One of the most famous contemporary maxims about writing comes not from Composition Theory per se, but from that popular American film of 1987, “Throw Mamma From The Train.”

In the role of novelist Larry Donner, Billy Crystal delivers the immortal line to a class of aspiring writers. In answer to the question, “What does a writer do?” Crystal’s reply is simply this: “A writer writes . . . always.”

The response sounds like a platitude behind which lurks the implication of dedicated practice. Hearing it, one might feel justified to press for specifics. Exactly what should a writer who is always writing write? If one’s goal is to become a better writer, to increase one’s confidence and improve one’s craft, what kinds of writing would a writer be wise to pursue?

In the film, Donner’s situation is ironic; his wife having run away with his unpublished book, he is suffering through a bad bout of writer’s block. Thinking of ways to help Donner overcome his block, one might suggest he consider at least the following two options:

1. less realistic but more dramatic: get caught up in a misadventure involving a homicidal student
2. less dramatic but more realistic: immerse himself in *A Community of Writers*

For Peter Elbow, longtime guru of process-oriented Composition Pedagogy (he’s now retired from UMass Amherst), and Pat Belanoff, Elbow’s coauthor and fellow fan of freewriting, the
best thing a writer can do to improve her writing ability is to keep a running record of her writing process(es). This way she can look back on those processes and refine them. This she should do and two other things: she should let much of her writing be loose and spontaneous (freewriting) and offer her work for the respectful feedback of her peers (sharing and responding).

Like Larry Donner, Peter Elbow knows the black dog of writer’s block. It is recorded in *A Community of Writers*, *Writing with Power*, *Writing Without Teachers*, and elsewhere that, unable to write his dissertation, Elbow dropped out of graduate school, and then, through relentless freewriting and process writing, was able to write his way back in. Much of his pedagogy originates in this personal history and, with every round of freewriting, reproduces it, framing acts of writing as projects of self-empowerment.

*A Community of Writers* brings Elbow’s practice, and his viewpoint, to the classroom. It is a first year Composition textbook steeped in process pedagogy that will not let students or teachers forget its approach, not even for a minute.

And why should it?

Approaching students as practicing writers, the book offers shop-tested processes that are the heart of its strength. To appreciate its pedagogy, teachers who adopt the text should give room to each of its essential practices freewriting, process writing, and sharing and responding and only after consistently applying them over the course of a semester (or more), evaluate their effect on students’ writing. It is through these activities that the book affirms its purpose, namely to create for students recurring situations of mind from which they may grow as writers, thinkers, and participating members of human communities. Since the publication of Elbow’s *Writing Without Teachers*, these practices have won many supporters, particularly among teachers of the learning disabled. As noted by Harris, Graham, Mason, and Saddler (researchers of developmental
writing instruction), however, “highly skilled writers” also practice these techniques (1). In their
definition of a writing course, the Elbow and Belanoff describe their program as follows:

“What a writing course can do for [the student] is help [the student] discover [his or her]
best writing processes, modify them if necessary, and become adept at using them.
Subject-matter classes and teachers don’t, and some teachers say they can’t, devote time
to this often messy task.” (264)

From this philosophy springs a vision of exactly the kind of Composition class in which students
would use CW and thrive--a space in the curriculum where students can think of themselves as
writers and experiment with different ways of writing to see which ones fit them best. It’s a class
in which writers are made and made to talk shop. And since watching oneself perform any
intellectual task is a good way to learn about one’s thinking in general, a semester of writing
shaped and guided by CW can serve as a passable introduction to intellectual life.

CW is organized into seventeen workshops, twelve miniworkshops, and eleven sharing
and responding activities. The workshops march from a must-read introduction to process-
oriented activities and on through a series of genre experiments. These include assignments in
description/portrait, narration, dialog, essay (personal, persuasive, expository, interpretation,
argument), satire/parody, poetry (slightly), interview, advertisement, letter to the editor, class
notes, and the dramatic rendering of literary texts. With every genre, with every workshop,
students are guided through writing activities that encourage them to experiment with both their
thinking and their writing, followed by writing about what they have just done in the light of
their growing self-awareness as persons who write to be read.
Before I describe a sampling of CW workshops (enough of them to fill a semester) and discuss how process pedagogy enters into them, let me share some observations about student acceptance of and resistance to the text, because any instructor who plans to use CW should prepare to encounter both.

The main thing that CW imposes on students’ writing and learning processes is delay. Compared to lessons in a subject-matter class, or compulsory, predefined activities in a top-down writing class, the activities in CW, a text whose authors define it as a book of “tasks,” may feel held up if not held back by its apparatus. Virtually no sentence gets written but gets scrutinized by its writer from the point of view of a past, present, and future self, as well as several readers. In what way a student will respond to these demands will depend on the attitude the student holds toward education in general.

It has been my experience that students who are used to seeing their education as a series of learning experiments whose most important outcome is their own enhanced self-knowledge and operational confidence are likely to see these process-probing pauses as prominences from which to survey the scene of their learning. On the other hand, students who function as educational dualists, who want to know what their teachers expect so they may always deliver the “right” answer, the approach of CW can prove a very hard sell. In addition, there are students who, initially intrigued by metawriting, lose interest in it after two or three workshops. They may even stop functioning as effective peer editors. The authors would tell you to stick to your guns, to insist on the pedagogy of the text and its primary focus on process. Personally, I have found it effective in these cases, if not in most classes, to subordinate process to product (I’ll have more to say about this soft-sell approach at the end of this review).
In terms of its workshops, *CW*’s offerings can seem overabundant. Its seventeen workshops want whittling. But that every instructor can whittle his or her own shape out of *CW* points to the text’s flexibility. Perhaps the best way to choose workshops is to focus on genre.

For a typical first year writing course section with a not-very-heavy research component, I might pick the following lineup:

1. An Introduction To The Variety Of Writing Processes (workshop 1)
2. Writing In The World: An Interview About Writing (workshop 6)
3. Persuasion (workshop 8)
4. Argument (workshop 12)
5. Interpretation As Response: Reading As the Creation Of Meaning (workshop 11)
6. Autobiography And Portfolio: The Self As Writer (workshop 17)

Workshop 1, “An Introduction To The Variety Of Writing Processes,” asks students to try out a number of generative writing activities, including free writing, focused freewriting, clustering or mapping, invisible writing, public informal writing, the letter, collaborative writing, careful writing, revising, process writing, and the cover letter (later, students will write metacognitive cover letters to introduce each subsequent formal assignment they write). The culminating assignment in this workshop is a collage of prose bits students accumulate as they do the aforementioned activities.

If *CW* is used, workshop 1 cannot be skipped. Its tasks are fundamental to the process approach. Many of them will seem strange and/or unnecessary to students who have been drilled in the five paragraph essay. Particularly odd will be freewriting and process writing (writing
about what happened in their minds while they were writing something else). Invisible writing (writing without seeing one’s words, either by turning off the computer screen or by writing on carbon paper with a spent ballpoint pen) may seem strangest of all. But if the book is to work, these tasks must be done. More precisely, students must experience them. There is also a from-the-ground-up revising activity that (perish the thought) might result in writing that seems worse than the writing replaced. With respect to this activity, instructors should prepare themselves for accusations of “unteaching.” Also, the workshop’s repeated process writing may inspire cries of “Irrelevant!” For this contingency, the authors’ argument for process writing (included at the end of the workshop) can be trotted out.

On the whole, workshop 1 functions as intended. It shows students an easy, playful, confidence-building side of writing and it introduces them to some high order cognitive operations they can apply to their writing and to their other studies as well.

Next in my sequence comes workshop 6, the interview. Jumping to 6 means skipping workshops on narrative, collaborative writing, private writing and audience. But the best bits of these workshops can be carried into this and later workshops by giving special attention to dramatic description, dialogue, unity, coherence and intuition. For example, workshop 6 asks students to “write up an interview with someone about how they write.” One might enlarge this assignment by enlarging the scope of the interview. Instead of focusing entirely on writing, the interview could be first about the nature of the subject’s work and second about the role of writing in that work. Description, dialogue, and perhaps a bit of personality profiling that could frame information about the subject’s writing practice could make for a richer piece of writing than, as written, the workshop requires.
Writing the interview this way would allow connections to significant themes other than writing itself—themes such as education or self-expression—that could make the interview more meaningful to students yet still pertain to thinking and writing.

Thoughts about audience inevitably come into play in the workshop on persuasion. Here the assignments are a letter to the editor and an advertisement. “[H]ow can written words cause people to listen and then change their thinking or behavior?” the authors ask. To answer this question in writing, students must project themselves into the persona of an other. They must put themselves in the shoes of their readers and decide how to calibrate their language to their words are sure to hit home. In this workshop, freewriting and process writing invite students to consider how short, informal, yet persuasive pieces of writing may prick or soothe, repel or attract those who read them. I have found that students love this workshop. They enjoy writing real letters to read editors and are thrilled to see their letters published, which they often are. They also enjoy analyzing ads on TV, print and radio, then writing comparable ads of their own. It’s a gas.

The argument workshop focuses on the analysis and writing of argument through an emphasis on reasoning. The authors equip students with methods for analyzing and constructing arguments—methods that are both intuitive and ingenious. They instruct students to find an argument’s claim, reasons, support and assumptions, almost as if looking through the eyes of Stephen Toulmin.

This method of attending to argument, almost to the point of mapping it, corresponds to the sympathetic “believing game” Elbow writes about in Writing Without Teachers. In the “believing” mode one reads with the grain of argument, endeavoring to give one’s mind to every turn in order to understand the argument fully. The “doubting game,” the flipside of the “believing game” calls for the identification of error or weakness in the argument. This mode
also appears in the workshop, so students get practice in both reading with and against arguments in readings supplied with the workshop (or provided by the instructor). Here, freewriting and process writing give students opportunity to gut the arguments they work with and consider how they themselves might construct convincing arguments for different audiences, much as they did (on a smaller scale and with less attention to the quality and quantity of evidence) in the workshop on persuasion.

The oscillation between believing and doubting echoes the pattern of oscillation students will notice between writing and process writing, freewriting and careful writing, and sharing and responding. They may find the pattern familiar and comforting, easy to slip into. On the other hand, they may think it’s hokey, in which case one can bring out the “willing suspension of disbelief” and put the whole operation in a broader context, perhaps initiating discussions of imagination.

One word of warning: although the authors’ “practical” approach to argument goes a long way, it may be worth interjecting a lesson in common logical fallacies. Such a lesson can help students critique arguments and write sturdier arguments of their own.

The workshop on interpretation is both phenomenological and beautiful. In it students are asked to do three assignments: narrate, in retrospect, their responses to a poem; act out poems to dramatize their interpretations; and write their own poem in answer to one they have read. Not only do these assignment get right to the heart of hermeneutic quandaries, they force students to watch themselves think, an activity that ties in with the discipline of their process writing. As a pedagogic aside, I know more than one writing instructor who uses this workshop’s “movie of my mind approach” when they respond to student writing. This way they tie together student
reading, writing and teacher response in a ring of monitored meaning making—the perfect note to sound before the semester’s final workshop.

The final workshop asks students to write a biography of themselves as writers. It asks them to look back on their semester’s work and note moments of growth and change. It asks them to define a writer’s work and to describe themselves in the act of writing. Here, freewriting and process writing allow students to develop a base for wider-angle self-analysis. If CW’s methods have taken hold, students should be able to discover patterns and abstract from their self-descriptions principles that will help guide their writing in the future. In many cases, this workshop has also won rave reviews from students.

I would conclude this review with some thoughts about the soft-sell approach I mentioned earlier. Not every student will be a fan of the process approach. In fact, when I taught with CW as a graduate student (it was the standard text in my program for several years) many graduate teaching assistants resisted its thrust, suggesting that something other than writing should be the writing class’ central theme, mostly in response to student boredom (and their own). To answer the question Larry Donner was asked, they would reply, “A writer writes . . . always (but not always about writing)!”

My answer to the question, “What should a writer do?” is this: my own splendid oscillation. Start with CW, but after the first workshop, turn freewriting and process writing into journaling activities. Monitor it. Give feedback to show it matters. But don’t make it the centerpiece of the course. If you wish, use the “sharing and responding activities” by themselves, too. They are available that way, separate from the textbook. Then do the Biography workshop at the end.
And finally, it is safe to say that were it not for Peter Elbow and his sometimes dizzying and distracting pedagogy, I would never have made it out of my own dissertation, nor would I have become interested in Composition Theory. Yes, I think _CW_ is too much, a deluge, but its goal is to envelop, to immerse the student writer in a world of his or her making and remaking and to awaken him or her to the reality of others and their impact on meaning. Given this, I think, it is best that the authors, Elbow and Belanoff, leave it to us to say when.

Works Cited:
