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The Novice

Most of the novice's difficulties start with the simple fact that the paper he writes on is mute. Because it never talks back to him, and because he's concentrating so hard on generating ideas, he readily forgets—unlike the veteran—that another human being will eventually be trying to make sense of what he's saying. The result? *His natural tendency as a writer is to think primarily of himself—hence to write primarily for himself.* Here, in a nutshell, lies the ultimate reason for most bad writing.¹

He isn't aware of his egocentrism, of course, but all the symptoms of his root problem are there: he thinks through an idea only until it is passably clear to him, since, for his purposes, it needn't be any clearer; he dispenses with transitions because it's enough that *he* knows how his ideas connect; he uses a private system—or no system—of punctuation; he doesn't trouble to define his terms because he understands perfectly well what he means by them; he writes page after page without bothering to vary his sentence structure; he leaves off page numbers and footnotes; he paragraphs only when the mood strikes him; he ends abruptly when he decides he's had enough; he neglects to proofread the final job because the writing is over . . . Given his total self-orientation, it's no wonder that he fails repeatedly as a writer. Actually, he's not writing at all; he's merely communing privately with himself—that is, he's simply putting thoughts down on paper.

I call this "unconscious writing." The unconscious writer is like a person who turns his chair away from his listener, mumbles at length to the wall, and then heads for home without a backward glance.

Basically, all it takes to begin moving from unconscious writing to genuine writing is a few moments' reflection on what the writing/reading process ideally involves. Think about it. What it involves is one person earnestly attempting to communicate with another. Implicitly, then, it involves the reader as much as the writer, since *the success of the communication depends solely on how the reader receives it.* Also, since more than one person is involved, and since all of us have feelings, *it has to be as subject to the basic rules of good manners as any other human relationship.* The writer who is fully aware of these implications—the conscious writer—resembles a person who companionably faces her listener and tries her level best to communicate with him, even persuade and charm him in the process, and who eventually bids him the equivalent of a genuine farewell.

The big breakthrough for the novice writer, then, will occur at the moment he begins to comprehend the social implications of what he's doing. Far from writing in a vacuum, he is conversing, in a very real sense, with another human being, just as I am conversing right now with you, even though that person—like you—may be hours, or days, or even years away in time. This breakthrough parallels an infant's dawning realization that a world exists beyond himself.

¹ Paul Burka, a national Magazine Award-winning journalist and executive editor of Texas Monthly, told one of my classes, "The hardest thing a writer has to do is curb his self-indulgence."