be made, but at the least it can help you to identify inconsistencies, to alert copyeditors that certain (often reappearing) terms are causing you problems, or to remind you to check with the graduate school as to local "preferences."

Style sheets do reflect preferences and customary usages. Be prepared to capitulate if you find yourself at odds with editorial or institutional policy, but don't give up prematurely. Styles are always in flux. Publishers' style sheets and the major style manuals are constantly being revised. The authoritative *Chicago Manual of Style* is well into its "teens" in revisions.

Keeping Track of References

In similar fashion, follow a consistent style for maintaining a personal file of bibliographic references. The obvious choice should be the standard in your field (if one exists) or the style of one of its major journals. You may want more detailed information than is ordinarily required by any of the abbreviated formats:

- full and complete title and subtitle of every source cited;
- *full* names of authors and editors (i.e., not just first initials);
- full journal names, with volume and issue number;
- inclusive page numbers for articles and for chapters in edited volumes;

- publisher's full name; city and state where published; and
- date of the publication you consulted, as well as the original date of publication, if different.

Not all of this information is required by every journal or publishing house. Yet it takes only a moment to make a complete record in your original notes, and it can save time if you should discover, for example, that a journal to which you have submitted your article uses authors' full names rather than only first initials.

When citing material published long ago but accessed by you in a more recent edition, be sure to give the date of original publication as well as the date and page of the edition from which you are quoting (e.g., Wolcott 1989[1967]:107). That way it won't look as though an author has sprung back to life or is passing off as new something written years earlier. Most journals provide illustrative entries for the way they wish citations to be formatted. They also provide instructions for citing electronic publications.[4]

Whenever possible, I also track sources *forward* by including in my notes and in formal citations any available information about materials republished or reissued. This practice is especially helpful for references to journal articles subsequently reprinted in books, or to previously out-of-print sources that become available again, as with many of the case studies in cultural anthropology and in anthropology and education originally published in the 1960s and 1970s.

One further suggestion about academic references: Make your citations as explicit as your text warrants. There are occasions when a reference to an *entire* work is appropriate, although if you cast a critical eye over the way academic writers parade their citations, you will catch some of them in a shameless game of name dropping. They lob references like so many snowballs over a fence, an indiscriminate barrage that fails to achieve the kind of specificity appropriate in scholarly writing. To be really helpful, go beyond minimum expectations (author's last name and date of publication) to inform your readers of the exact page number and the nature of the material to which you make reference, and, unless it is apparent in the text, your reason for citing it (i.e., whether it is your source: "see"; a source of additional information: "see also"; or a source for comparison or contrast: "cf."). Most readers will not consult your sources; they count on you to inform them. That is one reason for being accurate and complete. Conversely, some readers *will* consult your citations. That is the other.

Keeping Track of Bits and Pieces

As a manuscript evolves, you might find it handy to keep track of possible topics or references to include, paragraphs deleted in one place that may fit better somewhere else, and so forth. For each developing manuscript, I maintain a separate document or file where I can park such "working notes" temporarily until I decide their fate. As memory fades, I have found it essential to do all such tracking on paper or screen rather than trust that I will recall those details when needed. I have also grown more cautious about the way I make even minor revisions of text. Rather than delete and then rewrite material, I now move existing material ahead a few spaces (usually by hitting "return" a couple of times), insert my rewrite, and *only then* delete the old if the text is really improved.

Over the years, I have also developed the habit of keeping a permanent set of brief passages, theoretical notions, aphorisms, possible chapter epigraphs, frequently seen foreign phrases, and well-stated ideas or advice heard or read. These I keep in a handwritten journal, although they can easily be kept on the computer, logged in as they come to my attention. My notebook is labeled *Quotes*. Sometimes these sayings are incorrectly or inadequately referenced when I discover them. If I am unable to track the original source, at least I can acknowledge the author. My journal of *Quotes* has proven a valuable repository and resource for ideas and pithy sayings.

GETTING FEEDBACK

The compound word "**feedback**" contains two elements. The first implies nurturance. Most authors crave it. The second indicates direction: turning back. Feedback draws attention to the already-done rather than the yet-to-do. Keep that in mind when you begin to long for it. Don't seek it too soon, especially if it might divert attention from completing the full draft by tempting you to start revising what you have already written.

I recognize the good intentions of professors who want to approve (which, unfortunately, may also mean disapprove) the first three chapters of their students' dissertations, but the advice I gave my doctoral students is the same I give to all writers: Work independently as long as possible, even including a draft of your tentative

ending, before inviting feedback. When you are ready, seek feedback judiciously. A little goes a long way.

Timely and useful feedback on early drafts is hard to give and even harder to take. The problem is compounded in qualitative research because there are so many facets on which feedback can be offered: whether one has identified the right story to tell, how adequately it has been described, how well it has been analyzed and interpreted. As with any writing, it is also far easier for your reviewers to identify problems, awkward sentences, and alternative explanations than to know what to say about particularly well-conceived studies, particularly well-turned phrases, or particularly insightful interpretations, other than a clichéd, "I really liked this," or "Great!" Even the most gracious and gentle among your reviewer-critics are far more likely to fault weaknesses in a manuscript than to applaud strengths, unless they render only a global reaction and leave the nitty-gritty to others. Regardless of intent, feedback tends to be disproportionately critical and negative. Your consolation may be that the more painstaking the critique, the more you may assume that your critics have regarded your effort seriously.[5]

Choose early reviewers with care and instruct them carefully as to the kind (and extent) of criticism you feel will be most helpful at each stage. Unless I am developing a manuscript that has been solicited by an editor, I prefer to invite friends and/or fellow authors to be early reviewers. My assumption is that they constitute a support group who will look for ways to help me say what I am trying to say in specific instances, rather than dwell on my (or my manuscript's) apparently not-yet-attained potential.

Yet I value all feedback short of flat-out rejection. I would not think of formally submitting a manuscript that had not been given a critical once-over by colleagues, both as it was being developed and in almost-final form. I say "almost final" because as long as we invite critique, we will get it: the process never ends. If you insist on receiving final approval for something you have written, you will have to be candid about soliciting it.

In seeking feedback, keep in mind a distinction between the conduct of research and the reporting of research. Research purposes come first. Eloquence can enhance a good study, but it cannot rescue a poor one. Early readers should be directed to look primarily at the accuracy and adequacy of detail; at how the problem is stated as the account unfolds; and at the appropriateness of the description,

analysis, and interpretation. Outside readers may recognize aspects of a study to which an otherwise preoccupied researcher has become oblivious. There may be little point in worrying about the niceties of style if the content is not in place, interpretation misses the mark, the focus is misplaced, or the account lacks balance. Also recognize that no reviewer is likely to have something to say about every aspect of your work. Steel yourself for the likelihood that, regardless of how you instruct them, your reviewers invariably will say more about style than content. It is, after all, *your* account. Others should see their role as helping you to convey *your* ideas, not to make you a vehicle for presenting their own.

An ideal combination of early reviewers might include a colleague from one's academic field, to attend to framework and analysis, and a reader familiar with the context or setting who reads for accuracy, completeness, and sensitivity to those being described. If you are able to cajole any of your earlier readers to read a later version, help them to help you by calling attention to sections that have been rewritten or added. Most reviewers are capable of only one critical reading, especially without some direction from the author. If you have served in the role of editor or director of dissertations, you are well aware of the difficulty of bringing a fresh perspective to multiple readings of a manuscript.

And what to do with the advice and suggestions you do receive? Your first obligation is to listen attentively. Don't argue, don't explain, don't get defensive. Take the advice under advisement, show your appreciation, and make sure that you understand anything that your critics tell you that they did not understand. Even if your critics are in a position to assert their authority, you may be able to negotiate a compromise. But never simply assume that you alone are being denied an essential freedom and that everybody else is free to write whatever they please. As the old saw has it, freedom of the press is reserved for those who own one.

Like many fieldworkers, I make an effort to invite readers in the setting to look at developing drafts (especially the descriptive sections). I regard that as an integral element of fieldwork, and I like to note in subsequent drafts any reactions and comments prompted by earlier readings. (For some pros and cons of this practice, see Emerson and Pollner 1988.) Today's informants and collaborators not only *can* but *do* read what we write. If you have not thought about that aspect of feedback, you might review the lessons in

Caroline Brettell's edited collection *When They Read What We Write* (1993). Furthermore, those among whom you study may wish to, or may insist on, reading drafts prior to their general circulation.

It is advisable to anticipate how disagreements—or sometimes just "unhappinesses"—are to be negotiated. My practice has been to offer to share pre-release drafts with interested informants and to inform them that I will *take under consideration* any reservations they express. I think one is ill advised to offer full veto power, even to key informants or anyone with whom you are writing a personal life history. If someone holds that power, your project remains in jeopardy throughout its entire duration. Researchers, too, are human subjects who need protection from unnecessary risk.

Let me repeat: I have always delayed sharing a developing manuscript for as long as possible. I want to be sure I've said what I want to say, and have tried to say it well enough that my ideas are clear, before subjecting my words to the scrutiny of others. During the academic year I devoted to writing my doctoral dissertation (following a full 12 months of fieldwork), I deliberately lived away from the Stanford campus and made brief visits only when I needed to use the library. I did not need the company of other anxiety-ridden dissertation writers to get my own writing done. I had a story to tell. I was determined that, should the initial draft prove satisfactory to only myself, I first needed to recount the story my way. I sought little advice from my dissertation committee prior to submitting a completed draft to them. Had that draft been unacceptable, I was prepared to undertake whatever rewriting was necessary, but not until I had made my own version a matter of record.

I'm happy to report that except for reservations about length, and some useful editorial suggestions, the thesis was accepted as submitted. Little doubt that having one's thesis accepted without hassle can prove a great incentive toward further academic writing! Although the expected audience for your thesis may be small, don't lose sight of the importance of the thesis to your career, *especially* if you intend to pursue further qualitative research in which you expect writing to play an important role.

Although I avoided premature "official" feedback during that period of angst and authorship, I eagerly anticipated long work sessions with my fellow graduate student Ron Rohner and his wife Evelyn. We met regularly to discuss our progress, exchange information, and share and critique drafts of our developing chapters. Our

independent but somewhat complementary studies were based on anthropologically oriented fieldwork conducted at the same time, in neighboring villages, among the same people, and with the encouragement of Professor George Spindler, our mutual mentor (Rohner and Rohner 1970; HFW 1967). Like the fieldwork on which it was based, our writing proceeded in a climate of mutual help and support.

When time is of the essence, or you find yourself unduly concerned about how the writing is going, I recommend finding some patient soul (for that reason alone this probably will not be an academic colleague) who will read and provide intentionally encouraging feedback. Better still, ask someone to read your words aloud to you, perhaps even to read without comment or with only general and supportive suggestions, such as "That reads well" or "This needs more explanation." Hearing your words read aloud can help you concentrate on what has actually reached paper, the experience you are creating for others out of experience that was originally yours alone. They are not the same.

Another reason for hearing your words read aloud is that we do not recognize the rhythms and patterns of our own speech. What we write usually reads well to us (i.e., literally "sounds right") because we know how to read it. But no two humans share identical patterns of speech or intonation. When that oral reader stumbles—or not-so-subtly gasps for air, as my dear friend Anna Kohner used to do while reading aloud the longer sentences of my dissertation drafts—the author needs to get busy with the red pencil.

Technology is exerting its influence on editorial practice as on every other aspect of writing and publishing, and you may need to adjust the match between the editing help you seek and the extent of help given. I can appreciate technology that facilitates team review of a collective document or allows a newsroom editor to make changes directly on copy as submitted by a reporter. Because it is now possible for reviewers to insert "comments" without actually making changes in the document being reviewed, that is the mode that appeals to me. I cannot imagine burrowing into someone else's document to install changes that, particularly in the initial stages of a manuscript, are meant only as collegial suggestions.

SUMMING UP: TIPS TO KEEP YOU GOING

Let me conclude this chapter by reiterating the central idea: Keep the writing moving forward. Get the essence of your study committed to

paper, no matter how rough or incomplete it may seem. Do not lose sight of the fact that well-focused interpretive statements may help you improve the problem statement, just as your developing analysis may help you make better decisions about the descriptive material, although the descriptive material will probably (but not necessarily) precede it in the completed manuscript. Further thoughts:

• Keep your focus in mind as you weave your story and your interpretation, but maintain a healthy skepticism about the focus itself. Always consider the possibility that you are not yet on target or that the focus has shifted in the course of your inquiry. A guiding question: "What is this [really] a study of?"

• Your major concern, especially in writing the first draft, is not only to get something down but also to get rid of data—to focus progressively, to "home in" on your topic. Keep track of tangential issues that you might (or should?) leave for another time.

• Do not allow yourself to get stuck because of data you do not have or problems and elements that you do not fully understand or cannot interpret adequately. Make note of whatever is bothering you, either for yourself, if you think things can be remedied, or for your reader, if the problem seems likely to remain fixed at that stage. Then get on with it. Readers will not be offended if you do not presume to know everything.

• Unless absolutely forbidden to do so by a stuffy editor or dissertation committee, write in the **first person**. Put yourself squarely in the scene, but don't take center stage. The world does not need more sentences of the sort that begin, "It appears to this writer . . . ," or "What is being said here is. . . ."

• Try writing your descriptive passages entirely in the **past tense** if you find yourself moving uneasily between present and past. Admittedly, the past tense seems to "kill off" everyone as soon as an action is completed. It does strange things to "alive and well" informants, particularly if you begin writing while still in the field. By the time your manuscript has gone through several iterations, editorial review, and quite possibly publication, you will discover that the past tense no longer seems so strange. Nor will you have left informants forever doing and saying whatever they happened to be doing and saying when you last saw them.

• Use your extensive field notes and fieldwork experience to provide **concrete examples** and illustrations. Never underestimate the

power of specific instances to support your generalizations—not simply to inform, but figuratively to reach out to your readers. Clifford Geertz challenges us to use "the power of the scientific imagination to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers" (1973:16).

• **Write for your peers**. Pitch the level of your discussion to an audience of readers whom you assume to be deeply interested in finding out what you have been up to. Write your dissertation with fellow graduate students in mind, not your learned committee members. Address your subsequent studies to the many who do not know, rather than the few who do. Editor Mitch Allen cautions against the academic tendency to write for what he calls one's "WNC" (Worst Nightmare Critic), the individual who knows more than you do and cannot wait to pick you apart. As Mitch observes, these critics are not your audience and "they will probably trash you anyhow." Don't cater to them.

• Give emphasis to important points you develop. Where we mean to write seamless prose, the result is often merely uninterrupted prose. Give ideas some room by being attentive to paragraphing. Make generous use of headings and subheadings to call the reader's attention and to mark shifts in focus.

• Heed the admonitions so frequently heard in the interest of better writing. Avoid wordiness, passive or convoluted constructions, long words and pompous phrases, abstract nouns and faulty pronoun references, misplaced modifiers, and nonparallel constructions. But don't allow such admonitions to hinder initial efforts to get your ideas written down. You can attend to style and correctness in the later stages of revising and editing, and you can get—and even buy—help from others with those aspects of writing. No one will ever see your early drafts. As your ideas take shape and become more elegant, take pleasure in crafting sentences worthy of them.

• Hold off on seeking feedback until you yourself have taken your study as far as you can go. Do not seek help that is premature or that you do not intend to use—capture your own ideas first before involving others.

NOTES

1. Thus, the files are sometimes referred to as "drop files."
2. For instance, a colleague with an educator's interest in the events of a particularly eventful year in American public education and a historian's

penchant for collecting data amassed so much data that he became immobilized with how to sort it and where to begin. I suggested assigning one folder to the events of each month of that year and then to developing the account one month at a time. No particular need even to address them in order; one might start with an "easy" or especially interesting month. Such a "bird-by-bird" approach did not capture my colleague's fancy; the study was never written.

3. Procedures for cross-site analysis received major attention in both editions of Miles and Huberman's *Qualitative Data Analysis* (1984, 1994); see also Noblit and Hare (1988). Such issues get into problems of synthesizing and aggregating cases, which are beyond the scope of this monograph.

4. Two examples of electronic reviews are provided in the Reference section under Wolcott (see 1999b, 2008b). The version in my References for 2008b varies from the one suggested by *TC Record,* which I cite here in full:

Wolcott, H. (2008). Telling about society [Review of the book *Telling About Society*]. *Teachers College Record.* Retrieved from http://www.tcrecord.org/content.asp?contentid=14871.

Clearly, there is as yet no standard form for electronic reviews. For more on APA style for electronic references, see http://www.apastyle.org/elecref.htm.

5. C. Deborah Laughton, editor of the second edition, caught me off guard with an opposite and unfamiliar tactic. She peppered my margins with laudatory comments ("Lovely," "Key point," "Nice rhythm," "True") so generously bestowed that I felt I should make a critical examination of every page that failed to earn an accolade to see what I might do to bring it up to snuff. Don't count on finding many academic editors who follow this approach.