A LIFE OF PROCESS AND PROGRESS:
THE INFLUENCE OF WRITER DONALD M. MURRAY

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SETH ROBERT GRAVES

Berkley Hudson, Ph.D, Thesis Supervisor

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The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

A LIFE OF PROCESS AND PROGRESS: THE INFLUENCE OF WRITER DONALD M. MURRAY

Presented by Seth Robert Graves

A candidate for the degree Master of Arts

And hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

______________________________
Professor Berkley Hudson

______________________________
Professor Steve Weinberg

______________________________
Professor Michael Grinfeld

______________________________
Professor Maureen Stanton
For Jewel Duncan
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But what do beginners know? Too much.

It is what they think they know that makes them beginners.

-William H. Gass
Chapter 1

Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to explain how one individual, Donald (Don) Murray (1924-2006), developed and spread an academic culture known as the “writing process movement.” The writing process approach encouraged writers to be conscious of their own successful methods of planning and creating a piece. Murray encouraged newspapers to adopt his techniques and many newspapers invited him to hold workshops with reporters as a writing coach, particularly in long terms with The Boston Globe and The Providence Journal-Bulletin With his pronouncement to “teach writing as a process, not a product” in 1972, Murray enacted an approach to writing shared by like-minded scholars that would become termed the “writing process movement.”

Though references to “writing process” as a terminology for composition study dates back to 1919 or earlier, Murray’s phrase was a standard reference and invocation for composition scholars and the thinkers and practitioners of journalism of his time. This study incorporates over two dozen interviews and analysis of a variety of texts, including trade books and textbooks, magazine and newspaper articles. In addition to works that reference Murray or speak to his profession and pedagogy, the thesis will also present portions of Murray’s own writing in his daybook journals, articles, and books.

Sondra Perl writes that “beginning in 1971, a steady line of new work began to appear: work that looked at individual writers and examined precisely what they did as

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they were engaged in the act of writing.”

Taken as a whole, the members of the writing process movement would develop an attitude toward writing that drew from theories in composition, literary analysis, and mass communication, adult and child psychology, and the observation and practice of actual writing. Much of this work was produced at universities in the Northeast, particularly the University of New Hampshire, where Murray began teaching in 1963, and the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, where Peter Elbow, composition scholar, spent much of his career. They published books and academic articles, held and participated in conferences, and served as guest teachers and lecturers. Their work increasingly received recognition from rhetoric and composition programs, public school teaching workshops, and other communities of teachers and writers. The approach would influence following generations of students in the last quarter of the 20th Century.

In addition to his work in academia, Murray was also at the heart of a second cultural shift, created by his own transference of the writing process approach to the newsroom. Murray was one of the nation’s first writing coaches, initially hired to work with reporters and editors of The Boston Globe in and The Providence Journal-Bulletin in 1980. Murray’s role was to provide an educated outsider’s point of view toward the writing practices of the reporters and the relationship between the reporters and their editors. He brought his methods of classroom instruction from the University of New Hampshire to the newsroom and encouraged writers to explore and articulate their process. His emphasis was placed on having staff members articulate their successes in

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writing and reporting in order to circulate an attention to writing among their peers. Murray served as a bridge between these two communities and helped bring them together at an influential school for professionals, students, and journalism teachers in St. Petersburg, Florida called the Poynter Institute, in his touring workshops and seminars, and in wide swath of resources and subjects in his books. Tommy Thomason, founding director of the Schieffer School of Journalism at Texas Christian University, only met Murray “a few times,” but explained how Murray was the public center of this bridging of disciplines:

If I told you that somewhere in America there was a department of journalism and a department of English and they had gotten together to bring a speaker in, you would just know that’s Don Murray. If I told you there’s a school of English and a school of education and they were bringing somebody in to speak, that’s definitely Don Murray. Don brought areas together, helping to understand what it is that they were teaching.³

Murray became a familiar name in multiple communities, supported by his book-length work in many disciplines—journalism, writing, teaching writing, teaching in primary school—as well as his interest in establishing himself as personable and, social presence.

The work of Murray and other initial writing coaches such as Roy Peter Clark helped generate an influx of writing coaches, wordsmiths hired by various newspapers across the country. Murray and other writing coaches attempted to instill an attitude in the newsroom that allowed reporters to openly identify themselves as writers. Christopher “Chip” Scanlan, former reporter for The Providence Journal and one of Murray’s closest friends in the later years of his life, recalled his assessment of this newsroom attitude:

³ Thomason, Tommy, Interview with author (phone), 24 March 2010
If you ask somebody in most newsrooms what they do they would say, "I'm a reporter." Journalist would have sounded too highfalutin. They sneered at that. Writer, by the same token, seemed to suggest that we were better than the reporters, we could write better.4

Thomas Newkirk, a professor of composition studies at the University of New Hampshire and Murray’s neighbor for over two decades, put it similarly:

His point was that people get the news elsewhere. What they have to get is context, stories, and depth. They are going to get the headlines elsewhere. What you have to be as a journalist is a writer, and you have to look at your process and be more self-aware of what you have to do as a writer. That was a big message that he sent on to people. There are tools that transcend just journalism. You need to think of yourself as a writer.5

Like the writing process movement, writing coaches and their backers further spread their ideas of a closer attention to writing into the newsroom and the benefit of employing coaches to help accomplish this goal with print and aural advocacy: books, articles, conferences, workshops, and lectures. The Poynter Institute for Media Studies was particularly important for employing the methods of Murray and others in an attempt to bolster attention to writing quality in the newsroom. Nelson Poynter, as chairman of the St. Petersburg Times, established the Modern Media Institute in May 1975, which was renamed the Poynter Institute for Media Studies in 1984. The Institute, which originally only had four employees in 1976, invited journalists—reporters and editors—and educators to teach or attend proactive seminars and workshops in their area of study. Poynter also developed a program for high-school students, college students, and professionals in the field to spend a predetermined number of days in St. Petersburg with permanent faculty members and invited instructors.

4 Scanlan, Chip, Interview with author (videorecording), 16 June 2009: Poynter Institute, St. Petersburg, FL
5 Newkirk, Thomas, Interview with author (phone), 26 Feb. 2010
This thesis seeks to discuss how a writing culture is created and enacted and how influence develops and spirals outward from its original initiation. In some cases, such influence recedes or dissolves. Murray’s work became increasingly revised, criticized, and ignored, particularly by those who in the past two decades were influenced by a growing employment of post-structuralism and cultural studies approaches. Some saw Murray and his peers as overly “expressivist” or “expressionistic.”

Murray attempted to demystify the writer’s process of creating a quality text, and allowed for a reconsideration of what it meant to live a “writer’s life.” He says of his own ambitions:

I had come home from the war and gone to college not for scholarship but to earn a place in the middle class, a single-family house with a car in the garage.7

His life is was not characterized by chaotic extremes of personality. He made himself a product of his own mantra: that writing is a practice of democracy, available to anyone willing to contribute the work and research, and can be assisted by the writer’s own attention to how they best plan and develop their work. The notion seems pedestrian, and to a large extent is in its practicality, but extended itself to writers facing the quest to write better in a society that evolved out of the sixties, an era in which journalists pushed the boundaries of style and subject with “New” and narrative journalism and seemingly created such work in a cloud of smoke, in the eleventh hour, or perhaps with gross quantities of drugs.

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6 In this paper, the terms “expressivist” and “expressionistic” will be used interchangeably. For the purposes of standardizing the text, “expressionistic” will be used in the text, but “expressivist” still bears presence in quotes from texts and interviews. Both are referred to in text and account, and the author could find no difference in their use. The subjects interviewed for this thesis also used the terms interchangeably. This term is also primarily characterized as first coming from the composition theorist James Berlin.

7 Murray, Donald M., *The Lively Shadow: Living with the Death of a Child* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 188
This thesis is important to the study of journalism for a variety of reasons. First, it discusses a rather direct transference of ideas between academic and journalistic communities, demonstrating how an idea of an academic movement helped foster structural and ideological change to groups of journalists. Sondra Perl (1994) writes in “Writing Process: A Shining Moment” that “Murray reminds us that no matter what we are writing, no matter the form or the content, the structure or the point, we write out of who we are, representing ourselves in print.” Such an idea served to bring together writers from multiple trades, simply over a shared love and interest in good writing.

Though this thesis engages with text from other disciplines, including rhetoric, composition, and English, it remains a work of journalism at heart, relying on journalistic reportage and analysis vested in mass media studies. This study is important for scholars because it will provide an assessment of one man’s influence on the thought and practice of writing over the course of a half-century. The study is also important to journalists because it illuminates how the journalism process was discussed by a group of writing craftsmen and how that discussion changed over the fifty-year course of Murray’s career. The goal of is the work to illuminate historical study and inspire working journalists and the academic community.

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8 Perl 1994: xvii
Chapter 2

Literature Review: History, Process, Theory

The following literature review will cover three important areas that will help lay a foundation for a study of Donald Murray and his primary and secondary influences. First, a history of approaches to teaching writing, as primarily discussed by James Berlin, will illuminate what came before Murray’s approach. The account will outline a century-old debate over who should have access to writing instruction, questions of the effect of World War II and the G.I. Bill on the American education system, and various examples of societal and pedagogical changes over time. This broad history is followed by one more acute discussion, of the writing process approach itself, including its members, formation, and ideology. Finally, the chapter will make an attempt to define the form of this study as a hybrid ethnographic biography, told through a collection of voices spoken aurally and in print. The paper represents a postmodern ethnographic approach that effectively decentralizes the authority of the author of the text in order to achieve a “true fiction,” relying on the conversation between texts and interviews to illuminate its question: “What influence did Don Murray have on attitudes towards writing in collegiate and professional writing environments?”
The American Writing Course: A Brief History

In his book *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges*, James Berlin⁹ (1987) covers a large history of writing coursework and pedagogy at American colleges and universities from the nineteenth century onward. In it, he suggests that by the early twentieth century three major approaches to the writing instruction had formed. The first, endorsed by Harvard and Columbia, as well as state universities such as Texas, Illinois, and Wisconsin, “positivistic and practical in spirit, was designed to provide the new middle-class professionals with the tools to avoid embarrassing themselves in print.”⁴⁰ Berlin refers to this approach in short as “the rhetoric of meritocracy.”⁹¹

A second approach was indoctrinated in such schools as Yale and Princeton, which sought to use writing coursework as the extension of an “elitist and aristocratic” agenda, providing highly selective courses in writing, while literature served as a satisfactory course for the other students. “Proponents of this rhetoric denied that writing courses had an important place in the college, arguing that geniuses were few and that writing instruction for the rest ought to be handled in high school,” Berlin notes. This attitude did not lead to a foregoing of writing instruction entirely from the students curriculum, but “the use of a belletristic approach—courses in writing about literature.”⁹¹²

The final approach Berlin suggests is that of “writing as training for participation in the democratic process—a rhetoric of public discourse,” rhetoric primarily employed

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⁹ It should be noted that this is the same James Berlin who was cited by interview subjects as being a key figure in criticizing the writing process movement.


⁹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² Ibid.
in Midwestern schools. What little journalism education was provided in colleges at this time, like the young journalism program at the University of Missouri, started in 1908, may perhaps be grouped into this third approach as contributor to or product of this kind of training. The question throughout the first half of the century would continue to be the pitch of communication, composition, and rhetoric coursework: whether it functioned as a class meant to democratically familiarize all students with writing at a collegiate level, or whether writing coursework was intended to be selective, a place meant for the production of high art following a gifted students’ excelled knowledge of literature and the liberal arts.

Berlin suggests that the first extensive discussion on the process of writing as opposed to the composed product was introduced in 1919, the year Raymond Weaver, a professor at Columbia University, suggested the “process by which successful writers have brought their work to its final form has not been the interest of the pedagogue.” Instead “he has dissected the finished product—and from such analysis he has delivered to inarticulate students counsels of literary perfection.” This was an initial wave of what Berlin refers to as “expressionistic rhetoric,” a term he later identifies with the writing process movement. He characterizes “expressionistic rhetoric” as a Platonic notion that writing is a self-discovering process facilitated by articulating personal experience and its relation to society. In this initial period of “expressionism,” practitioners further channeled Freudian notions of tapping into the unconscious in the act of writing.

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15 Berlin 1987: 73-4
A following pronouncement of an interest in focusing on the process came in 1930. H.W. Davis, a professor at Kansas State University, argued that the teacher should concentrate on “the writing process rather than the finished product.”¹⁶ Davis produced key arguments that would be reflected later by Murray and his peers: that “‘themes’ or ‘compositions’ are rarely encountered in the world of literature, journalism, society, or business” and one should “learn to write by writing—and correcting and revising.”¹⁷

A series of changes took place in academia following World War II that would accelerate the evolution of composition pedagogy and eventually lead to the development of the writing process approach. “The push for general education requirements again emerged just before World War II in response to the Depression and the threats to democracy posed by fascism from abroad,” Berlin writes. “After the war, these programs increased dramatically, colleges again trying to combine the breadth of liberal learning with professional specialization.”¹⁸ Thus began a new “democratization” of education, a greater ideology of creating a culture in which the education that was once reserved for the aristocrat was now not only available to but perhaps even a responsibility for the entire American citizenry.

This was further advanced by a new generation of students brought to college by the G.I. Bill. Enrollment in American colleges and universities went from 1,500,000 in the 1939-40 school year, to shrink to 800,000 in 1944-45 during wartime, but then surged to 2,444,900 in 1949-50.¹⁹ Some schools, like the University of Iowa, continued to adhere

¹⁷ Davis 800, 802; rpt. Berlin 1987: 83
¹⁸ Berlin 1987: 92
¹⁹ Ibid, 96.
to more conservative communications course approaches, while other universities looked to incorporate a classroom model that resembled a class-“clinic” hybrid, particularly based on incorporating Freudian psychology. In a rather extreme example, the University of Denver, falling “victim to the ‘life adjustment’ emphasis in education that appeared after World War II,” employed a writing skills program in which the writing teacher functioned as a hybrid psychological therapist; teachers were referred to as “clinicians”:

Few students were exempted from the course, for example, because high scores on entrance tests indicated ‘oververbalized, intentionally oriented students’ who were not ‘adequately adjusted in the field of human relations.’ As for students who had received high grades in speech in high school, they were ‘often egocentric extroverts’ requiring ‘a great deal of additional training to undo the bad social habits…trained into them through competitive speech’…Clearly a leveling process was going on at Denver.20

Though University of Denver’s approach to teaching composition was not the norm for most American schools, it does give one pause to consider the ways in which teaching could be approached radically after World War II. Specifically, in the teaching of writing courses, the focus was often moved to personal expression as a way of dealing with the influx and democratization of college attendance in a postwar resettling period. The G.I. bill meant thousands of new students entered college, resulting in more various backgrounds and levels of prior knowledge—for example, knowledge of the Western canon. This may have lead some teachers, and students like Murray, believe in a strong emphasis on personal expression both as post-war catharsis and a better-suited way to approach language for the uncanonized.

20 Berlin 1987, 100-1
The Writing Process Movement

What became known as the writing process movement had no firm manifesto. It had no operative core upon which all theory was based, nor did it lack disagreement between its identified practitioners. However, writing process as an institutional practice seemed to follow a few basic assumptions and philosophies. Lad Tobin (1994), in his introduction to *Taking Stock: The Writing Process Movement in the ‘90s*, edited by Tobin and Thomas Newkirk, says that “the term the writing process has always been misleading, suggesting both more and less than what the movement has come to represent.”

Considering that “every single written product is the result of some process—and almost every process leads to some sort of product,” the term the writing process inevitably has to refer to a more specific notion. Tobin defines the movement based on its essential attitudes, articulating how it comes from a response to the kind of teaching its practitioners often experienced themselves and subsequently wanted to change:

…in the composition world, the term has come to mean something else: an emphasis on the process, student choice and voice, revision, self-expression. But most of all it has come to mean a critique (or even outright rejection) of traditional, product-driven, rules-based, correctness-obsessed writing instruction. The process movement, then, has been a rejection of a particular kind of product—the superficial, packaged, formulaic essays that most of us grew up writing and teaching—and a particular kind of process—write, proofread, hand in, and then move on to next week’s assignment.

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22 Ibid, 5
23 Ibid

Tobin provides a series of scenes for where these writings were taking shape:

There was Don Murray in the woods of New Hampshire, drawing on his experience as a REAL writer, developing one-to-one conferences, writing to learn, and the revolutionary slogans ‘Teach writing as a process, not a product!’ and ‘Maybe the teacher should cut class!’…Ken Macrorie in Michigan railing against dishonest writing, Engfish, and weasel words and proving what students can produce when they are trusted and pushed…Janet Emig at Harvard and the University of Chicago identifying previously undiscovered phenomena—that a student writer actually has an unconscious, a clue, and a composing process…Peter Elbow, at MIT and then out in the woods in Washington, somehow combining a background in medieval literature and an interest in group therapy to come up with freewriting, the doubting and believing game, and Writing Without Teachers.

Tobin also addresses how much of a coherent movement was actually created by these individuals, including Murray, who became active in the composition and teaching pedagogy community. After providing the narrative abridged above, Tobin admits that though the story may be in part an editorialized presentation, it creates something like a true fiction:

I know, even while I tell it, that this story presents, first, a caricature of life before the writing process movement and, second, a misleading image of unity and coherence during it. But in spite of its excesses, I keep telling it because I believe that it conforms in some sense to a narrative or psychological (if not historical) reality of that period.

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24 Ibid, 3
25 Ibid, 4
He is aware that there are those “who would deny that the philosophies of, say, Murray, Elbow, [Janet] Emig, [Ken] Macrorie, [James] Moffett, [James] Britton, [Donald] Graves, [Nancy] Atwell, [Lil] Brannon and [C.H.] Knoblauch, and [Lucy] Calkins were ever similar enough to constitute a particular approach, let alone a coherent educational movement.”26 However, in the eyes to Tobin and his peer Taking Stock contributors, these individuals represented a shared attitude of excitement towards writing as an act of discovering the self and the subject, revising as the essential element of creating a work, and collecting accounts of writing processes that work.

Engfish?

There was, in fact, some disagreement between these writing process practitioners. In 1970, Ken Macrorie, then a Professor of English at Western Michigan University, published Uptaught, which articulated his concerns with the teaching of English and composition among college students. He finds the most common methods of teaching composition in his time expects students to speak in an unnatural language, what he calls Engfish, to meet the requirements of their prompts. “When the student is moving upwards, using all his abilities and extending and sharpening them, the professor is at his most powerful,” Macrorie says, outlining his own method of teaching, the “Third Way”. When he quits using instruments of boredom and torture, he finds his students doing and saying things that make him look good.”27

26 Ibid
27 Macrorie, Ken, Uptaught (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1970), 158
Macrorie specifically targets Murray and his book *A Writer Teaches Writing* as deterrents from creating mutual respect between student and teacher:

The author of *A Writer Teaches Writing* forgets that the beginning writer in college or high school is not a beginning human being. He has already acquired a body of knowledge or he would not be alive. He is concerned about many things, not always those which fascinate the teacher. The author of this book knows that and even says it in several places, but he cannot refrain from presenting these condescending instructions.\(^{28}\)

Macrorie’s push to remove the condescension and boring drone of composition instruction is applied in his criticism of Murray’s simplistic approach. He finds Murray thinking too little of his readers, treating them like children, and giving them ultimatums for their production. Most of the interview subjects regarded Murray and Macrorie as members of the same camp overall. Thomas Newkirk thought these criticisms strange. “Macrorie was very critical of Murray in a kind of unfair way in Uptauught,” he said.\(^{29}\)

Regardless, both writers seemed to be fighting the same fight for good writing. Murray has a quote in *A Writer Teaches Writing* that follows a similar idea to Macrorie’s book in a similarly no-nonsense tone:

> Fear of a poor grade is not a good motivation, and undeserved A’s in writing presented to students who are articulate in comparison with the boobs they sit with in a given classroom do positive harm to the student who thinks he knows how to write when he doesn’t.\(^{30}\)

Regardless of its individual inner disagreements, the writing process movement was characterized by its sense, at least by its followers and practitioners, that it “occupied the higher moral ground,” says Lad Tobin. “After all, we were speaking up against rigidity, legalism, authoritarianism, fuddy-duddyism. We were speaking up for students,

\(^{28}\) Ibid, 122
\(^{29}\) Newkirk Interview
freedom, innovation, creativity, and change.”31 It was a move away from the past, from rigid assignments like five-paragraph essays, from dictated form and expectation. It was an appreciation for the initiative of the student, an emphasis on not teaching how to write but teaching how to allow one’s self to become a writer. Their practitioners often found a “comfortable position” “as long as [they] could characterize our opponents as old fogeys, too tired to change.”32

Charles Moran explains how Murray, as well as work in composition from Roger Garrison, then (1973) a two-year college teacher, arrived in his world of teaching, which eventually included his witness and contribution to work on the process approach at the University of Massachusetts—Amherst. He finds this particularly interesting because “an English Department at a Ph.D.-granting research university was influenced by texts from two communities it did not often encounter.”33 Murray’s world was the community of professional writers. “As its title suggests (A Writer Teaches Writing),” writes Moran, “Murray’s work drew on a non-academic, ‘writerly’ tradition—he himself a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, a novelist, and essayist.”34 Murray was particularly known for his broad exclamations in reference to writing process, including such coined terms as “Teach writing as a process, not a product,” and “Writing may be magical, but it is not magic.” The writing process was less concerned with micro-structure—accuracy in grammar, rigid structure, the creation of a product that met empirical requirement—than it was with macro-structural techniques—finding whatever works to create a piece that

31 Tobin, “Introduction,” 5
32 Ibid
34 Ibid, 139
communicates itself effectively. The process aimed to be open-ended, to attach itself to the strengths and concerns of the writer and move further in those directions.

**Where Biography Meets Ethnography**

In *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, Peter Burke (1991) asks key questions for contemporary historians:

> Whether they like it or not, historians are having to concern themselves with questions which have long interested sociologists and other social scientists. Who are the true agents in history, individuals or groups? Can they successfully resist the pressures of social, political or cultural structures? Are these structures merely constraints on freedom of action, or do they enable agents to make more choices?\(^{35}\)

Murray’s life and teaching presents a case of both *creating* and *reflecting* components of the evolution of the journalist in the twentieth century. “One does not have to read far into the history of today’s media to discover that many of its successful practitioners have themselves a lively curiosity about their own predecessors,” write James D. Startt and Wm. David Sloan (2003) in *Historical Methods in Mass Communication*.\(^{36}\) Identifying individuals whose teaching and practices were influenced by Murray is one way of determining what kind of contributor Murray’s person and text contributed to attitudes of writing and writing “cultures.”

**Biography: A Now-Variable Form**

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\(^{35}\) Burke, Peter, *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 16

Biography has often been ignored in serious academic discussion. Part of the problem is its fenced placement between creative and pragmatic construction. Leading historian and sociologist James Clifford (1962) writes in his introduction to the collection of essays *Biography as an Art*, “What, really, is a biographer? Is he merely a superior kind of journalist, or must he be an artist? ...Because of this uncertainty as to the very nature of biography there has been a tendency to ignore it as a major division of literature.” Literacy critics have shied from discussion of the genre, and only recently have sociologists begun to identify biography as a method of attaining key subject material. Mid-Nineteenth Century biographer and National Book Award winner Catherine Drinker Bowen (1950) comments of the genre:

Between novelist and biographer the difference is profound. The one invents situations that will rouse a reader’s emotions; the other brings out the significance of situations that already exist. Both are concerned with *la recherché du temps perdu*, both wish to uncover the nature or motivation of man.

Previous literature on biography and its aesthetics help biography in its contemporary varieties. “Most of us now accept the fact that all biographies need not conform to a single set of standards, that quite legitimately there are different kinds of life-writing, each with its own possibilities and rules,” James Clifford writes. “There will always be the traditional scholarly compilations and the completely fictionalized lives, but between these two extremes we now have a variety of modulations.” Milton Lomask, in *The Biographer’s Craft*, denies that biography can be comprehensively defined but that its general focus is on the primary tensions of the life discussed. “A

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biography is not a compilation of facts,” he writes. “It is a portrait in words of a man or woman in conflict with himself, or with the world around him, or with both.”


Biography can utilize individual voices of its subjects to create a coherent, bodied whole.

*Ethnography: Purpose, Definition*

Paired with biographical techniques, this study places emphasis on an ethnographic approach to make its case. The goal of ethnographic writing is to evoke “what cannot be known discursively or performed perfectly,” as Stephen A. Tyler states. Ethnographic study achieves this by permitting the entrance of an array of voices, “collective arrangements, distant or nearby,” that lead to an understanding; it is a process in similar style to a “field study” that “decodes and recodes, telling the grounds

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of collective order and diversity, inclusion and exclusion.” It maintains a self-consciousness of what cannot be discovered by “a voice” that is inherently its brand of truth and relies on a web of connected voices. Some of the foremost writers on contemporary ethnography, particularly in its relationship to the written word, journalism, and the media, are collected in a 1986 publication from Berkley’s University of California Press, *Writing Culture*, edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus. This collection features essays that range in discussion from the relationship between postmodernism and ethnographic study to the interdisciplinary approach to text:

The essays collected here…see culture as composed of seriously contested codes and representations; they assume that the poetic and the political are inseparable, that science is in, not above, historical and linguistic processes. They assume that academic and literary genres interpenetrate and that the writing of cultural descriptions is properly experimental and ethical. Their focus on text making and rhetoric serves to highlight the constructed, artificial nature of cultural accounts.

The group identifies with and borrows heavily from various continental European thinkers, including Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, by channeling, among other postmodern notions, a resistance to an inherently false single authority over a body of work. Paul Rainbow quotes Foucault in his *Writing Culture* essay “Representations are Social Facts,” reprinting three claims made by the philosopher and sociologist:

1. Truth is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. (2) Truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. (3) This regime is not merely ideological or

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44 Ibid.
superstructural; it was a condition of the formation and development of capitalism.  

The essential claim in this passage seems to be that “truth” is a controlled thing. It comes out of the operations that individuals use and regulations they place upon the world, how we select data (perhaps could fall to “lying with statistics”). Truth is sustained by who have power, making it relative and shifting. The goal of postmodernism in the vein of Foucault is to attempt to combat these notions of power, not by doing the impossible and removing the author of the work (there is always a writing hand) but, as the Writing Cultures interpret Foucault’s text, by admitting the “fictions” that any “truth” inherently contains. The best way to combat this, according to Rainbow and the other Writing Culture contributors, is through polyvocality: letting others’ voices collectively do legwork, particularly in making claims about a group or society.

Ethnography often argues to rise above authoritarian voice by emphasizing interaction of an authentic collection of voices, as will be demonstrated by Writing Culture. Ethnography is an interdisciplinary form that employs literary analysis, sociology, anthropology, and rhetoric studies. From this hodgepodge it becomes its own definable work best articled by its routinely expressed notion to uncover writing cultures, their development, and their evolution. Clifford quotes Barthes at the beginning of his introduction to the book:

Interdisciplinary work, so much discussed these days, is not about confronting already constituted disciplines (none of which, in fact, is
willing to let itself go). To do something interdisciplinary it’s not enough to choose a ‘subject’ (a theme) and gather around it two or three sciences. Interdisciplinarity consists in creating a new object that belongs to no one.\footnote{Barthes, Roland, from “Jeunes Chercheurs,” rpt. “Introduction” by James Clifford, \textit{Writing Culture}, 1}

This process of creating the “new object that belongs to no one” is at the core of ethnography’s goal in supplanting the voice of narration and authority with varying voices of disunity, which come together to create a culture of discourse.

\textit{Cultural Studies: Limits of Meaning and Positivist Science}

Another school of thought, referred to as cultural studies, has developed in the past few decades. It attempts to address all issues, be it ethnography, sociology, or any other concept or study, in terms of the means by which the issue contributes to the development of cultures. Ethnography can then be seen as a kind of cultural studies, since it traces the contributions of writing and writing forms to large-scale “writing cultures.” Key figures in cultural studies, such as James W. Carey and Stuart Hall, have pushed comprehensive assessments of society through an integration of such theories as Marxism and structuralism, as well as media theories such as gatekeeping and framing.

Hall, in his article “The Rediscovery of ‘Ideology’: Return of the Repressed in Media Studies“(1982), asserts that the experience of finding meaning takes place through the interpretation of signs or signifiers and further argues that the signification of meaning is not removed from the struggle between classes and control over language. The process of producing meaning, which Hall calls “signifying practice,” is an active media practice of “seeing”, “structuring”, “naming” and “presenting” that puts forth the possibility that the evolution of language could be seen as a series of collected individual...
subjective realities in regards to the interpretations of the material world.\textsuperscript{47} A common discourse of language terms and interpreted significances was witnessed in the interviews conducted in this study, even by individuals not familiar with each other, further suggesting a kind of common culture among them.

Cultural studies, as well as ethnography, is typified by a rejection of a type of science called positivism—an emphasis on the scientific method, unity, verifiable results, and verifiable logic. James Carey, in “Overcoming Resistance” (1985), attempts to diffuse the most pervasive practice of communications, a modernist-inspired, scientifically empirical quest for absolute truths, as substitute for an approach with the most encompassing banner of “cultural studies.” The article characterizes positivism, which Carey refers to as “the quest for the Holy Grail,” an objective approach to creating mathematical or scientific absolutes—overly falsifiable answers to cultural issues.\textsuperscript{48} Positivism, he notes, in the epistemological sense, “[provides] some guarantee that opinion could be transcended by truth.”\textsuperscript{49} He suggests that the “intellectually stagnant and increasingly uninteresting” idealism of this approach limits the potential variation of ideas and subjective experience of multiple individual voices.\textsuperscript{50} Cultural studies, particularly ethnography, permits a science of the individual instead of a strained attempt to fit conclusions into constructions, to have to follow through a hypothesis-based methodology.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid, 32
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid, 28
Carey calls for a presentation of multiple subjective realities in order to better lay groundwork in the more fruitful body of “experience,” “interaction,” and “conflict.”

One of Carey’s key discussions addresses a popular philosophical notion of symbolic interaction, which suggests that the individual is a key product of their society. In a mass communications context, the interest of the media therefore should be to communicate the individual experience as in turn representative of the society. To Carey, epistemological arguments often reduce their defense to “science says” instead of an argument that they can defend explicitly “on their own ground.” His arguments coincide with a postmodern move to break up hegemonic controls of information (i.e. pushing the question “Who owns this and what are its origins?”).

Similarly, in a review of the Cultural Studies in Contemporary Sociology, Howard S. Becker (1987) feels that with its arrival, “field by field, the social sciences are being reclaimed from a long madness, in which serious workers set out to do what couldn’t be done and ended up feeling pretty bad about their inevitable failure.” Becker articulates a feeling of burden from the “madness” of positivism in sociology, a scientific method-based approach that seeks to find “real knowledge” by “objective and impersonal” means. Positivism’s methodology is the scientific method, though to Becker and Clifford’s peers its greater suggestion is Platonic truth is attainable through good empirical science, a hegemony Becker is calling the “long madness.” However, to Becker, sociological study has exposed the flawed requirement of the replication of

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51 Ibid, 29-30
52 Ibid, 34
54 Ibid, 25
absolute truth demanded by positivist science, noting that “a variety of studies in North America, Britain, and France have shown that real science proceeds by violating, in some measure, all of the positivist rules in the name of getting some science done.”\(^{55}\) Scientists may produce “real knowledge,” but it is part of a “centuries-long conversation” vested in gradual development of understanding.\(^{56}\) Becker seems to identify and embrace the researcher’s admission of variable truth to any study, that their presentation is more concerned with being an important and reliable voice than an absolute answer.

This study employs each of the perspectives of biography, ethnography, and cultural studies in its own coherent amalgam, as articulated in the following methodology chapter. The study is a discussion of Don Murray given the context of attitudes toward writing and writing instruction before his time. It works with an understanding that Murray was a member of a circle of contributors, not always its center but a key influence and initiator. Murray will be discussed through voices who share different levels of awareness of the entire body of his work, but were all influenced by him to a primary or secondary degree. Together these voices create an important testament to Murray’s contributions to teaching and writing.

\(^{55}\) Ibid, 26

\(^{56}\) Ibid.
Chapter 3

Methodology: Tapping Veins of Discourse, Following Leads and Patterns

This study is intended to be a historical assessment of influence, guided by structural elements of ethnography. This paper employs an amalgam of contemporary approaches to the presentation and analysis of text and reported aural account in a society. It incorporates elements of biography, as seen through a postmodern attitude towards decentralization and emphasizes the use of interviews to tell its story, as told in roughly chronological themes. The narratives are facilitated by textual analysis, in-depth interviews, and attempts to identify “writing cultures” formed between collaborative communities of writers. It extends this notion by suggesting that one writing culture, the writing process movement, directly informed the development and rise of an attitude towards journalism in which a greater emphasis was placed on “good writing.”

The True Fiction

The essential goal of this form of study is to create what Clifford refers to as “true fictions,” revealing matter by retold or reconstructed accounts. These compile a variety of personal evidences to lay claim to the existence of a culture identified by its communication, a move from assessment by eye to that by ear:

Once cultures are no longer prefigured visually—as objects, theatres, texts—it becomes possible to think of a cultural poetics that is an interplay of voices, of positioned utterances. In a discursive rather than a visual paradigm, the dominant metaphors for ethnography shift away from the observing eye and toward expressive speech (and gesture).

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The task of the ethnographer is to create an “inherently partial” report that illuminates meaningful social relationships between individuals through textual analysis—texts being both written words and aural accounts.58

Clifford, in his essay in **Writing Culture** titled “On Ethnographic Allegory,” discusses the relationship between symbolic or representative speech and how it can be revealing to the study of writing cultures. “Embodied in written reports, these stories simultaneously describe real cultural events and make additional, moral, ideological, and even cosmological statements,” Clifford writes.59 These stories by definition are used for instructing or explaining the meaning of an idea, event, or practice through a story that functions as a kind of microcosmic testimony to the culture, perhaps by fable or parable. Clifford continues by stating that allegory, if by broad definition of an individual account meant to represent a greater meaning or understanding, is an unavoidable employment in ethnography:

These kinds of transcend meanings are not abstractions or interpretations ‘added’ to the original ‘simple’ account. Rather, they are the conditions of its meaningfulness. Ethnographic texts are inescapably allegorical, and a serious acceptance of this fact chances the ways they can be written and read.60

The goal, then, of ethnographic study is to effectively weave together a collection of individual voices as to create a greater understanding of Murray’s influence than the individual accounts could provide. The study uses just a sampling of a much greater number of individuals with allegories to share over Murray and his effects.

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58 Ibid, 7  
60 Ibid, 99
A Collectively Created Discourse

Tyler, in his *Writing Culture* article “Post-Modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document,” explains the importance of incorporating a collective of represented voices in text. The brand of postmodern ethnography under defense from Clifford and his peers is one that uses “discourse” as its greater binding principle, as articulated by “text.” The ethnographic account, in this case, then creates a “polyphonic text” that is too decentralized to be bound by one gathering and proclaiming narrative, or, in other words, a work that lacks a “discourse on the discourse.”61 Instead, in its ideal form ethnography creates a work in which “none of whose participants would have the final word in the form of a framing story or encompassing synthesis,” instead members of an active, collective dialogue.62 The author of this text does not follow the format of bearing witness to the events portrayed and deciding for himself what they mean; he bears second-hand witness with textual accounts, not true witness of event. “There is instead the mutual, dialogical production of a discourse, of a story of sorts,” Tyler says.63 A Cerberus of voices paints the picture, tells the story, and in this case evidences the various influences of Donald Murray.

Execution

The paper will create such “true fictions” by pairing individual accounts to form an intersecting web of voices. These individual accounts tell stories that function as allegories. Though true accounts, the interviewers often reveal tales of Murray or their

61 Tyler 1986: 126
62 Ibid
63 Ibid
own related careers that contain an allegorical structure, complete with a outcome or
“lesson” that transfers from the microcosmic moment to more continuous narratives.
Many stories about Murray were repeated like folk tales from subject to subject; the same
story was often told by two subjects who were not familiar with each other. Their own
experience with the life of Murray is told by an amalgam of their own interaction with
him by observation, his personal recounts of experience, and his text, which explains why
the subjects often revealed their lack of memory of where this or that anecdote was
derived. James Clifford argues that through allegory “any story has a propensity to
generate another story in the mind of its reader (or hearer) to repeat and displace some
prior story.” which could also describe the exercise of the researcher in seeing or hearing
an acute, single event-based story and making connections to its place in a greater
narrative.\textsuperscript{64} The study also collects accounts of subjects removed from Murray by one or
two levels of influence, perhaps by experiencing what originally came from Murray
through another individual (for example, Murray helped indoctrinate the practices and
ideology of the Poynter Institute, which Roy Peter Clark then mixed with his own ideas
and further disseminated). The purpose of including such secondary connections is to
explain how influence and discourse expands and evolves.

\textit{A Positive Dichotomy}

The study provides an interesting paradox by juxtaposing two techniques of study
that carry, on one level, an inverse relationship: biography, which focuses on the role of
the individual in a society, and ethnography, which focuses on the role of a group or

\textsuperscript{64} Clifford, “Allegory,” 1986: 100
culture in a society and is “potentially counter-hegemonic” or subversive toward individual presentations of history.\textsuperscript{65} However, combining these elements to create a biographical narrative that carries with it a dialogue and exchange of subjective accounts will allow for a worthwhile presentation of details and insight. The study then displays a recursive effect by constantly returning to the interviews to anecdotally discuss the nature of the events in the chronology. The structure permits discussion of a group’s role in a society, which better provides context for an individual in the group. Likewise, Murray’s individual narrative informs the histories of the writing cultures he influenced. The study demonstrates how an individual exists in relationship to a group.

**Interview Selection and Method**

The method used to select the interviewees was a process of discovery. The researcher contacted individuals based on either the use or prevalence of their name in a text by Murray, a recommendation from another subject, or the discovery that they purposefully attended an event that explicitly dealt with Murray or his work. The latter includes the three “Don Murray Colloquiums” held in St. Petersburg, Florida, which included workshops and lectures and allowed participants to view Murray’s daybooks. The response rate was varied, the most likely causes for lack of response being the sole availability of an e-mail or contact that was outdated and inability to track the individual, or their non-complacency in the interview due to personal reasons or time constraints. Some individuals such as Murray’s close friend Don Graves, fellow UNH professor and scholar of the application of the writing process on primary school-age children could not

\textsuperscript{65} Clifford, “Introduction,” 1986: 9
be interviewed due to illness. Other reasons included lack of time or presence in the United States or a wish to keep their contact information very private, thus making themselves very inaccessible to the writer of this thesis. An attempt was made to find critics of Murray and his approach, and some criticisms are highlighted toward the end of the study. However, criticisms of Murray may also be truncated because of what this author finds as a lack of radicalism in his approach. Murray was making no grandiose theoretical statements, but predominantly rearticulating practical, common sense notions. He is regarded as a practitioner and practical approach thinker, not as an abstract theorist. Thus, individual accounts would generally fall into categories of praise, indifference, or ignorance to Murray and his work. Finally, a key critic of Murray, James Berlin, passed away in 1994 at the age of fifty-seven.

The interviews represent a kind of hypothesizing and experimenting on the part of the author of this thesis. Some of the researcher’s hypotheses concerning the relationship between Murray and the subject proved incorrect. For example, though Ben Yagoda— instructor, journalist, author of books on writing, and professor at the University of Delaware—attended the first Don Murray Colloquium at the Poynter Institute, his only memory of Murray was that “he was a very nice man.” “But that’s hardly original,” Yagoda added. “I don’t remember any of the specifics of the conference. He gave some of his beliefs in writing. The most famous is probably write a little every day, and he had a Latin quote about that. That’s all I remember.”

A flexible standard was created for the questions asked of each participant in the study. Interviewees were first generally given an open-ended moment to pontificate at

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66 Yagoda, Ben, Interview with author (phone), 1 April 1 2010
their discretion their self-identified relationship with Murray or his work and any relevant stories or experiences that initially came to mind in regard to this topic. Interviewees were then asked questions related to their own area of profession or study, and whether they felt such practice was influenced or informed by Murray. The researcher then generally outlined a brief explanation of writing culture and asked whether the subject felt that Murray was part of a writing culture. This was an explicit way of referring to the theoretical and methodological approach of the thesis, and it was proven effective more times than not. Following this, subjects were questioned as to whether they felt a like-mindedness among current practitioners in their area of work Wayne Worcester of the University of Connecticut warned, “You could spend a long time talking to the people Don had a serious effect on.”67 This may be very true. Not all, but a substantive sampling, of those individuals will be represented by this account.

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67 Worcester, Wayne. Interview with author (phone), 18 Feb. 2010
Chapter 4
Donald Murray: Life, Influence, and Writing Cultures

Early Years

Donald Morison Murray was born in Boston, Massachusetts on September 16, 1924. In fourth grade, his teacher appointed him the editor of his class newspaper. At age 15, he worked a morning, evening and Sunday newspaper route. In 1941, age 17, he dropped out of high school to work with Hearst papers, including the morning paper, the Boston Record, and the evening Boston American on the display desk of the advertising department. Murray’s father raised his son with a positive regard for the military:

My father missed his war. He felt he had lost something important on the road to manliness when he couldn’t enlist in 1917, and he communicated his sense of anxiety to me. He would sing, “Tenting tonight, tenting tonight, tenting on the old campground” as a lullaby; crank up Sousa on the Victrola; march on Sunday afternoon walks – hup, two, three, four.

I was brought up on a muscular, male, military religion. The pipe organ made noises like a marching band during “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” and I dreamt of enlisting with the Onward Christian Soldiers marching as to war.

Don Murray the son tried to join the Marines, Navy, and Army after Pearl Harbor and was rejected by all three. He tried to go back to school, only to flunk out. He was recruited by Tilton School, where he received a varsity football scholarship. He was appointed to a dormitory floor supervisor position and edited the Tilton School newspaper. After one year of college-level coursework at the Tilton Junior College, he was drafted into the Army—only two years after he was rejected from volunteering.

68 Author’s note: biographical data not otherwise cited are derived from Poynter Institute Library’s guide to the Don Murray Collection, by Jean Wood and David Shedden, St. Petersburg, FL.
Before he left, he met Ellen Pinkham, who would become his first wife. Murray went to Norwich University for Army Specialized Training. As a paratrooper of the 17th Airborne Division, he witnessed the Battle of the Bulge and the Rhine Crossing into Germany. In 1945, he returned home to march in the Victory Parade with the 82nd Airborne in New York City.

As soon as Murray was discharged from the Army in 1946, he returned to marry Ellen Pinkham. In the same year, he started school at the University of New Hampshire – a school where Murray would grow as a student and teacher for the rest of his life. Murray graduated Cum Laude from New Hampshire in 1948 and started working as a copy boy for *The Boston Herald*. Only two years into their marriage, Murray and Ellen Pinkham divorced. Murray characterized the marriage as a decision motivated by wartime practice, not a wise move for love. Murray was promoted to general assignment reporter for the *Herald*.

On February 13, 1951, Murray met his future wife, Minnie Mae Emmerich, on a blind date. Born in Henderson, Kentucky, Minnie Mae was a “gifted mezzo-soprano” who performed in Washington, D.C., where she worked as a secretary for an advisor to the Secretary of War during World War II. She moved to Boston to work for Raytheon Co., in Waltham and sang in Boston and Cambridge churches. Murray and Minnie Mae married ten months after their first date.70

Murray became a part-time instructor at Boston University, a post he held from 1952 to 1954. He started graduate school there, but never completed the degree, to which he later said, “[I] refused to allow my advisor to change the facts and the conclusions in

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70 Long, Tom, “Minnie Mae Murray; her love, humor was infused in column,” *Boston Globe* (9 February 2005)
my master’s thesis and put his name on it so I do not have a master’s degree.”71 In 1953 he attended the American Press Institute of Columbia University. The same year, Don and Minnie Mae’s first child, Ann, was born.

The Pulitzer Effect

Perhaps Murray’s career successes, in part, spiraled out from his unexpected awarding of the Pulitzer Prize in 1954, for the editorial columns he published in The Boston Herald a year prior. At the age of twenty-nine, Murray was the youngest person to ever win the Pulitzer Prize in this category.72 Chip Scanlan considered the impact of this event for Murray:

I sometimes wonder what would have happened to him if he hadn't won the Pulitzer Prize. He didn't even know he was entered in it. That was the way he was in those days. I think he got a promotion or a raise, and I think Time came after him and recruited him.73

The one hundred editorial columns Murray wrote for The Boston Herald in 1953 to receive the Pulitzer Prize in 1954 was the largest entry ever submitted for the award.74 The editorials discussed problems with American national defense during the Cold War, which “voiced his newspaper’s alarm at cuts in the nation’s defense budget,” the New York Times reported, noting that his writing represents “an abrupt, incisive style, each sentence an unadorned fact.”75 Murray’s editorials were “credible enough to be cited in

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71 Bizzaro, Patrick, “The Writer Who Taught Writing,” Writing on the Edge 17.2 (Spring 2007), 17
73 Scanlan Interview
74 Sloan 2007: 127
congressional debates.” Murray began publishing in *The Saturday Evening Post* a month after winning the Pulitzer. On the day he was called about the award, his first article for the *Saturday Evening Post* was published, where he continued to freelance fiction and non-fiction alike. Later, a *Post* front-of-book section published a brief on Murray that jabs, “On page 28 is Murray’s third *Post* job, but he has got to stop expecting a prize with each story.”

On September 16, 1953, Nelson Poynter sent Murray a letter offering him a job with one of his own publications:

I have heard you spoken of favorably as one of the best young editorial writers in the country. I am wondering if you would be interested in either one of the enclosed jobs which I am advertising this week in *Editor & Publisher*.

The Washington job is for Congressional Quarterly News Features, which Mrs. Poynter and I founded, and are the owner and editor, in addition to owning this newspaper and WTSP (AM-FM).

The other job is on the editorial page of this newspaper.

Murray declined.

That fall, he began working as a contributing editor for *Time*. He brought the family to New Jersey. At the magazine, he wrote over three hundred articles. “As Don said, he was not a *Time* man,” Chip Scanlan noted, based on his conversations with Murray about his work at *Time*. “He wasn't Ivy League. He didn't like three martini lunches, which were standard fare.” In March 1956, *Time* asked him to move into the television department and start working as a producer. He said no and was fired. Murray

76 Sloan 2007: 127
77 “OH, WHAT A DAY!” *Saturday Evening Post*, 227.50 (11 June 1955), 164.
78 Poynter, Nelson, to Donald Murray, St. Petersburg, FL (16 September 1953) in Special Collections, St. Petersburg, FL.
79 Murray, Donald M., Personal Resume (Unpublished), February 1990, in Poynter Institute Special Collections, St. Petersburg, FL.
80 Scanlan Interview
began a long career as a freelance writer. “The choices narrowed. I wanted to write high art but my children, wife, and I wanted to eat,” he wrote in his *Globe* column in 2006. “I had to turn in drafts that I thought were inadequate. I had no Keogh [retirement] plan, no medical program.”

**Freelancing and Ghostwriting**

Murray’s first published freelance article, the snarky “I was a Nay,” printed in the *Rotarian*, ran in April of 1954. According to Murray’s account, Minnie Mae dug it out of the trash and submitted it for her husband.

In 1958 he assisted business writer Charles Hutchison Clark to publish a book about opportunistic thinking called *Brainstorming*, a work that was published in French, German, and Japanese. Clark cites Murray at the end of the acknowledgments: "Last, a word of thanks to Don Murray for his invaluable writing and editorial assistance" (8).

The primary issue of the book is how to use brainstorming ideas to create success in finance and business. The book's language is so similar to what would become Murray's style (even the style of his books geared toward children): the invocation of second person in the introduction of a topic, for example. From the first lines of Chapter 1, "The Difference an Idea Makes":

You know the difference an idea makes. You may not realize it, but if you look about you where you work, in a large office, on an assembly line, in the government, on a salesman's beat, in a small store, in a laboratory, in the shipping room or the executive suite, you will see the difference an idea makes...You will see it in your home and other homes, in the family

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which does things, in your church and lodge, in your political party, in your government. The one quality which turns the ordinary into the extraordinary is ideas.  

Passages often open with brief, conclusive, and easily digestible metaphors about a process, for example:

Brainstorming is a husky, lusty young man with lots of drive. He will survive and produce dozens of new ideas under the most adverse conditions. He will break out of the chains of convention, conservatism, and just plain sluggishness. He can spark new ideas in every sort of area, in church and laboratories, executive suites and machinist shops. He is an extremely hardy young animal. But there is one way to kill him. That is to fit him in a strait jacket.

While Murray continued to freelance, their second daughter, Hannah, was born.


Murray printed the first novel under his own name, *The Man Who Had Everything*, with New American Library (hardcover) in 1964. It received British and Portuguese Editions, and a paperback from Signet Books in 1965. Murray continued to freelance in order to bring enough money home to the family and fulfill his dreams of being a member of the middle class. He wrote a book on sound recording, *The World of Sound Recording* (Lippincott 1965). The work is peculiar as a guide to recording, invoking a highly personal tone that contemplates the sensual joy of sound amid technical language. The following is an excerpt from the first chapter, "Seeing with Your Ears":

Man's hunger to hear another voice and understand it is more basic than his need for red meat or a cover at night. Men who are placed in a solitary...

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84 Ibid, 69
85 Murray had previously published a novel called *The Sensation* (Signet 1963) under the pseudonym Ian Morison
prison cell or wander lost in a wilderness talk to themselves, trying to save their sanity.\textsuperscript{86}

These books represent the style Murray would later place in his books on writing and craft, and interestingly show attitudes and discourses toward brainstorming and sound similar to Murray’s way of talking about the power of words. They also demonstrate a start in writing for the sake of sustaining a middle class lifestyle, which evolved into the ability to write books out of pure interest and joy in the subject, increasingly afforded to Murray as his resume bulked.

**Professor Murray**

Murray was recruited in 1963 to become an Assistant Professor of English at the University of New Hampshire. Once there, he established their journalism program. Thomas Newkirk was a student at New Hampshire, and took a basic newswriting class taught by Murray. “At first, I thought he was a tough, no-nonsense newspaper guy,” said Newkirk. “He taught the inverted pyramid and basic techniques. He was very directive. There was no discussion” (Newkirk Interview). But Murray’s attitude in his courses changed over time. It took five to seven years, according to Newkirk, for him to develop an emphasis on process and revision (Newkirk Interview).

Murray became Associate Professor in 1965. He also began serving as a member of the New England School Development Council (NESDEC), a private, non-profit organization founded in 1946 by the Harvard Graduate School of Education that serves over three-hundred school districts and designs programs for professional development

\textsuperscript{86} Murray, Donald M., *The World of Sound Recording*, (New York: J.B. Lippincott Company), 1965
and curriculum planning. He went on to become director of Project Write, part of NESDEC’s summer programs at Bowdoin College. In 1965, Murray was requested by the administrators of the NESDEC to produce “a new approach to the old problem of teaching writing to a large number of students.” Murray had been teaching his own writing course for English Education majors at the University of New Hampshire. There, “he had isolated and defined the steps followed by most effective writers—businessmen and poets, scientists and journalists—and then made his students experience the process of writing as followed by most professionals.” Murray presented his approach to a panel of secondary school teachers, then again after turning the approach into a book. The book received three more drafts, then was disseminated to a large body of readers:

At the beginning of the school year in September 1966 the third draft of the book was read by more than a thousand English teachers, college students who planned to become English teachers, writers, college professors, and public school administration. The approach, in one form or another, was tried in hundreds of classrooms.

This book became Murray’s first book on writing. Published in 1968, A Writer Teaches Writing, with Houghton Mifflin, is regarded as a seminal publication of the writing process movement. He would later publish A Writer Teaches Writing: A Complete Revision (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) in 1985, a completely rewritten edition of the book that borrowed not one line from the first. The Complete Revision would receive a further revised edition in 2003 (Wadsworth). In 1968, Murray was also given a full professorship position with the University of New Hampshire. Now with a full-fledged

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87 NESDEC.org
88 Murray, Donald M., A Writer Teaches Writing (Boston:Houghton Mifflin 1968). xi
89 Ibid
90 Ibid
91 Murray Personal Resume
interest in discussing the process of writing in published texts, Murray also published his first magazine article about writing, titled “The Explorers of Inner Space,” which appeared in *Dial*. More would follow.

From 1972-74, Murray worked as the Director of the National Council of Teachers of English. Murray published as a book a program for elementary students grades three to five, *Write to Communicate: The Language Arts in Progress*, which was printed by Reader’s Digest Educational Division, who also sponsored *A Writer Teaches Writing* in 1968. Murray was disseminating his work to a large audience of teachers, students, and education majors,

During the last years of the sixties, Murray also taught a student named Wayne Worcester, now a professor at the University of Connecticut. When Worcester met Murray, he had already flunked out of his first year of school. He heard about Murray and decided to introduce himself. “I walked in…and said, ‘Listen, I’m going to be out of school for a year because that’s what’s required,’” recounted Worcester, “but I’m going to come back and take journalism. Is there anything I can do in the meantime?” Murray asked Worcester where he was going. Worcester was going to work in a factory in a small Massachusetts town. “Well write about working in the factories.” Murray instructed, “There’s plenty to work with.”¹⁹² Worcester recalled his initial respect for Murray as his professor and mentor:

For the first time in my life there was someone there regardless of my academic past who said you may have a talent, someone who paid attention. He was a very likeable man—a big bear of a fellow. He encouraged me. When I came back to school I became a good student.⁹³

¹⁹² Worcester Interview
⁹³ Ibid
Worcester was further interested in journalism and Murray’s work thanks to the “backdrop” of the era, the late sixties and early seventies, its “tumult and seriousness,” and experiments in journalistic writing:

He’d bring things into class. Willie Morris was the editor of *Harper’s* at the time... *Rolling Stone* was the new [thing]. Hunter Thompson was on the scene. All the rules were being challenged. *New York* magazine burst into public consciousness and was publishing some great stuff... We all know about the legendary excesses of New Journalism, but also the successes. In the middle of it, you had this marvelous man who was an extraordinarily skilled and an absolutely gifted teacher who made you want to please him.  

Worcester left the University of New Hampshire to lead a successful career as a journalist and professor. He was admitted to Columbia University’s graduate program in journalism with a substantial scholarship. He attended Columbia and enrolled in the notoriously difficult reporting class of Melvin Mencher, author of *News Reporting and Writing* (McGraw-Hill), which will soon receive its twelfth edition. “Mel’s much rougher than Don,” Worcester explained. “You put the two of them together and, outside of anyone who came from Missouri; they’ve got most of the working journalists covered. Mel was terrific and no-nonsense.”

Worcester looked to model his career after Murray. “[Murray] was the first person I met that I could say, ‘Son of a bitch. This man is having a good time, and he’s doing really good things. If I had my way, I would like to be in that kind of a position,” said Worcester. “Low and behold, I have been.” Worcester worked for *The Providence Journal-Bulletin* for most of the years between 1971 and 1981. Murray was the writing
coach in Providence during Worcester’s last two years. The Journal proved to be its own curious culture:

We had a great time [at the Journal]. It was exciting. I felt as though I’d gone from Don Murray’s class to a newspaper that was also a huge classroom. Number one it was in Rhode Island. I don’t know if you know Rhode Island, but Rhode Island is sort of like a theme park for reporters. It was just a wonderful place for a reporter to work. There was a little bit of everything, you never knew what the hell to expect. One day it’s a murder and the next day it’s political chicanery. Another it’s a feature, and in those days Rhode Island was the seat of organized crime in New England. Just added to the fun of everything. We were encouraged to try to break the mold and do things differently. Those places are rare indeed.97

In 1987 he was hired to the University of Connecticut to teach journalism and continue to write for various city and national publications. He has also written two novels and co-written a reference book for journalists, The Essential Researcher (Collins Reference, 1993). “I’ve been balancing the two (teaching and writing journalism) and mimicking Don’s lifestyle—in my own feeble way,” said Worcester. Murray had a strong influence on Worcester’s teaching style. Worcester revised Murray’s ideas with his own style of rhetoric: “[Murray] said, but never said flatly, ‘Listen, the Muse is a whore. If you sit around and ask her for a date you have a long wait’ He never said it that flatly, which I do.”98 Worcester represents an individual who was influenced by Murray both in his journalism and in his teaching, a notion accounted by others who have late in their careers left newspapers to become instructors of journalism and writing.

Kevin Sullivan, a reporter and editor for The Washington Post and winner of the Pulitzer Prize, was a student of Murray’s at the University of New Hampshire. Sullivan and his wife and co-writer Mary Jordan won the Pulitzer for international reporting

97 Ibid
98 Ibid
conducted in Mexico for the Post. Sullivan and Jordan also authored the book *The Prison Angel: Mother Antonia's Journey from Beverly Hills to a Life of Service in a Mexican Jail* (Penguin Books 2006). Sullivan graduated from the University of New Hampshire in 1981. “In the big picture [Murray] is the reason I am in journalism period,” said Sullivan. He met Murray in an introductory journalism course, where Murray gave them their first assignment: find a news story and type it up by the end of the fifty-minute period. Sullivan found a janitor, asked him a few questions, typed something up on a typewriter, and handed in his story. “I remember walking in the first day; there was Don sitting in his desk with a white beard and a flannel shirt sort of like a Santa character,” said Sullivan. “When we came back we started going through these papers, saying what we liked and what we didn’t like and what he thought about it. I would never look back. I will never forget the way he taught.” The woman sitting next to him that day was Jackie MacMullan, sportswriter, was has been a former columnist and associate editor for *The Boston Globe, Sports Illustrated* senior writer, a common television commentator on ESPN and other sports networks, and a book author.

Sullivan characterizes Murray as the center of a kind of culture at the University of New Hampshire. “Everybody loved Andy Merton,” Sullivan explained. “And there’s a guy called Ron Winslow—he’s great too. He worked there. All those inspired students, but I would say that Don is kind of the patron saint of that program. He’s the one who inspired everybody.” After Sullivan graduated, he and Murray continued to correspond by phone and email. He believed Don had an influence on the way he wrote:

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99 Sullivan, Kevin, Interview with author (phone), 15 March 2010
100 Ibid
101 Ibid
I always remember Don saying, “You can measure the power of what you’re writing by the power of what you’ve cut out, what’s on the floor. If you’re trimming out important stuff from your piece that means there is even more important stuff still in it…Don did an exercise where he gave us all these long and wordy sentences about Jesus crying. Then he eventually gave us the real text, “Jesus wept ,” which is so much more effective. I’m an editor here (The Washington Post). I do the Jesus wept edit on all kinds of content.102

In 2003, Sullivan was a keynote speaker at a reunion for journalism students at UNH.

Sullivan and his wife had won the Pulitzer that year:

It was great because Don was clearly getting older, and I wasn’t getting up to UNH very often. I hadn’t seen him in a couple years and was afraid I’d never see him again. I got to stand up in front of three or four hundred people, dedicate my half of the Pulitzer to Don, and say that he was the reason I was in journalism and that it was his prize. It was a great moment. He was kind of in the back waving me off, like “Ah shut up.” It was a great moment.103

This is selection of evidence demonstrates that Murray created an interest in the practice of writing that spread not only among his peer professors but among his students, who he quickly treated as peers, as another student and later instructor at UNH, Ron Winslow, deputy bureau chief of health and science for The Wall Street Journal and founding board member of the Association of Health Care Journalists, noted:

I think his fundamental effect on me and on other people was that he recognized people right away as part of a community of writers, a community of journalists…I mean there was certainly a dynamic there that was traditional, but you were quite quickly considered a fellow writer. There’s something inspiring about that and confidence building about it. It makes you think you could do things that you couldn’t do or didn’t think you could do or didn’t know you could do.104

Winslow attended UNH in the late sixties. He had been working at the campus radio station, and enrolled in a class with Murray. “It was pretty much serendipity,” said

102 Ibid
103 Ibid
104 Winslow, Ron, Interview with author (recorded audio), 24 March 2010, New York, NY
Winslow. “I had no real prior knowledge of who he was. I just saw a journalism course in a catalog and went to talk to him. He let me in and for better, and not too much worse, I was a journalist from pretty much that day on.” Murray had his students rewrite leads for *New York Times* articles. The students soon discovered they could sometimes do it better. “You’re taking the best in the business, looking at their words, rewriting it, and coming up with something that’s good,” he explained. “There was this immediate recognition. There was a way in, a belief that you could do it.” After working as a reporter, partly for *The Providence Journal*, Winslow returned to work as a professor of Journalism at UNH in 1973. He joined a group of academics who met regularly to discuss their work:

> We had this thing called the writing process, which was people from composition, people from journalism, and people from education. One of the people was Don Graves, who I am sure you have heard about... So we had this group, and we would each meet every week and share drafts and stuff there. Usually I think we’d rotate. Usually you’d get lots of graduate students in there or people who were graduate students who were also teaching in the composition program teaching undergraduates, plus these other folks who were sort of multidisciplinary. It was from an academic perspective.

> Winslow had been co-writing a non-fiction book about a woman who was hypnotized into having her husband murdered (*Open and Shut*, Norton, 1981). He shared much of the book with the writing process group. He was invited to give a reading and presentation on his work. “They’re all really into this sort of very arcane academic stuff. And I talked about this, and they loved it! They were eating it up. I don’t know exactly what it was, but there was some way that that sort of crossed this bridge.” Though he

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105 Ibid  
106 Ibid  
107 Ibid
enjoyed the job and his company of peers ("Thomas Williams was there when I was there. They had [Ted] Weesner, John Yount. That was an incredible lineup. And Mekeel McBride was still there.").), he felt a nostalgia for newspaper reporting on deadline. He left in the spring of 1983, when lunch with a former colleague the Journal resulted in an unexpected opportunity to reenter the daily journalism world.

Unexpected Death, New Colleagues

Murray was appointed chairperson of the faculty at the UNH from 1974-75 and English Department Chairperson from 1975-77. In 1977, Murray’s second and middle daughter, Lee, died unexpectedly at the age of twenty, from a rare disease called Reye’s Syndrome, characterized by a swelling of the brain, organ damage, and in twenty percent of cases—like Lee’s—coma followed by death. When no hope remained, Don and Minnie Mae had to give the word to allow Lee to be taken off life support. Her death became an important event both in Murray’s personal life and his writing career. He often talked about its impact, in his columns, talks, and books, and decades later wrote his memoir, The Lively Shadow, which focuses on the ways in which he coped with her passing.

The same year as Lee’s death, Murray met Thomas Newkirk, who had flown in for a job interview. Murray was on the selecting committee that hired Newkirk at UNH. Newkirk had just received his Ph.D. in rhetoric from the University of Texas in Austin. At the time there was little composition work at the Ph.D. level. “It was a transitional

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108 Ibid
time,” said Newirk. “Two to three years later you would have had Ph.D. programs.”

The University of New Hampshire “wanted somebody who was interested in writing, and realized they might not get that from an English Ph.D.” Because he was in a rhetoric program, whose only available composition study was in “classical rhetoric,” Newkirk wasn’t familiar with Murray:

When I got in they said, “You’ll be having lunch with Don Murray.” The fabulous Texas library didn’t even have a copy of A Writer Teaches Writing. Don was impressed how much I knew when I got there, but it was all on the plane. It was a different world back then. There wasn’t much out there. Composition wasn’t a field. A senior faculty came up and said, “I don’t think this job should exist. I think it could be handled by current faculty.”

Shortly thereafter, the writing process “became something you could investigate,” said Newkirk. “Composition was trying to find the way you can build a research foundation.” Newkirk quickly bore witness to Murray’s writing and process approach.

“For me witnessing his process helped me see how you could take on a longer project and work at it,” Newkirk said. “We all had these myths about super smart people who write books. But I watched him just go at it. He wrote every day, just cumulatively.”

Newkirk recalled an experience in which he realized the extent of Murray’s influence around town in Durham, New Hampshire:

One time he was giving a reading at this bookstore. I got there about ten minutes before it was about to start and the room was packed. I had this moment of irritation. I thought, “I’m his neighbor and I’m not even getting a seat at this damn reading.” Then I looked in the room and thought every person in this room had the same kind of relationship I had with him. He had the ability to seek people out when they needed support or guidance. It

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109 Newkirk Interview
110 Ibid
111 Ibid
112 Ibid
113 Ibid
might just be like coffee at The Bagelry once or twice. He had an understanding of when people needed to be stabilized, encouraged, or prompted. Then it might fade out, but people remember that moment. He had a really powerful effect on a personal level for a lot of people.\footnote{114}

Murray edited a column, “The English Journal,” for the National Council of Teachers of English for over two years, 1979-80. He was also the keynote speaker for a three-day seminar with the Mid-American Press Institute in Cincinnati, Ohio. There, current Miami University-Ohio professor was covering the event for an article in Editor and Publisher magazine. At the time, he was finishing his final year as a Ph.D. student in history and instructor of journalism at Southern Illinois University. He had left a career as a practicing journalist, predominantly with the Associated Press, for his doctorate.\footnote{115} He was struggling with his dissertation. Morgan met Murray, and encountered an unexpectedly seminal moment:

Here he was – this giant of a man sitting next to me on a backless cloth-covered bench at a hotel in downtown Cincinnati -- just passing the time. I asked him for a few details to fill out my notes and then he inquired as to how I was doing. I explained I had left my career with the Associated Press six years earlier to get a doctorate and to learn to teach. I said my time at SIU would end after a brief summer semester and that I had not obtained a job. I explained I was having trouble with my dissertation.

He knew I was frustrated and hoping for a better summer. Instead of reassuring me or giving advice to a person he did not know, Don Murray instead told me about the death of his daughter at the age of 20. He explained that he and his wife planned to spend the summer at the daughter’s house – where her spirit dwelled. He quietly pointed out that the search was not for an apparition, but to feel her presence by living where she had spent her last days.

Here he was – a World War II paratrooper who won a Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing at a Boston newspaper later in the 1940s and then went on to become a master teacher of writing at the University of

\footnote{114} Ibid
\footnote{115} Morgan on an AP job, and Murray: “I once interviewed Dr. King when he was booed and screamed at in Gross Point Michigan when I worked for the AP. King could have been mad and said, “How dare you say that! I won the Nobel Peace Prize!” Some Nazis got on stage and screamed at him. But he had such humanity. Likewise did Murray” (Morgan Interview).
New Hampshire. Here he was – opening himself up and showing his fragility and awe of life to a person he had just met.

When we parted, I felt refreshed, but somehow I didn’t know why. I just felt good.\textsuperscript{116}

Morgan explained that he developed a connection with Murray that was later enacted through further encounters with him, particularly with the faculty of Miami University—“sentence combiner” (as will later be discussed) Donald Daiker, Tom Romano, and Hugh Morgan, among others—who brought him in to speak. The two were never friends,

Morgan said, like some were, such as Murray and Romano. But he described coming to know Murray as a “discovery of self” and said “I think I knew Don Murray before I knew who he was.” Morgan believed Murray had a settling effect, a way of placing confidence in the writer or student. “I said that Don Murray basically was a Taoist,” Morgan said.

“The way of life of Lao Tzu. I came home and opened it up to the first poem there. It tells who Murray is. It’s poem 49 (of \textit{Tao Te Ching}). ‘The wise man’s mind is free, but tuned to people’s need.’”\textsuperscript{117}

Morgan borrowed many of Murray’s key teaching techniques, particularly the use of one-on-one conferences and portfolio grading, in which the student is allowed to progressively edit a draft as many times as necessary before receiving their final grade at the end of the class. He recalled a conversation with faculty at Miami University:

We once had an argument in the English department about grades. I said, “Who is the better teacher: the one who just grades their papers once and grades them up and down, or the one who gives them a chance to rewrite?” They said the latter. I said, “Then that gives them higher grades.”\textsuperscript{118}

\textsuperscript{116} Morgan, Hugh, “1,” Unpublished account of Donald Murray sent to author of this study
\textsuperscript{117} Morgan, Hugh, Interview with author (phone), 12 March 2010
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid
Christine Farris (1996), in *Subject to Change*, records college-level composition instructors’ practice of using Murray in their teaching. The instructors were from the University of the Northwest and taught with Murray at the focus of their syllabi. Farris cites their response to Murray’s text, its effectiveness, and how it is manipulated in the classroom using a variety of case studies. One instructor, Heather Ewing, “felt that Murray’s method ‘gets overpowered’ as soon as instructors go against Murray’s grain and give students ‘closed’ assignments.”119 In her conclusions section, Farris articulates Murray’s openness in instructive theory, and how it may come in conflict with more restrictive modes of instruction. “Conflicts may arise for both teachers and students when program requirements are not consistent with the pedagogical thrust of the textbook in use,” Farris observes. “Although Murray’s textbook emphasizes continuous revision of ‘open’ topics for student writing, the program’s requirements specified eight distinct graded products in a 10-week period, leaving little to no time for meaningful revision facilitated by instructors.”120 In a first person account published in *College Composition and Communication* in February 1988, Chris Madigan of the University of New Mexico talks of his employment of “Responsive Teaching,” a method proposed by Murray in *Learning by Teaching* (1982). “The writer follows language toward an evolving meaning, and the teacher follows the writer following the language,” Madigan summates of the practice.121 The student and teacher perpetually respond to each other’s rational and

119 Farris, Christine, *Subject to Change: New Composition Instructor’s Theory and Practice* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1996), 86
120 Ibid, 169
121 Madigan, Chris, “Applying Donald Murray’s ‘Responsive Teaching,’” *College Composition and Communication* 39 (Feb. 1938), 74-75
emotional reactions to the product and process of a text. Though he says the process may make some students and teachers uncomfortable, it has its benefits:

Students and I enjoy a far greater range of response. Responsive Teaching depends on face-to-face contact, verbal and nonverbal cues. I can hear the boredom behind a half-hearted ‘I liked my topic’ and address that…Responsive Teaching puts the primary responsibility for improving writing where it belongs—on the writers.  

In Murray’s lifetime, eight editions of Write to Learn (originally published in 1984) and five editions of The Craft of Revision (originally published in 1991) were published. In these books, Murray uses personal experience to drive suggestions for educational methods. In Write to Learn, Murray proposes his idea of the daybook, a word he finds more appropriate for its use than notebook or journal. The daybook again demonstrates Murray’s assertion that a writer is a writer and should not necessarily be bound by genre or compartmentalized from their consciousness. In Writing for Your Readers, where he calls about his experience and the experiences of others at The Boston Globe in 1983, Murray reiterates his writer-centric mantra:

A good way to get new ideas is too look at the world through the lens of another form of writing. If you’ve been writing profiles it may be good for you to write a straight news account or an editorial about something in your territory.”

He suggests writers always have a book at the ready, “at least one book in the briefcase or on the bed table outside your everyday interests.” His recommended reading books include “any book of poetry by Charles Simic” and Freeman Patterson’s Photography and the Art of Seeing. Murray often spoke with high regard for the poetry of Charles Simic, a national poet laureate who taught in the University of New Hampshire’s English

122 Ibid 77
123 Murray, Donald M, Writing for Your Readers 1st ed. (Chester, CT: Globe Pequot Press, 1983), 26
124 Ibid
Department during Murray’s tenure. Murray’s messages were not intended as absolutes but as suggestive comment to loosen rigid attitudes toward construction. They operate under a democratic assumption of capability, merely providing suggestions based on subjective experience.

In 1981, Carol Berkenkotter met Murray at that year’s 4 C’s conference in Dallas, where she asked him to participate in a study in which she would monitor and describe his own process:

On the spur of the moment I asked him if he would be willing to be the subject of a naturalistic study. He hesitated, took a deep breath, then said he was very interested in understanding his own composing processes, and would like to learn more. Out of that brief exchange a unique collaborative research venture was conceived. 125

In in “Decisions and Revisions: The Planning Strategies of a Publishing Writer,” she describes Murray as a very process-heavy writer who writes several drafts and practices his own brand of efficiency:

Unlike most writers who hand draft or type, Mr. Murray spends much time making copious notes in a daybook, then dictates his drafts and partial drafts to his wife, who is an accomplished typist and partner in his work. Later, he reads aloud and edits the drafts. If he determines that copy-editing (i.e., making stylistic changes in the text) is insufficient, he returns to the daybook, makes further notes, and prepares for the next dictation. The revision of one of the articles he was working on went through eight drafts before he sent it off. Two days later he sent the editor an insert. 126

Murray wrote his books out of his own experiences. Scanlan noted that Murray’s primary subject was himself:

Don always said, you know, he wasn't a reporter…he told me he was going to do a piece on the Pentagon and on the way he had to stop and

126 Ibid, 130
throw up he was so anxious. His subject was himself. He did not either feel the need or the interest to doing reporting.\textsuperscript{127}

However, Murray did enjoy working with reporters reporting, and did so to a positive effect.

\textbf{Murray as a Writing Coach}

In 1980 Murray started as a Writing Coach at \textit{The Boston Globe}. Between 1980 and 1984, \textit{The Boston Globe} received five Pulitzer Prizes in writing-based categories.\textsuperscript{128} Jack Driscoll, then managing editor of the Evening, Daily, and Sunday \textit{Globe} (then Executive Editor in 1982, then Editor from 1987 until his retirement in 1994) hired him to the position.\textsuperscript{129} Murray had invited Driscoll to talk to one of his classes. Driscoll shared a story of Murray’s first day, which has also been retold in print:

\begin{quote}
He had not been in the \textit{Globe} building, so he came in on the first day and walked across the newsroom to my office, which was in the corner. So that meant he had to walk through the newsroom. When he got to my office he said, “I know who your three best writers are.” My head went up and I said, “Oh?” so he pointed out three writers in the newsroom. I forget who two of them were, but I remember one of them was Ellen Goodman, nationally syndicated columnist. I said how do you know they are the best writers. He said because their lips move when they write.\textsuperscript{130}
\end{quote}

That event began a relationship between Driscoll and Murray that would last to the end of Murray’s life. “That later became a personal relationship after he retired,” said Driscoll. “We pretty much went for lunch…every couple of weeks.”\textsuperscript{131} Chip Scanlan also recounted hearing this story of Don’s first day at the \textit{Globe}, saying “It was one of those

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\textsuperscript{127} Scanlan Interview
\textsuperscript{129} http://web.media.mit.edu/~driscoll/bio.php
\textsuperscript{130} Driscoll, Jack, Interview with author (phone), 8 April 2010
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid
\end{flushright}
things where Don would write or say things that I thought couldn't be, but every time I plumbed deeper or asked other people about it I found that it indeed was true.”

Murray led a regular seminar, which generally held to a specific theme. “It was more of a writing exercise than a lecturing kind of thing,” recounted Driscoll. “That’s really what his style was. He would get people writing right away. And he would write along with them.” After every member of the staff had participated, the seminars began to function increasingly on a volunteer basis. Interestingly, Driscoll observed that the best writers were the ones who attended the seminars regularly. “The better writers couldn’t get enough,” he said. Murray wrote a series of newsletters in which he praised good writing and reporting. He eventually turned the newsletters into an in-house book publication, *The Writer in the Newsroom* (Globe Pequot Press 1992), meant to encourage the writers to continue paying more speculative attention to their work.

In 1980 *The Providence Journal-Bulletin* also recruited Murray to work as a writing coach. A Journal reporter, Carol McCabe, had won a *Best Newspaper Writing* prize in the second year of the competition and took a workshop from Murray at the Poynter Institute. She came back from Florida raving about him. Murray had been brought down to teach the class by Roy Peter Clark. The *Journal’s* editors hired Murray, who worked for the newspaper for seven years, holding workshops and talking to reporters and their editors. He placed one contingency upon both the Providence and Boston programs based: the top guys had to show up. Murray was concerned that when the head editors did not participate the writers would be lost wondering what Murray’s

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132 Scanlan Interview
133 Driscoll Interview
134 then *The Providence Journal-Bulletin*, technically
135 Scanlan Interview
place in the newsroom really served. Driscoll wrote with his staff. “He made sure that I was involved. Writing for him was part of the deal. You had to do what everybody else was doing,” Driscoll noted. Driscoll even wrote while doing his rounds visiting the “seven or eight” foreign bureaus the *Globe* had at the time; he would write while headed home. Driscoll recounted one experience in which Murray was dissatisfied with a sloppy piece of his writing:

> He was really vicious. He told me, “That wasn’t writing, that was a corduroy treatment.” Meaning that I was just unloading my notebook with quotes and things like that, and not really writing a story. He made me start all over again. Just like I was a rookie. But you are sort of a rookie every time you write, I don’t care who you are. Editors in particular have a problem writing because they are so anal about what is in a story that it is hard to make that transition to good writing. I think by being at these seminars I started to get back into it and wished I had more time to write.\(^{137}\)

Charles McCorkle “Chuck” Hauser, executive editor, and Joel Rawson, metro managing editor who later became executive editor, attended each of the meetings. The *Journal* was a finalist for four Pulitzer Prizes during Murray’s time as a writing coach.\(^{138}\) In Providence, Murray met Christopher “Chip” Scanlan, who was working as a reporter for the *Journal*.

Scanlan and Murray met across a seminar table in the *Journal*’s editorial boardroom in 1981. Scanlan entered one of Don’s very first workshops as a newly hired writing coach in Providence. Scanlan recalled the experience of first meeting Murray as formative:

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\(^{136}\) Driscoll Interview

\(^{137}\) Ibid

Don has described me as being very skeptical as I listened to him, but for me it was like a Moses and the burning bush moment. When he said those words, "Writing may be magical but it's not magic. It's a series of decisions and steps that every writer takes, no matter the length, the genre, or deadline." In many ways it was like throwing a life preserver to somebody who was desperately trying to keep his head above water, wanting to be a better writer, wanting to be a storyteller in the newsroom.”

Scanlan described Murray’s coaching as having a very strong effect on the way he perceived himself as a writer by exposing on a more conscious level the kind of discipline he had or lacked and what he could do about it:

I was, until then, always looking for a magic formula. I thought that's what great writers had. They were geniuses. They were gods. What they wrote was perfect. They probably had to be alcoholics, maybe live in a garret… Writing for me was being at one end of the forest, getting the assignment, and literally hacking my way through, emerging finally bruised and scratched and demoralized. I didn't know how to write. I didn't have any rational way of approaching writing. So when the writing wouldn't come, I would think there was something wrong with me. I guess I didn't have a paradigm, a view of writing. He was my first writing teacher.

Murray provided an extension of the newsroom as collegiate tool model. Some came from the Ivy League, while others never finished high school. He taught to his audience, leading classes in newsrooms and classrooms at the same time. Roy Peter Clark suggested that the editor-writer relationship in the newsroom—"talking to the writer, asking the writer questions, telling the writer what to work on or listening to the writer”—is easily analogous to the structure of the writing classroom.

Scanlan said that it was only about twelve years ago when he first found fun and excitement in writing, something he didn’t learn at first from Murray. “I was still hung up on the idea that writing had to be opening a vein, or as [Gene Fowler says]: Writing is

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139 Scanlan Interview
140 Ibid
141 Clark, Roy Peter, Interview with author (videorecording), 9 June 2009: Poynter Institute, St. Petersburg, FL
easy, you just wait until the blood drops appear on your forehead.” Scanlan had developed an expectation that writing involved a level of “agony.” He rejected Murray’s notion to lower one’s standards to accomplish the task of creating a work of writing, taken from a quote from poet William Stafford (“I believe that the so-called ‘writing block’ is a product of some kind of disproportion between your standards and your performance…one should lower his standards until there is no felt threshold to go over in writing. It’s easy to write. You just shouldn’t have standards that inhibit you from writing.”) Then, twelve or thirteen years ago, Scanlan tried freewriting, and it proved valuable:

I found myself doing it and beginning to have more success than I'd ever had as a writer, not to say I didn't have many of the insecurities of a writer. I was producing more and I was publishing in more high-profile places. And it started with just a freewrite.143

In an interview with the author of this thesis, Scanlan said he viewed writing as “the great leveler” when it comes to teaching. Murray wrote in front of his students and members of his workshops, allowing them to see his process in action, including its missteps within early drafts. Scanlan found that “especially useful” for students “because they can say, "Wow, that's a clumsy sentence. Gee. He's not very good. He won a Pulitzer?" To Scanlan his influence in encouraging the act of freewriting or otherwise unencumbered first drafts was created by “force of personality…by being more open than most teachers and by being willing to be vulnerable, to reveal to a class of students that he the teacher, the expert, was also struggling to write and to write better.”144

142 Scanlan Interview
143 Ibid
144 Ibid
Scanlan worked with Murray to publish a collection of the Journal’s best work, complete with articles from the reporters on their process of reporting and writing the piece, called *How I Wrote the Story*. “We used it for years,” Robert Wyss, a fellow reporter at the *Journal* and now a professor at the University of Connecticut, said of the book. Wyss became part of an effort to bring the concept of *How I Wrote the Story* online, onto a website called “The Power of Words.” “My idea was to move it from a book to an electronic form, which it was for years,” Wyss said. “It’s still up there but is no longer living the way it once was. I guess they ran out of money.”145 The website includes a history of the writing initiative at *The Providence Journal*, “a culture of writing that has grown and flourished over the last 20 years.” When Murray left the paper in 1986, the *Journal* “debated how he could be replaced and decided he couldn’t.” The paper created The Writing Committee, a group “whose mission is to keep the newspaper’s culture of writing alive.”146 They continued a “writing program,” which included an internal contest, talks from invited speakers, staff-run seminars, and website updates of tips and reports. “There was more of a culture of [a] writing community,” said Wyss. “Murray had created that culture and we all bought into it.”147 Robert Wyss explained the nature of the position of committee chair, which he later held:

What happened is Murray developed a culture that he passed on to Chip that Chip has passed on nationally…At some point we created this thing called the writing committee. There was always a chair at the writing committee. Usually the top editors would ask people to be members. I know Brian Jones was the writing chair before me. There might have been somebody between Chip and Brian (Berkley Hudson). Then there were

145 Wyss, Robert, Interview with author (phone), 29 March 2010
147 Wyss Interview
people after me. It kind of dissolved a few years ago when newspapers hit the stone wall, financially, that we have today. 

Scanlan and Murray continued to share drafts and contact each other often, even daily, after Scanlan had moved on from this position:

I always asked him, "Why are we friends? Why did I become your protégé?" He said, "You know, I've had thousands of students. How many of them sought me out?" 

In 1994 Scanlan was hired by the Poynter Institute to be director of writing programs. He oversaw the National Writers Workshops, hosted by Poynter, as well as Poynter's summer workshop program. In 2009 he was hired as visiting faculty to The Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University. Scanlan recollected an event in which Murray gave him the book *The Seasons of a Man’s Life*, by Daniel J. Levinson, that described typical patterns of the mentor/protégé relationship. Scanlan suggests the predictions of the book helped him stay conscious of maintaining a positive relationship with Murray:

I don't think he sent it for me to read that, but that really jumped out at me because it said they usually founder. What happens is over time the protégé begins to outpace the mentor—now I don't think that happened in my case, but in this description—and becomes impatient with the mentor. The mentor, on the other hand, is angry because the protégé isn't lavishing attention on him anymore. It's like the protégé is saying, "If I have to hear that story one more time about, fill in the blanks, I'm going to go crazy." The mentor, on the other hand, is, "That ungrateful pup. He wouldn't even be where he is without what I did for him." Basically they break off. You see this a lot. Ours could have on several occasions, but I was influenced by that and so ours held until his death.

Other newspapers, many aware of Murray’s work, began hiring writing coaches to conduct similar kinds of workshops with their staff of reporters and editors. One of the

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148 Ibid
149 Scanlan Interview
150 Ibid
goals was to build trust and reduce tension between each reporter and their editor, to replace what was sometimes identified as head-butting animosity with a feeling of mutual respect. Some were visiting coaches who may have worked with a variety of newspapers for a specific reason or brief tenure to cover one topic while others held more permanent residences at one newspaper. Scanlan, a part-time visiting advisor for newspapers while at the Poynter Institute, discussed the nature of the writing coach:

And then there came this explosion of writing coaches. I once made the distinction between an in-house writing coach or a visiting fireman…We're in working places where we consult as opposed to being the writing coach…

Jack Hart was hired by the Portland Oregonian to be one such coach. Hired to work for the newspaper in 1981, after serving as a professor of journalism at the University of Oregon, Hart served as editor of the Oregonian's Sunday magazine, Northwest. “We were very interested in upgrading the magazine, bringing in more talented freelancers, and getting the newspaper staff involved in doing true narrative nonfiction writing,” said Hart. “That involved a lot of teaching on my part.” The staff members and local and national freelancers at the time, the 80s, had little experience with long-form narrative writing, according to Hart. In 1989, Hart was promoted to staff developer involved in “all the training and the improvement of writing.” His duties included serving as a writing coach for the staff and freelancers. The Oregonian started winning major awards, including four Pulitzers overseen by Hart:

We had a growing interest in styles of writing that went beyond the standard news inverted pyramid. Every one of the four Pulitzers I was involved in coaching involved narrative styles that we introduced through

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151 Ibid
152 Hart, Jack, Second interview with author (phone), 7 April 2010
153 Ibid
the magazine. Tom Hallman Jr.’s first narrative nonfiction piece was in the magazine… That was the first piece of narrative nonfiction that he wrote. He went on to win every national award in feature writing. [Richard] Read has won two Pulitzers now. Julie Sullivan. The list goes on.154

Hart received a $500,000 freelance budget for the magazine. They magazine started working predominantly with local or amateur-grade journalists, but as its notoriety grew as a writer’s paper it attracted freelancers “publishing at a national level,” who already had many of the skills Hart worked as writing coach to improve and gather. The paper was eventually recruited to be a sponsor for the Neiman Narrative Conference at Harvard University, part of the Neiman Foundation and Neiman Fellowship, a fellowship program for experienced journalists founded in 1938 (and first curated by Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and Librarian of Congress Archibald MacLeish). Its mission is “to promote and elevate the standards of journalism and educate persons deemed specially qualified for journalism.”155 Hart is currently finishing a book, which includes discussions of his work with the Oregonian and the Neiman Foundation. He identified that he is using a Murray quote to open one of his chapters.

When asked whether a sense of community developed between writing coaches, Hart replied in strong affirmative:

We had a national organization and a national community. There was a newsletter for writing coaches at one point. At one point, somebody did a census. When Roy Peter Clark became writing coach at the St. Petersburg Times, he was the only one. Somebody eventually did a census and found sixty. I don’t know the figures now. It may be less because of the way newsrooms have pulled back.156

154 Ibid
155 Neiman.harvard.edu
156 Hart Interview b
A variety of publications brought attention to what was happening with journalists and newspapers. For example, “Carl Stepp would write for *American Journalism Review* in Maryland about these things and quote me and quote Jacqui (Banaszynski, Pulitzer winner) and quote Don Hallman,” Hart said. “It tended to feed upon itself.”157 Institutions made a variety of efforts to bring journalists interested in good writing together.

Things like Neiman Narrative, API’s (American Press Institute) writing instruction, and the Poynter Institute—probably the most influential—but these were all forums for people to come together…if you put us on a three or four-day program somewhere (as coach or in a program) you get pretty tight. The Society of Professional Journalist programs. American Society of Sunday and Feature Editors. These were forums where people who were speaking and teaching and running workshops on writing would come together and get to know one another and influence one another.158

Hart noted that the Poynter Institute was the “major organizing principle” for instigating the writing coach, promoting an emphasis on writing in newspapers, and bringing together a community of writing coaches. Poynter was “the vehicle where a lot of people met Don Murray.” he said 159. “They had an ideal position for spreading influence, since they were regularly bringing in people from all over the country.”160

The culture of writing coaches and the more general culture of the Poynter Institute has carried on, at least in part, through to the current. “There was certainly a strong community that developed from the late 80s on through the 2000s,” said Hart. “Once you’re on the circuit, going to conventions, and appearing together, you get pretty close.” Hart cited one person he met doing such rounds, Bruce DeSilva, as now one of his closest friends. DeSilva worked for *The Providence Journal* while Murray served as a

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157 Ibid
158 Ibid
159 Hart Interview b
160 Hart, Jack, First interview with author (phone), 5 Feb. 2010
coach there, until he left in 1981 to become an associate editor and in-house writing coach for the Hartford Courant. He served as a writing coach for the Associated Press until 2009, and is now an adjunct professor for the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. Hart began to work as a guest writing coach for a variety of newspapers outside of the Oregonian and Northwest. “I don’t know how many newspapers I taught at over those years,” he said. Hart explained that a successful job as a writing coach meant changing the attitude of the paper as a whole:

Working with the paper’s editor was job one: to change the culture of the paper. And to overcome the newsroom anti-intellectualism and get people to care more about writing. There was some resistance from some of the old hacks. They are hard-nosed straight reporters. The old notion among some of the real newsroom traditionalists is that those (writing and reporting) are dichotomies.

Hart expressed concern with a potential decline in writing coaches associated with financial problems that hit newspapers in the nineties and have been further complicated by recent economic declines:

Newspapers have one product to sell, and that’s words. They better damn well do a good job with them, whether it’s a single sentence or a three thousand-word feature…Newspapers all over the place are cutting back on quality because there is less money to put back into the product.

Hart said of Donald Murray that he was “aware of him and influenced by him long before [Hart] met him personally.” He says he may have first met him at a Murray colloquium, where he went through some of Murray’s daybooks. They had exchanged emails before meeting. “As I developed my career as a writing coach, I became more and more aware of the writing process in the success of the people I worked with,” he said. “I

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161 Hart Interview b
162 Ibid
163 Ibid
164 Hart Interview a
think a lot of my awareness of its success came from Don. First from his books and second from Poynter.” Hart considers his work an “amalgam” of influences, nothing that “influence spreads out from an individual in ripples, and a lot of times it’s second or third hand influence.”

Hart retired from his position with the *Oregonian* in 2007. In addition to working on his own writing, he now only works as a writing coach for individual projects with the *Oregonian* and with other papers.

Another key individual in the development of a community among writing coaches was Paul Salsini, co-editor of *Coaches’ Corner* with the late Lucille deView, former columnist and writing coach for the *Orange County Register. Coaches’ Corner*, which circulated from 1985 to 1996, served as a newsletter for coaches and published articles that discussed quality writing and reporting, coaching techniques, and solutions for situations coaches might get into with their writers.

Salsini, who started at the Milwaukee *Journal* in 1959, was eventually moved from state editor to staff developer in 1984 after convincing a new *Journal* editor that a position should be created to train and recruit new writers and staff members. “The basic part of it was as writing coach,” he said, “which intrigued me because it was a new idea then, and there weren’t many papers having them.” Salsini went to the Poynter Institute to take training classes there. He also read a lot, he remembered. “There wasn’t really a ‘how to be a writing coach’ kind of manual at that point,” he said. “We were all sort of doing our own thing.”

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165 Ibid
166 Salsini, Paul, Interview with author (phone), 7 April 2010
167 Ibid
the staff, emphasizing that the coaching wasn’t remedial. Salsini recalled that it was the most engaged and solid writers who kept taking up his offer:

I worked with some of the best writers on the staff, I believe, because I have found that they are the most vulnerable and insecure. They really want to improve their writing, but they are not sure how, so they do what they can.\(^\text{168}\)

Salsini identified Don Fry of the Poynter Institute as a mentor to whom he would often turn for suggestions. “He was very helpful when I ran into problems of management, or not giving time, or reporters,” Salsini said of Fry.\(^\text{169}\) Salsini said that he knew Don Murray, though couldn’t recall if they had met. However, Salisni and deView published dozens of Murray’s articles on coaching in *Coaches’ Corner*. The newsletter also regularly published Roy Peter Clark, Don Fry, Jack Hart, and Chip Scanlan. Salsini also noted that he was never able to resolve a disagreement of how the editors expected his coaching to work and how he knew the coaching would serve as most effective:

The main problem I think that gets a writing coach caught is that senior editors say, “You’ve got to work with this guy because he’s not writing very well.” How do you do that? How do you force someone to come to you voluntarily and say they need help? …Management was saying, “Why aren’t you helping them more?” It got kind of testy. For all of that, the job was still extremely satisfying.\(^\text{170}\)

This difference in expectation may have contributed to why writing coach positions sometimes didn’t last at newspapers (in addition to rising monetary concerns): editors may have, like in this case, felt the coach was not providing the outcome they wanted quickly enough to the writers most in need, while coaches like Salsini and Murray stressed getting the best reporters on board with their program first to set an example.

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\(^{168}\) Ibid

\(^{169}\) Ibid

\(^{170}\) Salsini Interview
Salsini’s position as writing coach ended when the *Journal* merged with the Milwaukee *Sentinel* in 1995.

Carl Sessions Stepp, a writing coach for various newspapers across the nation, said he was very influenced by Murray’s work despite having met him only once, at a Poynter seminar. “He was a pioneer in a lot of things that I became influenced in,” Stepp said. “It was relatively late when I met him…He became by that point to me kind of a legend in our field.” Stepp has been a visiting teacher and participant in seminars at the Poynter Institute. He started as a writing coach in 1984, under recommendation from Roy Peter Clark. Stepp expressed interest in coaching editors instead of writers. He did so for about twenty-five years. “The coaching movement that Don was so much a part of was phenomenally healthy because it increased the amount of time that people paid attention to writers and writing,” said Stepp. “I was certainly inspired by Murray.” He admitted that he continued to serve as writing coach in part because it helped him put his kids through college monetarily. When his last child graduated from college in 2006, he ceased most of his coaching. However, he said it was also beneficial to his writing and teaching, and that due to the increasing time constraints on the editors of newspapers coaches are still needed.

There is a myth that you sometimes hear that we’ll teach them to write in the newsroom. But that doesn’t happen much anymore because they are such busy places. What I found is when an outsider like myself was invited into a newsroom there was such a hunger. They were just lined up outside the door to talk about their work. It was a treat to have your work taken seriously.

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171 Stepp, Carl Sessions. Interview with author (phone), 26 March 2010  
172 Ibid  
173 Ibid
Stepp described a large number of venues that were available to talk about writing and coaching in the newsroom. During the 1980s and 1990s there were “probably a couple dozen of [them] that kept in touch a lot and ran into each other at conferences,” such as the Wilmington Writers’ Workshop, which became the National Writers’ Workshop, which became a Poyner-sponsored event. When Stepp met Murray, he was “excited to meet him because [Stepp] was influenced and heard his name invoked as an icon.”

Though Stepp’s relationship with Murray was primarily reflected in an admiration of his text, Stepp’s relationship with a community of writing coaches—he characterizes Jack Hart as “one of the best [he] ever knew”—and Poynter’s Roy Peter Clark, Don Fry, Chip Scanlan, and president Karen Brown Dunlap, among others as part of a “mutually enforcing admiration”—attest to the manner by which webs of influence spread and disseminate, as well as reinforce themselves.\textsuperscript{174}

**National Disseminators**

Among those responsible for bringing Murray’s ideas, and Murray, into the Poynter Institute was Roy Peter Clark, now the Institute’s “Senior Scholar.” Clark was hired as a writing coach for the *St. Petersburg Times* in February 1977. He had a background in English literature studies, as an Anglo-Saxonist scholar like his teacher, mentor, and friend Don Fry. At the State University of New York in Stony Brook, Fry directed Clark's dissertation, which concerned Geoffrey Chaucer's use of flatulence in *The Canterbury Tales*. Fry helped Clark get a job at Auburn University Montgomery, in Montgomery, Alabama, teaching Chaucer. According to Fry, Clark felt too slowed by

\textsuperscript{174} Ibid
academic life. By what Fry referred to as a "series of coincidences," including an opinion editorial piece about newspaper writing for the *New York Times*, Clark was asked by the editor of the *St. Petersburg Times*, Gene Patterson, to come to Florida.\(^{175}\)

Clark met with Patterson, then president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, while Clark was still working as a professor for Auburn Montgomery. Patterson described Clark then as “restive” and anxious to get involved with newspapers, which offered a faster pace to accompany the academic work. He wanted to write for the paper. Patterson said this event has how the “first organizer and editor of the *Best Newspaper Writing* volumes happened into [his] lap,” as Gene Patterson offered an alternative solution, a career:

> “Instead of teaching freshmen how to write,” I said, “why don't you join me in teaching professional reporters how to write better? Come to the *St. Petersburg Times* for a year as a writing coach and make our newsroom your new classroom.” He quit Auburn and showed up.\(^{176}\)

Clark was quickly appreciated for what Patterson refers to as “Roy's self-deprecating wit…as he prowled the newsroom desks and held voluntary writers' lunches.” He was able to escape any remaining doubt from reporters when he boldly criticized his own boss:

> He won over the doubters when he marked up and tacked on the newsroom bulletin board an embarrassing example of awkward writing—my signed Editor's column from the previous Sunday.\(^{177}\)

Patterson attests that his work paid off. “A year of his coaching noticeably sharpened the literary edge of writing in the columns…and concentrated the staff’s insistence on flarity and grace in use of language,” Patterson noted. “It dawned their extra effort was being watched and appreciated.” That year, the paper established the Poynter Institute, creating

\(^{175}\) Fry, Don. Interview with author (phone), 15 Jan. 2010

\(^{176}\) Patterson, Gene, E-mail message to author, 24 June 2009

\(^{177}\) Ibid
a not-for-profit model for the news group. Patterson invited Clark to “move to the faculty of the Poynter Institute as director of its Writing Center, which he had devised, and spread his techniques nationally.” Clark accepted, and moved over to Poynter as a journalism coach, teacher, and, in part, newswriting scholar.

Clark asked Fry to come to St. Petersburg and teach a seminar on writing and editing in February of 1980, which helped start a tradition of bringing in journalists, writers, and scholars of writing and composition to speak to young adult and professional audiences about various topics, including writing, reporting, and editing, predominantly in workshop format. "My job was to question assumptions," Fry said of his first seminar, "and so I came into a first seminar and questioned assumptions." Clark invited Fry to return seven more times.

In 1984, Fry and Clark received support to recruit a basic journalism faculty to the Poynter Institute, which would come together to write a "base literature of journalism that would be worth reading," according to Fry, who joined Poynter permanently in 1984 and stayed through late 1993. There, Don Fry met Don Murray:

I met Don early. Typically Roy would borrow two or three outsiders to help teach a seminar. Don was one of those visitors. He was just a knockout teacher. A huge presence. I’m six foot two, and he was considerably taller than I was. He looked like Santa Claus. He was a very jolly guy anyway, and quite fat. I was told that he paraded around Vermont in shower shoes and a bathing suit. He never got over World War II. He said to people several times, “I may look like Santa Claus to you but inside I look like an 18 year old paratrooper.”

178 Ibid
179 Fry Interview
180 Ibid
181 Ibid
Murray's initial presentation was particularly memorable for Fry, who watched with Clark as Murray walked to a blackboard in front of a workshop of professionals and drafted a story on the spot:

Don stood up and extemporized an article. He wrote it down on the board. This was part of a discussion about process, and he was showing us his drafting stage by actually doing it in front of us, with all of the errors and so forth. I think of all of the things he did, that was the most influential on me. It led to a whole bunch of risky things that Roy and I did after that. That’s my first memory of him at Poynter.  

Poynter held weeklong seminars of about sixteen individuals each for groups of high school students, newly graduated college students who majored in something other than journalism, and professionals, along with and four or five faculty. "We essentially lived together for the whole week," says Fry of the program. "We used to say that we’d screw your head off on Monday and give it back to you on Friday." Clark has since helped bring programs and guests to Poynter. In an interview with the author of this thesis, Clark suggested Murray’s heavy influence on the Institute, which started with an initial seminar in 1980, the first time Murray, Scanlan, and Clark were in a room together:

It just opened the door to years and years of exploration about what writers have in common, what’s different about them, what generalizations you can make, how you account for eccentricities that writers often exhibit. Clark suggested that Murray bridged the skepticism of journalists towards theory.

“Journalists are…more likely to be trained to see the world as a storehouse of stories

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182 Ibid
183 Ibid
184 Clark Interview
rather than as a storehouse of ideas,” he said.\textsuperscript{185} In contrast, Murray offered embraceable ideas because they are were communicated by a fellow practitioner of creating stories and intended to effectively complement the reporting process. “Murray was offering a theory about how writers work and how writing works,” Clark explained. “It is that foundation of theory and craft that ignited my imagination, and the influence has not by any means been exhausted yet.”\textsuperscript{186} Joe Hight, Director of Information and Development for the Oklahoman City Oklahoman, said that while Roy Peter Clark and Chip Scanlan were leading the Poynter workshops from his experience, Murray “provided that wise man on top of the mountain image at that point.”\textsuperscript{187}

From 1992 to 1997, Clark compiled and edited a collection of handbooks that became known as the Poynter Papers, in which five Poynter faculty members and five professors “who might be described as ‘friends of the Institute’” talked on specific points of writing, reporting, and editing:

The shortest, the first one, was only thirteen pages. We thought that would become the model, but subsequent volumes grew, the longest to ninety-one pages. The original concept remained: The Poynter Institute would publish, and distribute at cost, short takes on topics important to journalists and those they serve.\textsuperscript{188}

Poynter printed a particularly important Poynter Paper by venerated Columbia University professor Melvin Mencher. Mencher is mentioned first in Clark’s introduction the book\textit{ The Values and Craft of American Journalism} (2002) that compiles these handbooks and adds some essays to the original ten:

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{185} Ibid
\bibitem{186} Ibid
\bibitem{187} Hight, Joe, Interview with author (phone), 24 March 2010
\bibitem{188} Clark, Roy Peter, \textit{The Values and Craft of American Journalism: Essays from the Poynter Institute}, ed. Roy Peter Clark and Cole C. Campbell (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2002), 1
\end{thebibliography}
No teacher of journalism has taken the work of journalists more seriously than Melvin Mencher, who trained a generation of reporters at the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. Over the years, Mencher encapsulated his values in a set of aphorisms, published by Poynter as ‘The Sayings of Chairman Mel’ (1997). These survive, not just in this book, but in the nerve endings of reporters trained by Mencher especially his final challenge: ‘It is immoral not to be excellent in your craft.’\textsuperscript{189}

Mencher’s book \textit{News Reporting and Writing} is a heavily esteemed work, but contrasts greatly with Murray. Much of Mencher’s writing speaks in kinds of absolutes. Mencher creates a series of rules, definitions, and limitations to help guide the journalist through the often-muddied process of getting the story and paying attention. Mencher provides clear answers for unclear questions, as grand as “What is news?” and as firm and odd as, “What is the barebones structure of a story on the courts?”\textsuperscript{190} “He’s still a crusty old guy, and good,” Wayne Worcester said of Mencher. “There are a lot of good textbooks out there on how to teach news writing, but Mel’s book was the first of his kind. It really did set a pattern. The damn book was translated into 22 languages and pirated in China, for crying out loud.”\textsuperscript{191}

Mencher’s book presents a different emphasis for improving and maintaining the quality American journalism, one based in good reporting though preparedness and experience with the form or kind of story being addressed—preconceiving what to write before the story arrives (versus Murray: writing is a process of discovery). However, their visions of journalism are equally firm and occasionally intersect, particularly in their assessment of an increasing interest in subjectivity and humanism in the second half of the twentieth century. In a line Murray would approve, Mencher observes, “Today, the

\textsuperscript{189} Ibid
\textsuperscript{190} Mencher, Melvin, \textit{News Reporting and Writing}, 2nd ed. (Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown Company Publishers, 1977)
\textsuperscript{191} Worcester Interview
emphasis is on finding the human element in all events, if possible.” Many subjects interviewed for this study suggested that the two textbook authors present two sides of an important balance between writing and reporting—combining Murray’s emphasis on writing and Mencher’s emphasis on reporting can prove to be effective. Mencher and Murray taught a session together at the Poynter Institute on writing and reporting. Mencher serves as an interesting case study of how Murray’s approach to emphasizing writing in newspapers rubbed off on others. Mencher, certainly an important figure in journalism instruction, was initially hesitant toward Murray’s approach, as well as the move of Poynter to make writing the priority. He worried that reporters would lose understanding that good reporting was the key to good journalism. Worcester recounts:

I think initially he was suspicious of this whole groundswell of this process approach to writing. I think it sounded to him as somebody out there in the north woods was advocating doing too much ruminating about writing and reporting and almost committing heresy. The heresy would be to insist that writing is more important than reporting. I suspect that’s probably the way that Don sounded to him initially, but once he became familiar and understood what Don was all about that ended…It was from Don I first heard the phrase you can’t write writing.

In 1995, Murray contributed “Writer in the Newsroom,” in which Murray honors the eyes of the reporter and the soul of the writer, challenging editors to make room for the narrative visions that only writers can see.” In his compiled collection of the Poynter Papers, Clark secondly cites Murray’s piece second in his introduction, describing it as a work that attests to how Murray helped generate build “momentum in a reform movement in journalism that is now more than two decades old.” Murray’s “Writer in the Newsroom” discussed how a “reconciliation of ethics and craft rests at the heart of

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192 Ibid 77  
193 Ibid  
194 Ibid, 131
Poynter pedagogy over the decade.” Clark says of Murray: “No teacher or thinker has had more influence on the teaching of craft at Poynter.”

In 2006, Clark published a book of fifty suggestions for improving one’s writing, titled *Writing Tools*. “I suddenly saw writing as a series of rational steps, a set of tools,” he writes, “and with the help of Murray’s blueprint, I could construct a writer’s workbench to store them.” The book is dedicated “to Donald M. Murray and to the memory of Minnie Mae Murray, godparents to a nation of writers.” At the time of his interview with the author of this study, Clark had developed an idea for a new small book on writing strategies and solutions. “As I did it, I was hearing Murray’s voice in my head,” Clark said. “I was trying to distinguish myself from Murray. It's always an issue when you have a strong coach or teacher: how much you imitate and how much you innovate.”

**The Lectures and Conferences**

In 1982 Murray published a collection articles on teaching, called *Learning by Teaching*, with Boyton/Cook press. He became a visiting professor of English and Journalism at the University of Wyoming, and worked the Wyoming Writing Project summer institutes. Murray published a book or a new edition of a book all but three years of the next two decades.
In 1984, Murray was invited to speak with the sentence combiners, a group attempting to spread their composition pedagogy, which placed heavy weight on the proper construction of the sentence. Murray thought of their prerogative as a tad silly, particularly for them to place so much emphasis on one aspect of creating a work of writing. Murray recounts in the conference speech itself his conversation with Don Daiker, author of *Sentence Combining: A Rhetorical Perspective* (1985), when Daiker invited him to speak:

I thought the invitation a joke. Somebody was impersonating Don Daiker inviting me to a meeting of sentence combiners, a rabbi invited to a Nazi rally. But I called back. It was Don Daiker and he was serious. We want you because you are not a true believer. Such an invitation; such chutzpah to accept. Of course I would address the rally.

Murray littered the talk with incomplete, run-on, and other oddly constructed sentences. He says in comments about the speech, printed in *The Essential Don Murray*, “I decided to combine sentences, pile up huge train wrecks of clauses, and have fun with the language as well as the content of the piece,” he noted. “And they got it. They understood it and laughed with me, not at me.” The paper was titled “Writing Badly to Write Well.” Newkirk said of the paper: “He talked about how writers have to be open to chance and experimentation and writing badly, and how that is more organic and practical than sentence combining. It’s his most outlandish essay. I wish I could have heard it. It’s like

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200 Clark Interview
202 Ibid, 101
he’s on some kind of trip or something.” Newkirk provided a similar simile to Murray’s own: “[It was] like inviting Barack Obama to a KKK meeting.”

Murray frequented a variety of conferences for both news media practitioners and rhetoric and composition scholars. According to his own resume, by 1990 he had either lectured, given a reading or workshop, or otherwise spoken at over sixty-five colleges and universities and more than sixty-five school systems for children between kindergarten and twelfth grade. He had also read papers, given workshops, or held programs or talks at over fifty professional organizations, including the Bay Area Writing Project, the Canadian Council of Teachers of English, the National Newspaper Association, the Associated Press’ National Meeting, and the American Press Institute. The 4 C's (College Composition and Communication) conference was the primary conference in the composition field. “At conferences, Don Murray’s sessions were always packed,” recalled Daiker.

Daiker also remembered an experience he had after attending one of Murray’s conference presentations:

I attended a session on Murray and liked it as usual. The day after, I went to the Chicago Art Institute. I went to my favorite gallery, which was 17th Century Dutch painting. There was great, great stuff there. In that gallery were all these 17th Century Dutch masterpieces. An art student had setup an easel and she was copying a piece. When I was in that gallery with all these masterpieces, the people who came in to that gallery spent more time looking at the student copying the painting. In [an essay I wrote,] I said, “Don Murray would have understood this. What he was always focused on was the student writing. He was always focused on the process.” What was going on in front of you in that room, with the student artist, was the process of creation. Murray recognized that that’s what were all interested in. Even if the finished process was a priceless painting.

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203 Newkirk Interview
204 Murray Personal Resume
205 Daiker, Donald, Interview with author (phone), 11 March 2010
206 Ibid
Tom Romano (2000), of Miami University in Ohio, recounted in *The English Journal* a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) convention in Charlotte, North Carolina, in which he and Bonnie Sunstein, a nonfiction, education, and folklore professor at the University of Iowa and past president of the National Writing Centers Association, co-chaired a session on the life and work of Murray. “Over two hundred participants packed the conference room Friday afternoon,” Romano wrote. “They leaked out the doorways into the lobby and adjacent room, where they stood or sat on the floor, listening through open doorways.”

Various session participants spoke about Murray while he and Minnie Mae sat in the front row. Bill Strong, of Utah State University, talked about Murray’s place among the present community:

> Imagine that Donald Murray is not here—in fact, never has been here as a voice to be reckoned with…Imagine, in the silence of his absence, the enormous yawning hole in the knowledge base of your profession. Imagine your bookshelf empty of Murray’s books and journal articles—and imagine that shelf without the work of those who have derived intellectual or spiritual capital from Murray. In other words, imagine hitting the delete key for most of the Heinmann (books) list—and a good part of the NCTE booklist as well…

Romano characterized Murray as one of the “High Priests of Process for our Tribe” whose work was further important for it’s non-academically grounded, “outsider’s perspective”:

> His was a rhetoric of dialectic, not unity—a rhetoric of tension, not taxonomy. Tradition valued certainty, predictability; Murray valued surprise. Tradition valued rules and prescribed forms; Murray valued form following meaning. Tradition valued an objective, impersonal tone; Murray valued voice.

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207 Romano, Tom, “The Living Legacy of Don Murray,” *The English Journal* 89.3 (Jan. 2000), 74
208 Ibid
209 Ibid, 74-5
In Romano’s words, Murray submitted a challenge “to give up the security of old forms—to demonstrate our own learning in authentic, personal ways, from the inside out.” “Scary?” Romano added, “You bet. But well over 1.5 million teachers in the National Writing Project have taken the Murray Challenge and are willing to testify.”

Two primary school teachers and authors, Susan Stires and Mary Glover, also spoke at the 1997 session, in which they discussed “the professional impact Murray had on their lives.” Glover had only met Murray four times, at a mini writing course in Arizona. To receive these accounts, Sunstein and Romano sent out a query to people across the country asking for a one-page story of their relationship with Murray. In one, Brock Dethier, professor of pedagogy and poetry at Utah State University and now director of its writing program, wrote to Murray, “I think about how I began writing in lines largely so I could join your poetry group.” Following the participants’ accounts, Murray gave a brief talk of his own: “For years colleagues told me I was too easy, not demanding enough, a bad teacher…Look at this room.”

Romano and Sunstein collected the one-page accounts into a book, which they presented to Murray. Murray sent Romano a letter in reply:

> I have enjoyed fantasies of scoring a touchdown while playing right tackle. That actually happened. Of being pursued by naked women panting with passion. No such luck. Of my parachute going up rather than down. It did once. Of a publication day party in a Manhattan penthouse. Never. But I could never have imagined that day in Charlotte and the book of one-pagers.”

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210 Ibid, 75
211 Ibid
212 Ibid, 76
213 Ibid, 75
214 Ibid, 78
The Globe Columns, Retirement Years

On June 1, 1986, Murray published his first column in The Boston Globe. His column was titled “Over 60” and articulated the life of an elderly, generally retired man—he would retire during the second year of the column—who saw everything through the lens of a writer. “I always liked that title,” said Jack Driscoll. “It wasn’t about the elderly so much as sort of centered on aging. It was really a powerful column. In fact, his license plate was OVER60.”215 The column was a meta-discussion of the values of the American middle class, the feelings of nostalgia and old age, and the need to continue a productive and mentally healthy life. Murray pragmatically confronted aging. “In my field of vision, there is only one correspondent truly covering the terror-filled front of old age,” Max Frankel (1998), former Pulitzer Prize-winner and executive editor of The New York Times from 1986 to 1994. wrote in The New York Times Magazine. “He is Donald M. Murray, The Boston Globe’s 73-year-old weekly columnist, a poet in prose.”216 In his columns, Murray provided insight on how he made the most of his aging years, and how readers might do the same. The titles of his articles included “When Words Fail, Love Still Speaks Through the Language of Touch,” “As We Age, Adaptation is a Means of Survival,” and “Slowing Down a Busy Life to Get Lost in a Good Book.”

With the help of Minnie Mae, Murray would write by dictation and drive at the same time. Often on a sort of tour of talks with newspapers, universities, and other groups such as College Composition and Communication, Murray dictated his upcoming articles

215 Driscoll Interview
216 Frankel, Max. “Word and Image; The Oldest Bias,” The New York Times Magazine (May 24, 1998), Section 6, 16
and books, while Minnie Mae typed out his words on a table he installed in the back seat of his van.\textsuperscript{217}

Shortly after Murray retired from the University of New Hampshire faculty (to become Professor Emeritus), he had a heart attack while visiting Chip Scanlan in St. Petersburg, Florida. He required triple by-pass surgery. Murray would recount this experience in a memoir, \textit{My Twice-Lived Life}.

Murray’s columns often discussed the nature of living in retirement, including such pedestrian conversations as boredom and strain. His columns included such notions as “If you’re thinking of retiring, remember Murray’s Law: IT TAKES MORE TIME TO BE RETIRED THAN TO WORK” and “…Over 60, overweight, bypassed, diabetic and feeling as lean and tough as I was as a paratrooper so many lifetimes ago, I go on my morning march, a survivor still.”\textsuperscript{218} His attitude was ultimately positive: more time to write, and no requirement. “Retirement has allowed me to devote full time to my lifetime addiction with the writer’s craft,” he wrote.\textsuperscript{219}

In 1990, Murray published a collection of quotes by writers across the centuries that he had been collecting for years. Murray used quotes to articulate a lot of his methods and writing habits. His most important was “\textit{nulla die sine linea},” Latin for “never a day without a line,” which was used by an historic lineage of writers. He received front-cover author accreditation for \textit{The Literature of Tomorrow: An Anthology of Student Fiction, Poetry, and Drama}, a book of student writing, winners of the Holt

\textsuperscript{217} Fry Interview
\textsuperscript{219} Murray, Donald M., “Free of Work, Many of Us Over 60 Embrace It,” \textit{The Boston Globe} (21 September 1993)
Prizes in Literature, for which he wrote the introduction and a brief guide to creative writing as an afterword. Murray was recruited not as the ultimate judge for the prize but as the examiner following the selections to write his passages (the afterword is predominantly borrowed and re-cooked bits of his previous available language on writing). Murray writes in his introduction about the problem with influence and creating a personal voice, and identifies his own influences. "We find our voices by trying on the voices of others in a kind of peeling away the possibility until, as we mature, we are left with what we are," he writes. “That is always, at first a disappointment. I hoped to be A.E. Houseman-Ernest Hemmingway-William Faulkner-James Joyce, an impossible combination. More recently, educated by feminist colleagues, I want to be Anne Tyler-Mekeel Mcbride-Sharon Olds-Toni Morrison, but, of course, I know now that I cannot be them.”

In the spring of 1990, Murray read a paper at the Annual Conference on College Composition and Communication, also known as the 4 C’s conference, called “All Writing is Autobiography,” which was then reprinted in the *College Composition and Communication* journal in February 1991.

In the conference paper, Murray described all of his writing as being, on one level, an active recount or a making visible of his writing process. Even his poetry became in part about its being written. In the body of the paper, Murray cited a poem that appeared in the March 1990 issue of *Poetry*, “At 64, Talking Without Words,” which actively recounted the relationship from the mind, to the pen, to the past experience, “The

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220 Murray, Donald M. *The Literature of Tomorrow* (Fort Worth, TX: Hold, Rinehart, and Winston, 1990), xiv
present comes clear when rubbed/with memory. I relive a childhood/ of texture.”\textsuperscript{221} Murray quilted his attitude toward process into the matter of each individual work he wrote, be it essay, academic paper, lecture, poem, fiction, or article. “As I look back, I suspect that no matter how I tuned the lyre, I played the same tune,” Murray wrote.\textsuperscript{222} In 1995, “All Writing is Autobiography” was republished in \textit{Landmark Essays on the Writing Process}, volume 7, edited by Sondra Perl. Perl had met Murray decades prior, after he reacted to a piece of her dissertation research published in a New York University alumni magazine. “And one day I got a postcard in the mail from Don Murray saying that he had read the article, and that he thought it was a wonderful piece of work,” she said. “He congratulated me…It sort of stood for the kind of person he is…”\textsuperscript{223} Perl said that Murray was a large influence on the pedagogy of the New York City Writing Project, which serves to hold workshops with teachers in New York City. Public Schools:

\begin{quote}
Personally his work just sort of resonated with me as I was beginning to formulate a pedagogy. His approach made enormous sense, as it was one that valued the writing processes that writers had and also valued responding to students as writers.\textsuperscript{224}
\end{quote}

In \textit{Landmark Essays on the Writing Process}, Perl cites a variety of scholars, journalists, and educators who turned about-face in their perception of product and process. For example, Nancy Sommers (1992) reflects upon her own evolution in “Between the Drafts,” where she characterizes herself as a “bloodless academic creating taxonomies, creating a hierarchy of student writers and experienced writers, and never

\textsuperscript{222} Ibid
\textsuperscript{223} Perl, Sondra, Interview with author (phone), 24 March 2010
\textsuperscript{224} Ibid
asking [herself] how [she] was being displaced from [her] own work.” Perl notes, “twelve years later, Sommers presents both her work and herself, her voice now shaping the dialogue with others, neither submerged nor silenced but present and aware of the interplay.” This illumination exemplifies a growing sense of comfort with placing the self, the writer, in the process and the output.

Memoirs

Murray’s writing process techniques are even evident in two memoirs he wrote toward the end of his life, *My Twice-Lived Life* (2001) and *The Lively Shadow* (2003). The former is a series of contemplations on life following Murray’s survival of a heart attack. The latter discusses the death of his daughter, Lee, in 1977, more than three decades prior. Both deal with some of the same general narrative strains of Murray’s life, and it all is driven through a parallel narrative—Murray’s obsession with discovering insights on the writing process. Both memoirs also mimic the voice of Murray’s decades of column writing for *The Boston Globe* in his column, first called “After 60” and changed to “Now and Then” in 2001. In *My Twice-Lived Life*, Murray channels the recent experience of a heart attack, an instance in which life literally is splayed, “flashed” before one’s eyes, in order to talk more generally about his career and life story. However, no matter the topic he addresses – be it the war, conflicts with his parents, his first marriage, or his friends – the narrative is ultimately a discussion of the writing process itself.

Murray brings us to the moment of each word’s conception and demonstrates that these

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226 Perl 1994: xvii
memoirs are a life-asserting process. “The work of writing is my therapy,” he says. “As I write, defining and describing my fears and joys, anxieties and satisfactions, I begin to understand them and reduce the terrors to the manageable.” Murray’s descriptions of past events become livened by the muscular, proactive process of writing that is divulged to the reader. The true narrative of the book becomes the process of writing the book itself and the honesty of Murray’s pleasure in being able to write such a thing.

Murray used writing as a way to out his inner demons. One friend of Murray described his craft of writing as simply his religion. Andrew Merton was once a student of Murray and is now the chair of the University of New Hampshire English Department, where Murray founded the school’s journalism program in the sixties. “He felt that if he didn’t get writing done every day, that was a sin,” Merton said. “It was a ritual. He had to do it.”

In *The Lively Shadow*, Murray uses his writing process as a point of reference, as a way of zooming out and in between two separate decades of his life – the point of Lee’s death and the present. He relates his experience of recovering from Lee’s death by noting the number of words he wrote each month following, starting from little-to-nothing and gaining pace. “Wait and the page will fill,” he tells himself. “It always did, but after Lee’s death it does not.” He charts his track like a sailor traces in a log:

No words until September 3, when I write 66. Then 1,001 on the fourteenth, 189 the next day, then none, then 26, then three days before 288, two empty days, then 367, another empty day, then 30, two days

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228 Merton, Andrew, Interview with author (phone), 5 May 2009
without words, then 197 and two more days at the end of the month without a single word.  

Murray nearly personifies writing throughout the book. The heartbreak of Lee’s death disturbs his relationship with words. The way his equilibrium is manipulated, how his ability to write is fractured, is the narrative by which Murray can best articulate the greater heartbreak of the loss of life. Murray becomes speechless and can only regain his composure as a man of words when he realizes his practice would help keep Lee’s spirit, her wishes for her father, and her memory, healthily alive. Murray tries to work through the absence:

I know I will be drawing the spaces where she is not for some time…There is always a stimulating lack of conclusion in an effective painting or piece of writing, a significant lack of completeness that lets the viewer or reader in. The work belongs to the individual viewer or reader, not to the maker. In the drawing as in life, Lee is here and not here, an emptiness and a force.

This compares interestingly to Murray’s spatial treatment of audience, as Carol Berkenkotter observes of Murray years later. “It is also natural that a writer like Murray would not be aware of how significant a role his sense of audience played in his thoughts,” she writes. “After years of journalistic writing, his consideration of audience had become more automatic than deliberate.”

Though more physically present, the audience is equally there and not there to Murray’s cognition, internalized and considered.

Murray’s collection of papers and work was originally held at the University of New Hampshire until it was donated to the Poynter Institute in 1995. Murray would bring

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230 Ibid
231 Ibid, 150
232 Berkenkotter 139
in boxes, often of documents that Minnie Mae had persuaded him not to throw away and often with little organization. These documents, particularly Murray’s extensive collection of daybooks, led to an idea from the Poynter staff, as recounted by Chip Scanlan:

He was going to throw [his papers] out. He called me up one day and said he was throwing them out because it was such a dispiriting experience at the UNH library. And I said, "Hold it. If you're serious, I will rent a storage facility here. I will take them." And then I talked to Karen, who is the dean, and we came up with a decision to provide space and, at least for three years, do colloquium. She said, "We don't want it just to sit there. Can we use them for our teaching?"

Thus started a series of three Donald M. Murray Colloquiums, held at Poynter in 1997, 1998, and 1999. A wide variety of journalists and educators attended the Colloquiums. The Colloquiums brought together journalism and composition scholars alike under one roof, with Thomas Newkirk and Bonnie Sunstein as visiting faculty and presenting alongside Roy Peter Clark and Chip Scanlan from the Poynter faculty. Tommy Thomason, who founded the Texas Christian University Schieffer School of Journalism and serves now as program director for the Texas Center for Community Journalism, was one of the thirty-six program participants in the first of these three conferences:

Meeting Don for me was like meeting a life-long hero. He had influenced me so much in his writing. Just the experience of being around him was fantastic. What I really enjoyed was just the time spending with the daybooks. There are off the cuff observations that he made—things about writing that I found in the daybooks that I still use today.

The participants were predominantly professionals in their field and demonstrate the kind of influence Murray created among his communities. Another participant in Murray’s first Colloquium was Hector Becerra, who later helped the *L.A. Times* to win a Pulitzer

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233 Scanlan interview  
234 Thomason interview
Prize in 2004 for breaking news reporting. Carl Sessions Stepp, Jack Hart, Joe Hight, Lisa Miller, and Paul LaRocque, husband of Coaches’ Corner co-editor Paula LaRocque as well as a retired professor and part-time writing coach, were among the attendees of the first Colloquium alone.235

Murray Dies 2006

When he passed away in 2006, his former student and successful writer Janice Harayda, published an obituary on her website, One-Minute Book Reviews, “I learned of Don’s death this morning, and because it’s New Year’s Day, I thought of waiting until tomorrow to post this,” she writes. “Then I thought about that handout that says: ‘Never a day without a line’ [Nulla dies sine linea, in Latin]. It doesn’t say: ‘Except for New Year’s.’”236 Minnie Mae had passed in 2004. His last columns were published posthumously in The Boston Globe.

The University of New Hampshire held a memorial service in one of their auditoriums, Johnson Theater, and invited speakers from the Poynter Institute, UNH, students, friends, and family to speak. UNH posted a collection of stories written in Murray’s memory online.237 Lisa Miller, UNH instructor and close friend of Murray in the last years of his life, was one of the speakers at Murray’s service. “I think Don knew so many people in so many different ways that I was often being surprised by someone coming up and saying, “Don talked about you” or “Don talked about that experience or

237 unh.edu/journalism/donmurray.htm
that experience.”

Miller recounted, in an interview with the author, the large attendance for the memorial, and the lack of expectation of its success by the university:

I think the day before somebody from the dean’s office said, “Are you sure we should have it in the theater? We are afraid the theater won’t fill and won’t look right.” We just laughed. The theater was just full and packed and I don’t think we realized the impact Don had on so many people.

Others also arranged tributes and responses to Don Murray’s death. John Boe of the University of California-Davis arranged a Don Murray tribute in an issue of the journal, *Writing on the Edge*, of which he serves as editor. In the issue, Boe compiled comments from Murray taken from three occasions: an interview with him for *Writing on the Edge* in 1993, and an interview and self-interview in 2003, “on the occasion of the establishment of The Donald Murray Prize” for a work of creative nonfiction on the subject of writing. Boe also had sent out an open email requesting responses to Murray’s death, which were emailed back and then collected into the issue. Chris Thaiss, now director of the University Writing Program at the University of California-Davis, recalled that Murray visited the Northern Virginia Writing Project (a professional development program for teachers, an affiliate of the National Writing Project, and partnered with George Mason University) several times, particularly in the program’s early years in the late 70s. Patrick Bizzaro, a poet and regularly published contributor to *College Composition and Communication*, described a mistake that highlighted Murray’s humor and approach. Bizzaro had taken on a writing project for the fiftieth anniversary issue of *College Composition and Communication*. “My goal was to study

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238 Miller, Lisa, Interview with author (phone), 26 March 2010
239 Ibid
240 Boe, John. *Writing on the Edge* 17.2 (Spring 2007), 3
241 Thaiss, Chris, “This Santa of a Man,” *Writing on the Edge* 17.2. (Spring 2007), 11-12
the dissertations of several first-generation compositionists to see if research methods they learned as students of literature carried over into the theorizing they did as compositionists,” Bizzaro explained. “I had hoped to include Don in this study, having been profoundly influenced by him, a writer myself teaching writing.”

Bizzaro found a dissertation attributed to a Donald M. Murray, and contacted the New Hampshire Don Murray, who hadn’t written the work. Bizzaro received a letter from Murray in return for his, which he kept on his office desk:

Dear Professor Bizzaro:

I am flattered by your description of my educational credentials.

I flunked out of North Quincy High School. I was granted an AB degree from the University of New Hampshire. I did graduate work—not in English—at Boston University but refused to allow my advisor to change the facts and the conclusions in my master’s thesis and put his name on it so I do not have a master’s degree. More to your point, I considered applying for a doctoral degree in English Literature—like David Bartholomae I would have studied Thomas Hardy, his poetry not his novels—but decided that if I did graduate study that emphasized literary criticism I would develop a life-long case of literary constipation. Instead I have committed the sin of publication promiscuity [diarrhea?] I am convinced I would not have written had I gone on to graduate literary study. Obviously I do not belong in your interesting study.

I believe the Henry James dissertation was written by a Donald M. Murray who was—and still may be—on the faculty of Northern Illinois University. 243

Many of Murray’s books continue to stay in print. The Eugene Patterson Library of the Poynter Institute opened and continues to sort and compile the Donald M. Murray Collection, which includes publications, manuscripts, speeches, interviews, correspondence, World War II memorabilia and photographs. The true continuing voice

242 Bizzaro 2007: 16
243 Ibid, 17
of Murray comes from the application of his practice. Writing instructors, members and participants of the Poynter Institute, and good journalists all actively continue to promote what was left by his legacy.

**Poststructuralism, Post-Process, Post-Murrayesque**

In 1999, Southern Illinois University Press published *Post-Process Theory*, edited by Thomas Kent, that attempted to bring together composition theorists interested in moving beyond what they felt was a variety of shortcomings of the previous generations of process approach theory. In Kent’s introduction he begins with a general, binding claim along the lines of a manifesto pronouncement: “Most post-process theorists hold three assumptions about the act of writing: (1) writing is public; (2) writing is interpretive; and (3) writing is situated.”

Of the first declaration, that writing is public, Kent asserts that writing takes place as a “specific communicative interaction occurring among individuals at specific historical moments and in specific relations with others and with the world.” Due to the fact that all of these relations are constantly in flux in an ever-changing contemporary history, “no process can capture what writers do during these changing moments and within these changing relations.” That is to say, to the post-process group, what the process movement got wrong was their emphasis on pushing a codified, ever-ready formula for the development of a work of writing. No such Platonic ideal exists, as there are too many interpretative variables in flux. Instead, post-process theory replaces

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244 Kent, Thomas, “Introduction,” *Post-Process Theory: Beyond the Writing-Process Paradigm*, ed. Thomas Kent (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 1
245 Ibid, 1-2
246 Ibid, 2
“process” with what Kent calls “hermeneutic guesswork,” in which the writer and instructor engage in a series of “interpretive” moves to develop an understanding of the text, its mission, and the “reception and the production of the discourse.” The term is a broad, never-ending act that spirals into a final product, a written work, but makes no absolute, defined statements about the steps of writing, as Kent claims the writing process, despite its best intentions, ultimately demands.

Particularly in the nineties, the writing process method began to get heat from both sides of English scholarship: from the “left,” who found the method too rigid and dismissive of cultural backgrounds, a byproduct of the rising popularity of cultural studies-based disciplines, and by the right, who found writing process theory too pedestrian, to decentralized, or too unacademic. Murray noted it himself in 1993, reprinted in the Murray dedication issue of Writing on the Edge in 2007: “I have been well treated: promoted, tenured, published, invited to speak. But lately I’ve had some strange rejections. In one recent rejection my work was described as ‘quaint.’”

Peter Elbow noted the decline in popularity of the writing process approach:

I think part of this reaction against Ken Macrorie and Murray and me came along with a period in the late 80s and 90s in which the field of composition wanted to be a real grown up, fancy position like physics. It’s always from the beginning been linked with teaching, and that’s a bit unfancy. It lacked a kind of unified theory. Physics has a unified theory. Composition was a big fat mess compared to physics because there was no unified theory.

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247 Ibid, 2-3
248 Boe 2007: 4
249 Elbow, Peter, Interview with author (phone), 17 Jan. 2010
Elbow identified Jim Berlin as a key dissenter to the process approach, instead advocating the kind of empirical theory that could, in his view, better unite composition studies:

What [Jim] Berlin was doing was saying we need a theory, a right and single theory. So it was an attempt for the field of composition to become a fancy, grown-up field unified by a single theory. That meant criticism of people like Macrorie and Murray and me. We didn’t talk much about theory, so that’s that. The implicit theory, Berlin’s thing is that we were wrong because it was too linked to the person, self, individual. So that helped explain the reaction, and when the field went that direction—“we need a theory and Berlin is right because his is attractive in the most modern era”—the degree to which this way of writing went into the doghouse is very strong.\(^{250}\)

Thomas Newkirk held to a similar idea of how Murray’s work was receiving scrutiny:

People like James Berlin and people who were interested in cultural criticism—people more interested in academic writing—saw what he was doing as not aligned with a sort of analytic academic mission that they saw themselves part of. His approach doesn’t give you the critical tools to challenge the kind of cultural ideologies that you need to talk back to. You write a personal narrative about your mother coping with cancer, but it doesn’t necessarily give you the tools to discuss disease and medicine in our culture, etc. There’s kind of an intellectual component they thought of as not being there as Don and others described it.\(^{251}\)

Though Newkirk believed Berlin’s characterization of Murray and the writing process movement as “expressionstic” to be an intentionally subversive move, Donald Daiker disagreed with this idea. “As I remember it, when Berlin used the phrase “expressivist” this was not a derogatory term. He was just categorizing things.”\(^{252}\)

Academic work also began to get criticized as sounding too much like Don Murray. One rejection, a print representation of a conference paper, was criticized and ultimately rejected by reviewer reading his work by blind submission who called it

\(^{250}\) Ibid  
\(^{251}\) Newkirk Interview  
\(^{252}\) Daiker Interview
“Murrayesque.”253 In the Writing on the Edge tribute to Murray, nonfiction writer Robert Root (who was also winner of the 2006 Donald Murray Prize, given by the National Council of Teachers of English to honor the best nonfiction work on teaching and/or writing during that calendar year) called the incident his favorite “Murray anecdote,” which Murray recounted to Root himself.254 He responded to this criticism by questioning academic trends to trounce the previous generation:

To my mind the reviewer, either by preferring the numbingly indistinguishable uniformity of academic prose or suggesting that Murrayesque ideas were passé, was inadvertently identifying two dilemmas of composition as a field: the reluctance to recognize the individuality of writers and the obsession with continual reinvention.255

Donald Daiker recalled his memory of what Newkirk and Lisa Miller, in The Essential Don Murray, called an “infamous” rejection:

He had been at a conference and given a paper, and the editor of a journal—I think it might have been Writing Program Administration—the editor of WPA invited Murray to turn his conference presentation into a paper. Murray submitted a written version of his conference presentation to the journal and had it rejected. Of the two reviewers, one said it was wonderful and the other said, “This is juvenile stuff.”256

Daiker proposed this event then be turned into a panel at a College Composition and Communication conference. One of the panelists was University of Arizona professor Edward M. White, who Daiker called “probably the single most important voice in composition evaluation—writing evaluation,” as well as “a good guy.”257 White did not speak favorably of Murray’s work:

253 Newkirk and Miller, The Essential Don Murray: Lessons From America’s Greatest Writing Teacher, ed. Thomas Newkirk and Lisa C. Miller (Pompeobury, NH: Heinemann, 2009), x
254 Root, Robert, “A Few Words on Donald Murray,” Writing on the Edge 17.2 (Spring 2007), 12-13
255 Ibid
256 Daiker Interview
257 Ibid
…he more or less said that he thought Don Murray’s work was not scholarly enough. It was not serious enough. It was too casual. It was too anecdotal. If you divide the composition and rhetoric field into composition and rhetoric, Don Murray was not embraced by those who did rhetoric. The more composition focused you were, the more likely you were to embrace Murray. The scholarly theoreticians would say, “What more is there to say about the teaching of writing, et cetera?”

This may have stemmed from previous criticisms of the writing processes’ “expressionistic” style, and despite the skeptical attitude many supporters of Murray shared toward such “naysayers,” critics of Murray were often moving to progress teaching in a way that accommodated an increasingly globalized state, new theories of cultural studies, and interdisciplinary approaches. Perhaps ethnography would not be possible in its current state without the contributions of a new generation, who like Murray and his peers in an earlier time, were inclined to call themselves progressive. The next generation of composition studies generally expressed interest in discussing the lack of the “ideal voice,” instead a polyphony of individuals with various cultural backgrounds and personal experiences. Peter Elbow called much of this debate purely political at its apex, but now less so:

I think you’ll find people who feel loyal and affectionate to Murray feeling a little besieged and defensive, a little shot down. There was a party line, and the party line was Berlin. It said Murray and Elbow—they really neglected Macrorie—were not on the party line. There’s a lot of defensiveness with people who looked at Murray and me because they felt under attacked. The party line is less rigid now—feminism helped break it down. It’s more diverse, more catholic. It used to be all about politics.

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258 Ibid
259 Elbow Interview
Chapter 5

Conclusion

This thesis evolved from a little, italicized dedication in a book. What did it mean for Roy Peter Clark to call Donald and Minnie Mae Murray the “godparents to a nation of writers?”

This investigation led to the discovery of an array of testimony about the role of Don Murray. Murray had published newspaper and magazine articles, Pulitzer-winning editorial columns, essays, and books, but it increasingly seemed as though it was something else, his social presence, that made his ideas stick.

This research sought to pair Murray’s successes as evidenced on print and by the writing of his peers, followers, and those who followed them with a look at the way Murray spread his writing process by individual contact. How did his personality and character play into his influence? When people said he influenced them, what did they mean by that? How does personal individual interaction have any effect on anyone new now that he has passed away?

The interviews play the key role in telling of Murray’s reach through the variant sounds of a range of voices. Individual subjects recalled personal stories, stories of Murray, and stories of members of Murray’s boarder community of writers. It was that basic term writer that allowed Murray to circumscribe his process approach around English academia, composition studies, rhetoric programs, education programs and teachers of all grade levels, and journalists alike. The idea was two-fold: how to discover the writer within, and how to encourage others to discover the writer within—writing and

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Clark 2006: dedication page
teaching. Murray balanced, managed, and sometimes combined both sides of a curious dichotomy of newsroom and classroom. He was a practicing writer and journalist who moved into academia, where he helped generate an entire approach to a new field, composition studies, only then to spread his academic approach back into the newsroom. This presents a case of dissemination and influence. He helped invigorate two newspapers, at minimum, *The Providence Journal* and *The Boston Globe*, to reset their agenda as reporters and place a greater emphasis on writing. He maintained a relationship that many described as a mentorship with hundreds of individuals in a variety of disciplines.

This study proposed that one writing culture, the writing process movement, which heralded Murray as central figure and promoter, helped influence attitudes toward writing in the news media, as well as in other publicly disseminated publications and programs. The writing process additionally served as the groundwork for Sondra Perl’s New York City Writing Project, an institution serving thousands of New York City public school teachers, and contributed ideological framework for other programs. Murray’s work had an important effect on the development of composition studies as a legitimate and researchable discipline, as noted in interviews with Andrew Merton, Thomas Newkirk, and Peter Elbow, in addition to a variety of print testimonies, such as the writing process history *Taking Stock*, edited by Lad Tobin and Thomas Newkirk of the University of New Hampshire, Murray’s base of operations.

There were several limitations to the project. One was the lack of availability or access in regard to interviews. For example, Bonnie Sunstein of the University of Iowa was ill and would be an important person to talk to. Another was the number of deceased
individuals along Murray’s timeline. Recently, Ken Macrorie passed away. Some accounts could not be collected of earlier events in Murray’s life. The daybooks could also be further explored. Further study into the number of writing coaches and the extent to which they declined as newspaper budgets fell in the nineties could be conducted. A long trail exists of Murray’s work and the work and accounts of his peers, and this thesis has only attempted to surface a microcosm of a visibly heftier biography.

And perhaps Murray’s work paid off. The Globe won five Pulitzers. The Journal, according to its former reporters who worked under Murray’s guidance, was a raucous to be seen—a place where great writing and experimentation thrived. And the same could be said of other papers, like the St. Petersburg Times, right in the Mecca of quality newswriting advocacy, or the Portland Oregonian, where a charismatic Jack Hart, influenced by Don Fry and Roy Peter Clark, who were influenced by Donald Murray and the writing process began working with journalists to produce award-winning, long-form narrative work the paper and their magazine, Northwest. Coaches’ efforts were further institutionally supported by the American Society of Newspaper Editors’ initiatives to promote quality newspaper writing. Then there were dozens of writing coaches. And there was Coaches’ Corner, which gave folks like Murray, Fry, Clark, Hart, Salsini, and others another place to converse and maintain a community. As some interview subjects eluded, this attitude—the coaches, the initiatives, the conferences, Poynter’s workshops—tended to have a recursive effect, snowballing upon itself and creating its own snow to add. Until, due to a lack of funds in the newsroom, things declined. Murray’s ideas became less popular, too pedestrian, too expressionist, too un-postmodern. However, just as Murray and others were cited as hauling in new ideas as a
response to a previous generation, “post-process” advocates could not have come to their stances without the introduction of the writing process approach.

Whether Murray’s work will continue to have a discernable influence in the public or academic world is not clear. Though Murray’s death drew individuals from across the country and from a variety of institutions to discuss the importance of his work, Murray’s work may no longer be at the forefront of composition or the interests of newspapers. Shirley Brice Heath, an intellectual historian whose specialization is in the history of language and literacy, questions how Murray’s work will fit with the theoretical frameworks most lived and promoted today. Heath worked with Murray at the Poynter Institute and at the Bread Loaf School of English in Middlebury College. Heath explains her greater concern that due in part to the lasting effects of postmodernism, in part from the emphases in popular society and culture, Americans have less and less interest in studying history and influence. “There is a loss of memory for the importance of history, and along with that has come the importance of depth,” she said. “I do not think with either of them in 20 years we will be able to track any influence, except at institutions like Poynter, which has as its business maintaining some kind of intellectual history. That’s why they have archives and some pretty stellar scholars.” However, Heath reflects a particular skepticism toward postmodernism and claims it to be eradicating history. In addition, her claim is not that influence would not exist by perhaps three, four, or more degrees of separation from Murray’s original work, but that they will become increasingly untraceable and increasingly less interesting to the public. She identifies her own bias:

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261 Heath, Shirley Bryce, Interview with author (phone), 25 April 2010
I can’t be encouraging, but you can’t exactly trust my view. I am an intellectual historian, and they tend to lament something they have dedicated themselves to in their lives.²⁶²

This study took the interesting challenge of employing a postmodernism-inspired theory of contemporary ethnography to discuss a group whose primary source of criticism and perhaps ultimate alienation came from tenets postmodernism. However, in doing so it produced results: evidence of Donald Murray’s influence, a tracing of his career and his work’s dissemination, and a placing of Murray in the context of society, writing cultures, and history.

These testimonies illuminate how influence spread among individuals interested in strengthening their craft. It identifies the source of a bridge between the academic and public communities, and how one influenced the other. “I think he was one of the first individuals in the world of English education that I would consider a real crossover figure,” said Shirley Bryce Heath of Murray. “Crossover meaning he crossed from what we typically called the real world into the academic world, and back. He was always crossing over as a writer but with the mindfulness of a reader.” The study demonstrates how accounts combining public and interpersonal dialogues can provide testimony to an attitudinal change in thought. It exemplifies the role of ethnography as collecting voices to illuminate sources of societal and cultural development. Murray continues to live in the print and spoken stories current and future generations of writers.

²⁶² Ibid
Appendix: Interview Transcriptions and Notes

Author’s Note: The following are transcriptions of interviews with the author. The transcripts are in chronological order by date of the interview. A flexible standard was created for the questions asked of each participant in the study. Interviewees were first generally given an open-ended moment to pontificate at their discretion their self-identified relationship with Murray or his work and any relevant stories or experiences that initially come to mind in regard to this topic. Interviewees were then asked questions related to their own area of profession or study and whether they felt such practice was influenced or informed by Murray. Following this, subjects were questioned as to whether they felt a like-mindedness among either current practitioners in said area of work or that one existed in relation to Murray. For interviews over the phone, the author’s questions are not listed, but in general follow the direction above.
The Interviews: Brief Bios

Andrew Merton,
Professor and Chair of English, University of New Hampshire

Roy Peter Clark,
Vice President, Dean of Faculty, and Senior Scholar of the Poynter Institute

Chip Scanlan,
Faculty member of the Poynter Institute and current Visiting Associate Processor, Columbia University

Gene Patterson

Don Fry
Poynter Institute faculty turned independent writing coach, author of 17 books, former professor of English at Stony Brook University and the University of Virginia

Peter Elbow
Professor of English Emeritus, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, author of several books published on pedagogy, particularly on freewriting

Jack Hart
Recently retired as writing coach of the Portland *Oregonian*

Wayne Worcester
Former journalist, now professor at the University of Connecticut
University of New Hampshire undergraduate student

Thomas Newkirk
Professor of English, University of New Hampshire

Donald Daiker
Professor Emeritus of English, Miami University in Ohio

Hugh Morgan
Professor Emeritus of English, Miami University in Ohio

Mimi Schwartz
Nonfiction author, former professor
Kevin Sullivan
Reporter for The Washington Post and 2003 Pulitzer Prize winner for international reporting with his wife Mary Jordan

Sondra Perl
Professor of English at Lehman College and the Graduate Center of CUNY; cofounder of the New York City Writing Project

Tommy Thomason
Founding Director, Texas Christian University Schieffer School of Journalism

Lisa Miller
Professor, University of New Hampshire

Carl Sessions Stepp
Professor, University of Maryland; former writing coach (various newspapers); Senior Editor, American Journalism Review

Robert Wyss
Associate Professor, University of Connecticut; former reporter, Providence Journal

Joe Hight
Director of Information and Development, Oklahoma City Oklahoman

Ben Yagoda
English professor and author, University of Delaware

Ron Winslow
Deputy Editor, Health and Science, The Wall Street Journal; former professor, University of New Hampshire

Paul Salsini
Novelist; former writing coach, the Milwaukee Journal

Jack Driscoll
Editor-In- Residence, MIT Media Laboratory; former Executive Editor, Managing Editor, Vice President, Boston Globe

Shirley Bryce Heath
Intellectual historian and linguistic anthropologist, history of literacy and the teaching of language; professor, Brown and Stanford Universities
Andrew Merton, 5 May 2010, phone.

I was an undergraduate at UNH. Actually, I was here before he was. I was a freshman in fall 1962. Don was hired to establish the J-School in the fall of 1963. One year later, I took basic news-writing. My impression changed. At first, I thought he was a tough, no-nonsense newspaper guy. He taught the inverted pyramid and basic techniques. He was very directive. There was no discussion. He tried to simulate newsroom conditions. He would give exercises to do under tight deadlines.

He changed over time.

He had many interests. He was one of the founders of the writing process method of teaching writing. He went 180 degrees to not being directive at all and to having everything come from the students. If I disagreed, I told him. He thought anything that students did was good.

In the early stages, there was no emphasis on revision. Five to seven years later, he swung back at least halfway the other way. He wrote a book on revision.

I graduated from UNH in 1967. I had no idea of teaching. I wanted a newspaper job. I worked in Gloucester, Massachusetts and at the Boston Herald. I came to teach, a hiring facilitated by Don. Don got me the job. I modeled my classes after Murray’s but Murray had moved.

He picked up a column in The Boston Globe. He was only writing for a general audience at that time. Most writing there was for professionals of writing. Don was the ultimate workaholic. He was teaching, writing, and flying everywhere.

When I was a junior faculty member, he was very protective of me. At that time it was the seventies. The journalism program at UNH was not separate from the English department. Don was hired out of the English department. People were very skeptical of that. The Ph.D.’s in literature were…this idea of a guy coming in with just a B.A. bothered people. It was still that way ten years later when I came in. He would stand up for me.

They couldn’t do anything about Don because he already had tenure. The “old fogies” rallied. At the end of his life I finally got the chance to reciprocate some. After his wife died he was at loose ends. I had him over every Tuesday for dinner. All the things he did, he never thought it was enough. Every Tuesday he would bring a gift. It was usually music; he was a big music lover.

Writing was Don’s religion. I don’t think he was actually religious but that was his religion. It was a ritual. He had to do it. He had a Latin motto: never a day without a line. He taped it on the office door and in the office. He felt that if he didn’t get writing done
every day, that was a sin. For me, it wasn’t. Two people from the sort-of third generation UNH in the 80s were very close with Don: Lisa Miller and Ton Newkirk. Also, Jane Herrigan was close.
How do you see Don Murray in the kind of work that you are doing right now, and the kind of work you did with Writing Tools? How do you see the way that he approached the process in your own work?

I think Chip remembers as I do, as sort of a seminar, where the three of us were together for the first time ever. Murray wrote on the chalkboard and then handed out a piece of paper that had these seven or eight words on them (“writing may be magical, but it is not magic”). And those words probably stimulated the intellectual life of the Poynter Institute as much as any other lesson that has been taught here. It just opened the door to years and years of exploration about what writers have in common, what's different about them, what generalizations you can make, how you account for eccentricities that writers often exhibit.

Journalists are sort of skeptical of theory and nervous about it and are more likely to be trained to see the world as a storehouse of stories rather than as a storehouse of ideas. Murray was offering a theory about how writers work and how writing works. He was doing things that I'd never seen a teacher do before. He was not just lecturing on writing, but he was asking his students to write on a regular basis. He would write with and for his student. He, for the first time that I've seen, mastered the art and craft of the one-on-one writing conference, which became a very crucial part of both his work in composition and his work in journalism. They're analogs: the editor in the newsroom talking to the writer, asking the writer questions, telling the writer what to work on or listening to the writer, and what the teacher does in the writing classroom in any field of study. So it is that foundation of theory and craft that ignited my imagination, and the influence has not by any means been exhausted yet.

Writing in my own daybook, which is the same model that Murray used, I wrote on the plane to New York and conceived of this structure of perhaps a small book in which I define twenty common problems that writers run into and strategies for solving these problems. As I did it, I was hearing Murray's voice in my head. I was thinking about how he would approach such a thing. I was trying to distinguish myself from Murray. It's always an issue when you have a strong coach or teacher: how much you imitate and how much you innovate. I think for each one of us who has worked closely with Don, he has allowed us to find a way to hook on to his best work but to transform it into our best work. That was a significant contribution.

One of those things I say about Don—it's one of those exaggerations that's impossible to disprove—is that it's hard for me to think of a more influential writing teacher in the history of education. I say that because he had a distinguished career as a writer, and then was one of the founding parents of the writing process movement. In addition to that, he did all this work with professional writers and journalists. I think one of the things that happened that saddens me occasionally is that the composition field, like other parts of
the academic world during the last twenty years, I'd say, became sort of highly politicized, ideological in many of its manifestations. A lot of people who could be teaching writing are using composition to do something else. Don and I had conversations about this.

*Not to name names, but what would be an example of that?*

For example, postmodern literary theory that grew out of places like Yale and many other institutions over the last twenty or thirty years, the growth of programs such as gender studies, attention to issues of race and diversity...that there is a sort of school of composition teaching that is really more about critical analysis of texts than it was about the creation of pieces of writing. I don't think that movement has helped college students become better writers.

*To tap into your English background for one second, it feels like you're suggesting criticism of the postmodernists, who were critical of the New Critics, and the New Critics, who would also be critical of teaching writing by the practice of writing itself. So are you saying that both of these camps at opposite ends of the playing field are missing out?*

Well, I am a New Critic by training, in the field of literature, and I am a writing process altar boy as a result of my early training in how to teach composition. I have never, ever felt tension between these two fields of thought because what the New Critics taught me was how to read closely and critically, and how to look at a text and the effects that a text had on me as a reader and other readers as well. What I thought was missing from the New Criticism was that there was never enough attention on how what I call the x-ray reading of a text could help you become a better writer.

I can give you an example. (Gets up and selects *The Great Gatsby*) Let's just take one of the standard texts that would have been canonized in the first half of the twentieth century in the United States. So you read this, and you read the ending, and it's a famous ending:

And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby’s wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter—to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther...And one fine morning—

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.
I know journalists and other people who have just sort of memorized that text and thought about it and studied it and appreciated it in its language and the power of its thought. When I was writing a chapter on endings for the book *Writing Tools*, I said, "Well I should go back and revisit that ending." When I read it I said, "I remember the ending, but I don't remember where the ending comes from." As an instinct or intuition, I just went back to the beginning of the book, and I read the first chapter. At the end of the first chapter, the narrator says:

I decided to call to him. Miss Baker has mentioned him at dinner, and that would do for an introduction. But I didn't call to him, for he gave a sudden intimation that he was content to be alone – he stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and, far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far way that might have been the end of a dock. When I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished, and I was alone again in the unquiet darkness.

So, in my reading—in my interpretation, in following my intuition—I found the early source in the book for the ending. Chapter one has an ending that foreshadows the ending that's at the end of the book. If I were to teach that now, I would use that New Critical reading skill to make the connection between those two elements of the texts, and then I would use the writing process to say, look, this is not just an effect. It's a strategy that causes this effect. There is a scene planted at the end of the first chapter, and you will not become fully aware of it until you read the very end of the book. And people who read the end of the book, will have forgotten that it appeared at the end of the first chapter. You have to study the text. You have to read it more than once to get a feel for it, to sort of see it. If you read *Writing Tools*, what you'll see is that I'm doing close readings of texts for the purposes of translating those effects to reveal the strategies of the writer that created those effects, and to share those strategies with aspiring writers of every age and every background.

There's a generosity in what Don taught me that is fairly rare in education around the world. I've heard it from writers in France. I recently heard it in Denmark when I visited there: people saying, "You don't know how hungry we are here for this kind of strategic advice on how to make meaning. And when people get that knowledge here, they keep it to themselves or they turn it into abstractions. What we admire about you Americans," they say, "is your capacity and generosity in making this practical and powerful, and not keeping it to yourself but sharing it with others."

*I guess this kind of still fits into this, "how do you see Don Murray in your own writing" question: reading Murray's daybooks has been fascinating because I get to see his dialogue with himself. Everybody edits themselves whether they are doing it explicitly or not, but he is creating a dialogue with himself that is to an extent ideological, that is its*
own theory in a way. Do you feel like he compelled writers to entertain this kind of dialogue, and where would we find this kind of dialogue today?

I notice that when I'm looking at Book Talk, for example, on CSPAN, I get a little frustrated sometimes by the fact that ninety-eight percent of the conversation is about the content of the book, where the writer of the book, at a bookstore or a conference, is responding to questions: about World War II, or about AIDS, or whatever the content of the book happened to be. I think that it's such a missed opportunity to fail to engage the writer in a discussion of the writer's methods. That failure is a kind of lost opportunity to see the world not just as it appears on the page, but to see it and understand it as it involves over time. Don gave me a book that was highly influential. It's a little blue book called Authors at Work. So Don gave me this book. This is a book that came form a manuscript exhibit at a museum. It's filled with pages in which we have a handwritten manuscript that has been marked significantly, probably by the author himself though I think in some cases it may have been done by an editor. Here is a beautiful page from Balzac (shows camera). What you are seeing here is actually a galley proof that he has marked up, almost like Egyptian hieroglyphics. But each of these markings reveals a thought or idea that the author had. Or a doubt, or an experiment, or something like that. One of the things that has been lost a little bit by the new word processing technologies is the preservation of earlier drafts and revisions so that the evolution of an idea is less transparent now than I think it was in some of the older technologies. Word processing systems can track changes, but it's sort of not the way that most writers use the new technologies, I think. One of the things that I've written about, that's going to be a chapter in my new book, is here's Shelly and one of his most famous poems, "Ode to a Skylark," and what you see here at the top is that he's edited the title. His original title was "To the Skylark," and he's taken the word "the" and crossed it all up and he's put "a" on top of that. That change of "the" to "a" was highly significant for Shelly.

It's one of my jobs as a reader and a writer and a teacher to ask that question. What Murray does is to make some of those decisions even more transparent by essentially creating a kind of meta-narrative about the working of his mind and the steps that he takes in creating a text. I have not studied the daybooks myself, but I have seen enough of them to remember how powerful that was. That level of self-consciousness is not necessarily helpful for every writer. I have noticed it is the same way with athletes. There are some athletes who are highly self-critical and very much aware of the physical process they use to accomplish some sort of athletic feat, while others just sort of step up to the plate and swing and let their natural talent come forth. In the old days of baseball, Mike Schmitt, Hall of Fame third baseman, used to talk about hitting in terms of torque and bat speed and things like that. When Hank Aaron used to hold clinics, he would swing. He would say, "Here's what I do and here's how I look when I do it." I guess I would come down on the side of sort of a field called rhetorical grammar, which I've not seen any curriculum incorporate as fully and as helpfully as it could. I learned that when someone accused me, in a friendly way, of being one. He said, "I know what you are, Mr. Clark, you're a rhetorical grammarian. You hardly care at all about grammar as a sort of technical etiquette. You're looking for the strategies of language that cause certain kinds
of effects." That's exactly what I'm interested in. I'm crying, "How did he do that?!" I'm outraged, "How did she do that?!" I'm part of that equation as a reader, of course, but it's influenced by the work of the writer.

_We did that in Jacqui's class._

Yeah. I call it x-ray reading. She calls it diagnostic editing, I think. I come at it from my background in literary criticism, and she comes at it more from her background in story editing and news judgment. But I think it's the same act.

_She would come up to the board and give us a variety of scenarios and have us solve the problem. Instead of solve the text it was solve the story._

I'm interested in things like the tension between two words or two phrases or two scenes. I remember writing an essay, maybe in my freshman year in college, about a short story that Thomas Mann wrote, translated from German to English. The title of the story is "Tonio Kroeger.” It’s the first name and last name of the main character. When you read it, you realize it's about the tension of civilizations: Northern European and Southern European civilizations, the hot and the cold, both in temperament and environment. Tonio Kroeger's mother is Italian and his father is German, so he has a German last name and an Italian first name. So Tonio Kroeger: you have a title and a name of the character that absolutely embodies the thematic tension throughout the entire story.

Then suddenly I'm sitting and watching an episode of “Buffy the Vampire Slayer”, and I realize that the author there, for a very different purpose, has taken these two elements which don't really seem to belong together—the stereotypical name of the high school valley girl Buffy and vampires. A vampire slayer's name should be Van Helsing or something like that. So I see when the Philadelphia Enquirer did its big narrative stories on the meltdown of Three Mile Island, the nuclear power plant, the author of the main part of the story opens with the scene of these boron rods collapsing and all this radiation shooting out of the containment building. While outside, workers on their lunch hour are playing Frisbee with each other. I'm looking at these things, and it involves high literary art, popular culture, and journalism: there's something about taking these two things, pulling them up, and letting them exist in this sort of tension that obviously has power because you can find it in these different venues.

_I find this stuff personally fascinating. I am beginning to explore similar regions. Last semester I wrote a paper on Wordsworth as a journalist and Wordsworth's articulations of the subjective. What I hear you talking about, and what's interesting from the conversation here, is how Don Murray evolves from some English. I've heard quite a bit about how Don Murray evolves from journalists. Now I'm hearing quite a bit about how Don Murray evolves from English. I can feel Cleanth Brooks in Don Murray. I can feel James Tate in Don Murray as much as I feel some of the journalists from the fifties or the forties--the early Boston Herald journalists he was working with while he was writing. I have two more big questions. The last question I'll save for the end is to ask you how you_
feel that Don Murray shaped the Poynter Institute's methods and history, but stepping back a little bit, could you talk a little bit more about that history when you came down and met Don Murray for the first time, when you saw what was going on at The Providence Journal and The Boston Globe? Could you talk a little bit more about what was happening then and what was happening around the time that you wrote your first book? What else was going on in your career?

One of the things that I think Don appreciated in my early work was the sort of requirement, since I had no journalism background, to be an eager and avid learner of how journalists work and how they understood the process. Don was engaged in a research project that refers to a method called protocol analysis. Somebody had essentially just wired him up, just carrying around somebody else's tape recorder. During the course of his writing, he was asked to dictate what he was thinking and what he was doing at various points. And so scholars in the composition field and other fields were sort of interested in what he was doing, how he was thinking, how he was working, what his expectations were, what his aspirations were toward writing in general and for a particular piece of writing. Every one of those books up there from the winners of the ASNE Distinguished Writing Awards contains interviews with the writer about how the writer solved the challenges presented by the work, both in reporting and in writing, and, in some cases, editing as well. When I told Gene Patterson, who had hired me, that I was going to do that, he shook his head and said something like, "Journalists weren't smart enough to tell you...the good ones just do it." I did nine out of ten things that Gene Patterson has ever told me, but I had total confidence in this method of working and understanding. And there were parallels for it. There were the Paris Review interviews. There was the sort of evolution of ethnography as a discipline as certain expressions of anthropology.

That was going to be my next question.

So sometimes these things don't happen very often, not for me, in a linear way. Don would say the writing process isn't linear, it's recursive. It sort of loops back on itself. That's the way I've always sort of integrated these various intellectual areas and tried to translate them to make them as practical as possible for anybody who has listened to me or taken a class or read what I was doing. I think I caught Murray's curiosity about how writers work. I think my instincts, because of my training, were more literary than his, whereas he had a practical understanding of what professional writers do from having done it himself. That was his preparation and his training.

You talked about ethnography. I focused my thesis' theoretical backing as a creation of writing culture, which is often considered an ethnographic study. I was going to ask as a blanket question whether you feel like Don Murray created a writing culture. Knowing that the answer is somewhere along the lines of yes, how do you feel that a writing culture was created, or what kind of writing culture existed around Murray, or whether there was some other center, or whether there was a foil to Murray that was happening
at the same time? If I needed to draw the landscape, a mind-map, of it, what would it look like?

There's a scholar who used to teach at Stanford—I think she's still there—named Shirley Brice Heath, who actually met Murray down here at Poynter one time. Shirley Heath has done a lot of work in language cultures. Some of her interests revealed things to me-ways of thinking, ways of learning- that were quite different from what I was learning from Don and also quite different form what I was learning from critical study of literature. It's a name that might be useful to you. She has done some with children and with journalists, and she also had a child—I think a daughter—who sustained a brain injury from a skiing accident. It took that child a significant amount of time to regain her language skills. Shirley Heath has written about that, not in intensely personal ways but in scholarly ways about language acquisition and things like that. Very interesting. Well I think Don allowed me to recognize some of the limitations in my own education, which came from a culture of teaching and learning which the Brazilian education scholar Paulo Freire refers to as the banking model. I pretty much grew up in the banking model, which was that my teachers were the depositors and I was the bank. What Don did was just turn that upside down for me. He demonstrated that the teacher was a resource, potentially, for the student. Although the teacher created rules, structures, protocols that governed the behavior of the students in many ways, many of the choices that teachers had made for me Don expected the student to make using him as a resource. I don't know what sort of perfect storm of influences made the University of New Hampshire and the New Hampshire area in general a kind of a ground zero of a lot of powerful creative work in the area of writing and learning. I don't know the history of that other than that Don came from New Hampshire and went to the University of New Hampshire if I'm not mistaken.

Charles Simic was up there at the same time.

I don't know him very much but I know the work of Donald Graves. Do you know Donald Graves much? Are you related to Donald Graves at all?

No, I'm not.

Donald Graves is the author of that book (points to a book) and together, because Graves was interested in the writing of children and because Murray was interested in the writing of adults, and they were very close friends in many ways, they sort of dominated the field, at least in my imagination. They, like other sort of great academic leaders, created this sort of school of thought, this way of teaching and way of writing and way of knowing that influenced the next generation of teachers and scholars. So Graves and Murray helped create a woman named Lucy Calkins, who teaches at Columbia Teachers College now. She hired me to come and work a couple of days there a few months ago. I've known her for many years now, and she basically is responsible for most of the affected writing instruction in the city of New York and the New York metropolitan area. Nancy Atwell became the voice, at one point, in teaching middle school students, and so Tom Newkirk was a kind of advocate of both of these teachers. I'm sort of interested in
this: I don't know if you follow professional football very much, but the coach that turned the Tampa Bay Buccaneers around was Tony Dungy, who eventually won a Super Bowl with the Indianapolis Colts and retired recently. What's really interesting is that if you look at the family tree of coaches, it tends to be a very, very powerful set of influences. You have a player who plays for a coach who becomes a very knowledgeable player and eventually becomes a young coach, and so you have these two, three, four generations and the tree gets wider and wider and wider until you realize, "Oh my god, he worked for Tony Dungy or he worked for so-and-so," sort of like a six stages of separation. It's very, very true of Murray and Graves and whatever was happening there at the University of New Hampshire.

I wanted to just throw a couple other names out of foils to what you thought Murray was doing. Don Fry has been someone who has been recommended for me to talk to quite a bit, and I haven't spoken to him yet. And someone who I have been exploring who I don't think ever met Don Murray—they may have met Don Murray, I just haven read about it yet—but Mel Mencher up in Columbia. They have met. They met here. All those figures met here at Poynter.

*How do you think that these people who are writing about journalism...Mel Mencher is writing more strictly about writing journalism, not self-conscious writing process. How do you think that they fit into this world of Don Murray?*

Somebody sent me something about whether Murray was a Platonist or not, whether he was Platonic, as opposed to Aristotelian, in his philosophy and method. I'm no expert on Greek philosophy, but I can sort of, to the extent that Murray was creating these categories, which if you move down the ladder of abstraction, would manifest themselves in specific behaviors. I'm going to make an odd case in a second. This is leading somewhere. You could argue that, in fact, he was someone who was very interested in the theory of writing as well as the practice of writing. Now Mencher, even though he very much publicly rejected the kind of thing that Murray was doing and the kind of thing that Poynter was doing—he said, "You shouldn't be teaching writing. You should be teaching reporting."—Mencher is in many ways the most famous practical theoretician of how the journalist creates stories. Let's leave writing and reporting out of the equation. Let's just talk about the creation of stories, the creation of texts. Mencher very much preached, and still does, a kind of a theoretical approach to the creation of journalistic stories. What he would say is, "You get word on the police radio that smoke was seen floating over Bayboro Harbor, and you get sent by an editor to cover this. From the beginning, as soon as that happens, the writer—and the more experienced the journalist is the more this happens—is you begin to preconceive that the story is going to be about." As soon as you start to talk about preconception, you talk about a Platonic notion of what a fire story at the harbor looks like or feels like. His models for this were sort of empirical cognitive theories, and scientific method. You begin with a hypothesis of how a story is going to turn out, you get the evidence. If the evidence matches what you do, you go with it. If the evidence is in contradiction to what you conceive, you re-conceive it and come up with a
new theory. You say, "What a minute. The smoke is over the harbor, but it's coming from All Children's Hospital." So now you're not thinking about exploding gas tanks, you're thinking about children in peril, or something like that. There were times when Mencher seemed dismissive or antagonistic of the things that we were learning from Murray and that we were using here. Once again, you have to look at the family trees. I'm a student of Don Fry in graduate school. I bring Don Fry down here. Don Fry gets to know Murray here. Chip Scanlan is a student of Mencher's, graduates from Columbia.

And Berkley [Hudson].

Yeah, and Berkley. Like I said, this is a very, very complicated family tree. But Don [Fry] became impatient, to say the least, with Mencher. I think Don's [Fry's] inclination might have been to apply Murray's notions in a too mechanical way, in a much less organic way, than Murray presented them. Don is a very, very good translator for particular audiences of people's theories, and he's an Anglo-Saxonist, a Beowulf scholar, in terms of his own training. He has all that background in the history of language and in literature. The culture of Poynter...this sort of moves to your last question...Murray as much as anyone influenced the sort of intellectual culture of the Institute: its approaches to learning and its approaches to teaching. The word process is a very, very important word at Poynter, and not just in the writing area. There's a process for editing a story. There's a process for making an ethical decision on deadline. There's a process for designing a page. There's a process for creating a multimedia story or presentation, and more than one process. But the idea is: 'how do you learn something?' You say to yourself, "This is not magic. It's the result of a set of rational steps followed by practitioners, and I can learn those steps." You can learn those steps with a little help, a little direction, a little coaching, with some reading-those kinds of things. So even people who didn't meet Murray, never studied with him, didn't write under his tutelage, have been indirectly influenced here by the powerful and influential culture we were able to create here, teaching and learning using many of Don's ideas and theories as a foundation.
First I was going to ask you to tell me a little bit about the first time you met him. You were up in Rhode Island at the time?

We met around a seminar table, actually The Providence Journal's editorial boardroom. Don had been hired as the paper's writing coach. He actually came to us by way of Poynter, which is pretty interesting. Roy had invited him to be visiting faculty in their writing center office, and one of our reporters won a best newspaper writing prize the second year, and she was at that workshop. She came back raving about that workshop and said, "You have to have him come here." I can't tell you the exact month in '81, but I was pretty excited. Don has described me as being very skeptical as I listened to him, but for me it was like a Moses and the burning bush moment, when he said those words, "Writing may be magical but it's not magic. It's a series of decisions and steps that every writer takes, no matter the length, the genre, or deadline." In many ways it was like throwing a life preserver to somebody who was desperately trying to keep his head above water, wanting to be a better writer, wanting to be a storyteller in the newsroom—wanting to be a writer in the newsroom at a time when the default...if you ask somebody in most newsrooms what they do they would say, "I'm a reporter." Journalist would have sounded too highfalutin. They sneered at that. Writer, by the same token, seemed to suggest that we were better than the reporters, we could write better. So I walked out of there just enthralled. I remember being in the boardroom. I remember Don. I don't remember what else he said that day. I'm sure he enumerated the steps of the process, but it was a milestone in my life.

He says that he remembers you being particularly challenging, asking a lot of questions, when he first met you.

Yeah, yeah. And I probably did. Did you read that in the introduction of my textbook?

Yes.

I'm sure I had a lot of questions, but I didn't think of them as challenging. I just wanted to know more about this idea of a process. I was, until then, always looking for a magic formula. I thought that's what great writers had. They were geniuses. They were gods. What they wrote was perfect. They probably had to be alcoholics, maybe live in a garret. But I tell people now if I had to describe my process, the analogy I would draw would be the scene in Sleeping Beauty when she's pricked the needle of the spinning wheel, falls into a deep sleep, Prince Charming is racing to her rescue, and the evil queen Maleficent causes this brier forest to just climb up all sides. Writing for me was being at one end of the forest, getting the assignment, and literally hacking my way through, emerging finally bruised and scratched and demoralized. I didn't know how to write. I didn't have any rational way of approaching writing. So when the writing wouldn't come, I would think there was something wrong with me. I guess I didn't have a paradigm, a view of writing. He was my first writing teacher.
Do you feel like he made writing...is it the wrong word to say that he made writing "fun"?

No. Not immediately. In fact, it didn't really become fun until maybe twelve, thirteen years ago when I embraced freewriting. I was still hung up on the idea that writing had to be opening a vein, or as Adam Loosley says, it might be Red Smith, it might be some body else (it was Gene Fowler), some other journalist: "Writing is easy, you just wait until the blood drops appear on your forehead."

But the whole idea was that it was agony, and it continued to be agonizing until I had an experience where—and I fought it, I thought the idea was just counter-intuitive: lower your standards? Just begin babbling without thinking about it? —I found myself doing it and beginning to have more success than I'd ever had as a writer, not to say I didn't have many of the insecurities of a writer. I was producing more and I was publishing in more high-profile places. And it started with just a freewrite.

How would you characterize Murray's personality? It seems that he's very successful at compelling people to feel a certain way about writing, but that his mastery is sometimes not articulated in text, that it's articulated by who he was: what type of person he was, how he spoke, and how he was able to compel others. How would you articulate that?

Well, if I understand your question, he did it by modeling. If he asked a class to write, he would write with them. If he ran a seminar, or was teaching a seminar, and he asked the group to write, he would write with them. What I've come to believe is writing is the great leveler. It's especially useful, I think, for students to see the teacher write because they can say, "Wow, that's a clumsy sentence. Gee. He's not very good. He won a Pulitzer?" So I think that's how he did it. I don't know if you'd say by force of personality, but by being more open than most teachers and by being willing to be vulnerable, to reveal to a class of students that he the teacher, the expert, was also struggling to write and to write better.

I was told a story recently about Murray. He walked into a newsroom, and I think this might have been The Providence Journal, and he was being given a tour through the newsroom. He pointed at two people and said, "They're the best journalists in the room because their mouths are moving."

That was actually The Boston Globe. The source of it was the preface to...he produced two books out of the Globe coaching experience. Writing for Your Readers was one of them, and then he updated that. I'm looking there to see if I have Writing for Your Readers. But I believe you'll find that it was Jack Driscoll. I don't know if he was the executive editor or the managing editor, but that's what he said far as I can tell you. One is a very well known Boston Globe columnist, Ellen Goodman, and a couple of others but I can't remember. I asked Jack Driscoll about that, and again it was one of those things where Don would write or say things that I thought couldn't be, but every time I plumbed deeper or asked other people about it I found that it indeed was true. So I remember
asking Jack Driscoll. He's affiliated with the MIT Media Lab. He's retired. I think he may have an office or something. I think I may have an email for him.

The focus of my thesis is an explanation of influence. I have spent a lot of time trying to define that word using ethnography to go about it, talking about creation of a writing culture, similar minds working for a creative effort. How would you say that Don Murray was influential? How would you battle claims that he wasn't as influential as others who have contributed to journalistic practice—who focus on reporting, for example. Where does his influence stand and how do you see it moving today?

I think there have been occasions where people have been hyperbolic in their description of Don. "America's greatest writing teacher." Don was pretty appalled by that description. He may have inwardly liked it, or been warmed by it. Well, let's see. He had enormous influence in the composition movement in high school and college. I don't really know the history of the composition movement, but the afterward that I have written for the book that is coming out of Don's work recounts an experience in—I think it was—Savannah, North Carolina where NCTE (National Council on Teachers of English) were vetting him. I was invited. I got up and I said, "Being here is like finding out that your father has another family." There was a journalistic family, and then there were the composition family, the Nancy Atwells and Lucy Calkins, Heinneman, who published pretty much all of his books. He was influential, I think, in encouraging journalists to be writers. There are two people in my life who were mentors, and they both have been very influential. The first one was Melvin Mencher at Columbia. Mencher believed that the role of the journalist was to pay attention to the institutions that effect people's lives. He was a reporter, and he wanted his students to be reporters. At the same time, he liked well-written work. It wasn't to say he didn't want the writing to be good, but I know he came here several times and complained that we didn't focus on reporting enough. Now this was really before my time. What he was trying to do was foster a journalism of concern. And so he assigned his students to have live-ins, where you immerse yourself in a story and the people in a story. My live-in was with a guy, a petty criminal, who had cops police his whole life because he had been not guilty. He got charged for something he didn't do, and he refused to go along with the system. And so there I was one morning, at five-o-clock on the day of his court appearance, on this linoleum floor, one-room, single-room occupancy hotel. He's sitting on the bed, his common-law wife is there, there's a bottle of brandy, there's a puddle of brandy puke. I think without Mencher's guidance I would never have been there, and it was a really important place to be. He made us go to places where you could see in a granular form what impact great institutions had on people. So when I graduated—plus you have to think about the time—I graduated from Columbia in 1974 when Watergate and Woodward and Bernstein were folk heroes, where I think a lot of my classmates wanted to be investigative reporters. So when I got out, I was doing consumer reporting and got a guy arrested, and put a scam out of business. Then, for personal reasons, I went somewhere else—to a very cronny paper where they didn't care about writing or reporting. They just cared about filling the paper, often with tips from the other paper. And so I found myself leaving journalism and eventually quit and tried to write a novel. I ran out of money and had to go back to work.
I was fortunate enough by that time that I had enough friends at the Journal that they helped me get hired there. Before Don arrived, I had found a niche very early on as a writer. We had an editor there named Joel Rawson. I'm sure Berkley has told you about him. In fact, Rawson started the writing program at The Providence Journal, the seminars and giving people things to read. He was very generous because he had started this thing, and now basically we are going to bring in this other to be writing coach. To get back to influence, I learned from Don that when he came to Providence he had a condition that the top editors had to be at the workshops. In Boston, it was very vague, and so reporters didn't know if this was a prize or a trip to the woodshed. That made for some difficulties. Joel Rawson and Chuck Hauser, who was the exec, they were there for every one. It allowed us to say things to these people, and it also allowed us to realize, “Oh, yeah, they want to be writers too.” Am I getting at it?

Yeah. This has some intersections with some of the things that Berkley and Roy have also told me.

Yeah.

Did you ever come back to that novel?

No, but I have the notebooks.

Have you thought about it?

I do think about it. I have another novel that is that same kind of...it's interesting. Don and I were the stereotypical reporters who have a novel in their desk drawer. Don wrote, I know, one novel and perhaps a second, but he wrote the first, The Man Who Had Everything, about a paraplegic, which I found really interesting. But then he gave that up to support his family. Both he and Minnie Mae grew up in the Depression. They talked about it a lot. And Don was middle class. It's hard for middle class people, I think, to be artists because of their innate sense of responsibility. There were novelists in the English department at UNH, and I remember Don saying that they didn't show up for office hours. Basically they worked at the University of New Hampshire, but job one was theirs: write fiction. Giving attention to students was definitely not on their radar. Don couldn't be like that. One thing about Don is that he really wanted to be loved by everybody. The very first time we came together, shortly after he came to Providence, I wrote this gushing fan letter and he invited my wife and I up for Easter Sunday. That was the first time that I got to sit with him. In fact, he was already awake that Easter Sunday sitting in his Morris recliner. He was very tidy. He would have his pens here, his books here, the daybooks. And he stuck to things. He was very disciplined that way.

He also wrote a ghosted novel? I see that a lot in his daybook. It seemed to be something he cared about in the late seventies, early eighties, but never felt quite comfortable with.
No. The stuff that he had to do for money—the ghosting, the book about sound recording—there's like ten copies or more in Bankers—he was doing a lot of work on spec. I sometimes wonder what would have happened to him if he hadn't won the Pulitzer Prize. He didn't even know he was entered in it. That was the way he was in those days. I think he got a promotion or a raise, and I think *Time* came after him and recruited him. As Don said, he was not a *Time* man. He wasn't Ivy league. He didn't like three martini lunches, which were standard fare. He was bombed, he couldn't do any work. He had an editor who just hated his stuff. He told a story that his direct editor submitted a piece of Don's with another guy's name on it. The editor said, "Why can't Murray write like this?"

Don always tried to be very overwhelming honest about things: "Yeah, I got fired from *Time.*" Actually what happened was that they wanted him to be like a TV Producer, right?

*They wanted him to write for TV.*

I don't know if he was in New Jersey already. He might have been. And that's when his freelance career started. But Don always said, you know, he wasn't a reporter. I don't know if you've seen, but he told me he was going to do a piece on the Pentagon and on the way he had to stop and throw up he was so anxious. His subject was himself. He did not either feel the need or the interest to doing reporting. When we could compare ourselves, I was much more of a reporter. He had a lot more confidence. Of course, it came from years of doing this, but I found it very difficult at first to write in the first person like most journalists. You learn early on if you are under the thumb of a grizzled city editor, "nobody cares what you think." I'm trying to think about the difference with Mencher. I mean all he wrote were textbooks. It was interesting. Both of them wrote textbooks. Don did not write reported work, and Mencher did not write lyrical work. I think the two of them, I don't know what they would have been like as one person, but at least my way of thinking—they're pretty good poles to be working with them.

*I've heard that Don Fry is referenced as a mediator between the two as well.*

I don't know.

*Could you talk a little bit more about your interactions with Murray from a writer's perspective: how you would send each other your work, or how you would talk about your work?*

Well, early on I was sharing drafts with him. He was giving me responses. I'm trying to remember. I think he once basically told me a story ended earlier. I always asked him, "Why are we friends? Why did I become your protégé?" He said, "You know, I've had thousands of students. How many of them sought me out?" You could go the psychological route. I lost my father when I was ten and was looking for a father figure. I certainly found one. Don was writing more frequently than I was because I was doing projects. And if I was doing a daily, I didn't really have time. Then is when I was at the nightmare Washington bureau. I didn't have time to do what I used to do with stories,
reading ledes to my wife Kathy because she was home with three infants. One of the things we started to do was write questions above the manuscript: Does this work? Should I give up writing and move to Tahiti? You know. Basically what we were getting was feedback. The thing about Don that was amazing was that if I would make a remark about a column, I'd ask a question and half an hour later he'd send me another draft. He would write the damn thing all over. Now, there was no way I could do that. He had I think an extraordinarily generative mind. If you look at what he says, "I came up with thirty-five titles for a magazine article," which is another one of those things that sounds like a war story that may be a little iffy. You look at his daybooks and you see that he did. I could barely come up with five.

I found a copy of a list of titles for his books. I think it was A Writer Teachers Writing. There were a hundred titles on the page.

He would sit there and do that at a single sitting. His beginnings as a journalist stood him a good stint because he could write fast. At one point we were going to write a mystery novel together. One thing that was a little troubling for me was Don had that novel, and I can't tell you how many first or second chapters he sent me. And I would almost beg for him not to. I'd follow his own advice: write it to the end. And he couldn't. He just couldn't. Were I his therapist I would have said, "You know, Don, you can't finish this because this novel has to make up for all the writing that doesn't measure up to a novel because of supporting a family." I believe his literary hierarchy was poetry, fiction, nonfiction. I just could not get him to finish. He was enormous supporting of all my journalism, but I would send him a short story and his criticism would be devastating. I would say to my wife, "I'm never calling him again." I was furious. We never talked about that, and the only thing I could think was that maybe he was jealous that I was writing fiction. Or maybe the fiction was so bad that his criticism was warranted. But it was such a contrast between his enthusiastic response to my journalism. You probably could construct a psychological portrait.

It would be an option for the biography to do psychoanalytic history, but I steered away from it.

I like psychoanalysis. I like analyzing. When my kids get frustrated with me, I say, "See, that's how writers are." I was going to tell you something about that. One of the most influential things Don gave me early on was a book called Seasons of a Man's Life by a Yale psychologist. I'm blanking on his name. It was basically a longitudinal study of several types of adults. There was the worker, there was the novelist, there was, I dunno, the businessman. It had a page or two on the mentor-protégé relationship. I don't think he sent it for me to read that, but that really jumped out at me because it said they usually founder. What happens is over time the protégé begins to outpace the mentor—now I don't think that happened in my case, but in this description—and becomes impatient with the mentor. The mentor, on the other hand, is angry because the protégé isn't lavishing attention on him anymore. It's like the protégé is saying, "If I have to hear that story one more time about, fill in the blanks, I'm going to go crazy." The mentor, on the
other hand, is, "That ungrateful pup. He wouldn't even be where he is without what I did for him." Basically they break off. You see this a lot. Ours could have on several occasions, but I was influenced by that and so ours held until his death.

_I'm going to ask you a couple questions that are a little bit tailored to what I find interesting maybe more than what the thesis may be about. First question is about his poetry. Was he a little bit more reclusive about showing his poetry or discussing his poetry? Did he feel like it was very personal?_

No, I don't think so. He would send me his poetry. And a lot of it, I think, was really good.

_It's become difficult to find his poetry. It's not as archived as his journalism._

Yeah. I mean, he published in a lot of obscure places, I think. But he was a poet, there's no doubt about it. He was a poet. I don't think it was the kind of thing where he hid things. I mean, if you look at them, the territory is very familiar to anybody who reads his columns. He sent stuff to me. I don't think he was ever able to get a collection published. He tried. It is very hard. My sense of this is that you have to be a member of the poetic tribe. Don was a part of the pedagogical, really, tribe. If you did a content analysis of his work, the majority of it is about how to write and how to write better.

_Who does that place him with, of his time particularly?_

The thing is, it wasn't until after World War II, with the GI bill, that places like the Iowa Writer's Workshop grew up and writers were supported by university budgets. Prior to that, in, say, the thirties, a fiction writer—and I guess a non-fiction writer could live—by writing for what were known as the slicks: _Colliers, Better Homes and Gardens_ I think. It may have been _Cosmopolitan_. Places where you say now, "Really?" And then you find out there was a really great fiction editor. I guess the point I'm trying to make is I don't think there were that many writing teachers until the MFA and MA programs grew up. And they grew up because the slick market disappeared. And a lot of people went to Hollywood to write for TV. And then what grew up was I think this incestuous culture where your teacher went to Iowa, he liked one of your stories, and he would write his friends at this literary journal, and you would be published there, and then perhaps might get a job. Then there was the NEA funding. What happened though: I think Don is considered by the vast majority of people he came into contact with in newspapers as a pioneer, a dean, an original thinker. And then there came this explosion of writing coaches. I once made the distinction between an in-house writing coach or a visiting fireman. And that's what Don was. That's what myself and a lot of colleagues are. We're in working places where we consult as opposed to being _the_ writing coach or whatever. Can you repeat that question?

_You were saying that pedagogy was his primary field if you look at his work. I was going to ask you what his contemporaries were._
Oh, Peter Elbow. Lucy Calkins, Vera John-Steiner—who wrote a book, *Notebooks of the Mind*. You know, one of the ways you can learn about this in the daybooks is that he would write often, and in his books too, he was very generous to other writers. Well you know, Seth, journalism academics and journalists are like natural enemies the same way editors and reporters can be natural enemies in the newsroom. I'm sure this isn't news to you, but I think a journalist sees *Journalism Quarterly*: you look at the title, and you read it, and it's pretty high up the abstraction ladder. And journalists are pretty much at the bottom. So bridging that gap was in some cases impossible. By the same token, the academics didn't think journalists had anything to provide. I was just talking to someone recently and unless you have a PhD you can't get a job teaching there, that it's research that is prized over teacher.

*There's actually only one PhD student, or possibly two, who have ever been reporters at the [Missouri] journalism school.*

I mean my line is, "There are journalists who have one clip: their dissertation." I don't scorn them. One of my best colleagues—we ran the summer program here for seven years, she was five I was seven—I think she was ABD. She may have gotten it. Her name was Christine Martin and she was at West Virginia. Now, here's an interesting thing. If you can reach Chris Martin, Chris Martin and I met and had an immediate connection because of Don Murray. We had a shared admiration for him. Chris had never met the man. She, like a lot of people, discovered Murray through his books, through *A Writer Teaches Writing*, through the books on revision. But it was wild because she had never met him, but she knew him cold. The book I think is probably the most influential for teachers and coaches is *Learning to Teach While Writing*, something like that. It has learning in the title. It was about teaching. It was really helpful for somebody going in and teaching. Newsrooms are, I would say in general, anti-intellectual cultures, which is why they're not comfortable with intellectual cultures of the academy.

*So how did The Providence Journal look when this started? Were other papers talking about it? Was there conversion, or was there possible accusation?*

Well it's funny...the only thing that comes to mind: Joel Rawson is a huge believer in narrative and narrative reconstruction who had challenged, "How can you say what something was like when you haven't been there?" He would turn to Bruce Catton in *Stillness at Appomattox* and the scene where the army of the Potomac is crossing the river and the sunlight is glinting off their bayonets. He was coaching at a paper and telling about the value of reconstruction, and the editor who invited him from the back of the room said, "No! No! No! We will not do that!" That's when Joel said, "How can you write when sunlight glittered? Because there's a photograph." How could Tom Wolfe tell you what somebody was thinking? Because he asked them. This is one of the frustrations I've had about journalism. It's not a profession by the standard definitions. It doesn't have a critical literature. Everything from it doesn't have organizations...I did a paper at Columbia on it. I can't remember much, but what I do know is that by the standard
definitions journalism is not a culture. What that meant was there was no shared literature. There were a couple of anthologies put together over the years, but I would say the best newspaper writing is perhaps closest to a body of work. I don't know if I would elevate it to a status of scholarship, but because it was not just the prizewinning work but the interviews with the winning writers that made it so valuable. Personally, because Carol McCabe won, I think in 1980...First of all, I have the entire set. There are not a whole lot of people who have the entire set. 1994 edition, which was the first one I edited: you can't buy it. What it meant was that I was exposed to these and would get them every year. Soon after Don came to Poynter and then Providence, I got to go to a seminar at Poynter. I have the syllabus. (Retrieves the syllabus). Talk about an archival.

And then Roy would have me come back as a visiting faculty for a week, and so basically I would always get copies of the books. And what I did from the very beginning was...I was less interested in the stories than I was in the explanations of craft. My methodology was to identify anything in the interviews that corresponded to the writing process. So that was one of the first ways that I was able to take what Don had taught and begin to make it a way for me to have access to craft lessons, and have access to them for each step of the process.

The next question I was going to ask you, which ties into this directly I believe, was that at the same time Don Murray seems to becomes very fascinated with the writing process—I would say 1979, 1978, but before that. That is when he put it in his daybooks. In 1979 he started having an argument with himself about whether this is what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. From 1979, there's a page where he makes a confession that's he's decided that that's what it's all going to be about, that that's what he loves. At the same time he's talking a lot about the Paris Review Interviews. I was going to ask if you thought those were influential for all journalists in looking at the process. Did it really do some of that bridgework that Don Murray was trying to do between high and low brow?

Yeah, I mean I also have the collection of that and was doing the same kind of things: annotating, using the process approach as my ruler. Of course, those appeal to me because I've always wanted to be a novelist. Maybe that's one of the reasons why Don and I did have such a close relationship. It may be why, when I would write fiction, his reaction would be so much more critical. The Paris Review was high-brow. Interestingly, Best Newspaper Writing adopted the literary interview as opposed to the journalistic interview. So we said in the book, these are edited, we've exchanged with the writer. Let's put it this way: The Paris Review interviews were prized by Don much more than the Best Newspaper Writing. When I was editing it, he was a great friend and would say, "It's a great book, and you've done a great job." He was very generous to me. There have been times that I worry, "Jeez, Don, am I writing your stuff?" He'd say, "What are you talking about?" We'd have occasions where we'd go, "You taught me that." "No, no you did." "No, you did." And I think he really was confused about it. His papers: he was going to throw them out. He called me up one day and said he was throwing them out because it was such a dispiriting experience at the UNH library. And I said, "Hold it. If you're
serious, I will rent a storage facility here. I will take them." And then I talked to Karen, who is the dean, and we came up with a decision to provide space and, at least for three years, do colloquium. She said, "We don't want it just to sit there. Can we use them for our teaching?"

*We've been looking at guest lists for the colloquium.*

Good.

_The last question I was going to ask you is how Don Murray shaped the Poynter Institute. That's frame of reference for the next question, the next question being, where do you see Don Murray in journalism today, be it newspapers, in magazines, et cetera?_

In journalism, I think you see him in the hearts and memories of his students, be they UNH students, audience members of National Writers Workshops, and in his protégés—everyone from me to Bruce DeSilva at the *Associated Press*—and to writers who continue to be inspired by his views on writing.

_I'm using the term writing culture quite a bit. Do you think that he created a writing culture? Am I right by putting him in the middle of a web._

I think so. I think you might get different viewpoints from some people. I'm saying Lucy Calkins. I'm throwing it out, but I don't really know if that's who it is. I think that's why the tribute packets may hold some clue. For me, he is in the center of the web. I was really struck, being with Berkley and him talking about Don and forgetting about _that_ or forgetting that I didn't know _that_. I've said that I know what it's like to be an apostle or a disciple. I'd be interested to know how Berkley would describe himself. I had the most personal and longstanding relationship. He did not like the idea of him being a father figure. We were colleagues. The fact that I was about twenty-five years younger than him did not...we were equals. So, I'm prejudiced by that. Do you want me to talk about the last question, what influence does he have?

_Sure._

First of all, Mel Mencher fought every time he came, "You need more reporting! Writing's great, but reporting is where it's at!" If you were one of his students, you were terrified of him but you just respected him. He was so tough. It was like being at boot camp. He described the first edition of his textbook to me as one of the strong ones who stood up. He was almost like a military. He was just a Napoleonic figure. Very polarizing at Columbia. Most people hated him. And he hated them because they were incompetents. So he was extremely influential because Roy embraced Murray. If you read the dedication of *Writing Tools*, he's pretty explicit about the role. There are a lot of people who use not his materials but...I guess it is almost apostolic in the sense that it's, "Well that's what Christ said. This is what Murray said." Those of us who were lucky enough to have been close to him are able to say, "Murray once said it takes courage to
admit you're afraid. It takes strength to admit you're week." It was Murray who said, when some classmate of some fellows here was kind of struggling with his personal essay assignment, and I asked [Don] about it and he said, "Tell him don't ever apologize for being human." He was a very wise man. I don't know if this is what you're thinking about, but I don't know how great his influence or profile was outside of these in some sense fairly limited spheres. The composition movement: limited and narrowly focused. And journalism, which is more about the product, if you will, than the process. I'm reading a lot about Hitler lately. I don't know why. If Hitler's on the history channel, I'm on it. I don't know why. It's a book about the pathology of Hitler. Hundred of thousands of pieces of writing have been written about this man. Everybody knows Hitler. This is not a good comparison, I may probably abandon this, but Don was beloved. He was generous. A perfect stranger would call him up or write him, and in the next day's mail Don had sent a couple of his book and his classic laminated "Never a Day Without a Line Nunca Dia Sine Linea." On the back he had quotes.

Do you have one of those?

Yeah I do, in fact. This one is never a day without 500 words, and I think that might have been when I told him I was going to write 500 words a day on my novel, and I lasted 154 days. And behind it are all these quotes.

He loved quotes.

He loved quotes.

I guess his two favorite writers that I can infer are Flannery O'Connor...I'm drawing a blank.

You have to understand one thing about Don and Minnie Mae was the effect of their daughter's death. He read hundreds of mysteries. They were the only things that could keep Lee's absence at bay when he'd wake up in the middle of the night. Hundreds of them. And he turned me on to them. This is the classic one (holds up) which is "Never a Day Without a Line." I think they loved him at Kinko's.

I recall him writing especially early in his freelancing a lot of cop-and-robber-type stories.

Well, he was a police reporter and at a time when the police reporter was almost an adjunct of the police force. These were the days where there was competition over getting a picture of the victim. They'd go in and steal the picture, and not always bring it back. He'd also been a military policeman. It was very interesting. He was a paratrooper and a military policeman, fought in the Battle of the Bulge, and was a fierce pacifist. You read the columns on Memorial Day and Armistice Day, or columns about marches. Well, he was unapologetic. But going back to the influence here, I read recently something to the effect that an institution is shaped and reflects the long shadow of one person. That
person is Roy. But Murray, until I think recently, was also a shadow. I mean, from the
writing standpoint, that's what we taught. We taught the process approach. For me it was
my Bible. It was the single most important element of my education as a writer, and I felt
it was my duty, if you will, to share it with people because there wasn't a language. Going
back to writing culture, before the process approach there wasn't a language to talk about
stories. The clichés response from an editor: "It just doesn't work for me. Go rewrite it."
Murray brought to this culture a common language that editors and reporters could use to
communicate about a story: its progress, its failings, its plusses. It established for us a
series of milestones, but, for me, I felt that the best part was that it gave you a set of tools.
Those were invaluable to become a better writer. The writing program, historically at
Poynter, has always been the most influential, popular. Roy started it. He brought Don
Fry in. Murray visited once for a month-long period here. The “Newspaper Reporting and
Writing”, that seminar. (Points at a seminar agenda) What years was that?

1982.

And what's the name of the seminar?

Writers and editors seminar.

The core course was, newspaper reporting, writing, and editing. I taught that course for
years, two to three times a year. Poynter has been described as a confederation of
freelancers, and also is a place where professional journalists reside in silos that are home
to their individual discipline or delivery method. So there's leadership, there's ethics of
diversity, there's broadcast, there's print. When I leave, there's only going to be one
writing teacher left. Given our financial state, I hope they're going to hire somebody,
but...

The national writer's workshops were also a way that Don's influence was shared.

But there were and are a lot of writers who don't need the writing process to write. David
Finkle agonizes over his ledes. I preach to people, "Write the ending first, and don't
worry about the lede. You're probably going to rewrite it." Well, David Finkle is an
amazing journalist, a Pulitzer Prize winner now. Why change?
Hi Seth--

Thanks for e-mailing your questions. I offer these answers:

1. Well before I was elected president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors in April of 1977 I had determined to use my year in that office to elevate the quality of writing in newspapers. Too much of it was ordinary, not excellent. That included uninspired writing in my own St. Petersburg Times. So one of my principal initiatives as ASNE president was to launch the ASNE Writing Awards to recognize and honor the best writing to appear in newspapers each year thereafter. I appointed Tom Winship, editor of The Boston Globe, as the first chairman of a committee to select juries from among able editors to judge the winners annually. The Poynter Institute of Media Studies, of which I was chairman, was chosen to administer the entries for ASNE, much as Columbia University administers entries for the Pulitzer Prizes. To extend the reach of the good-writing effort, The Poynter Institute undertook to publish annually and distribute the winning entries chosen by the ASNE juries. I named the books Best Newspaper Writing for each given year. The shelf lengthens.

2. The first organizer and editor of the Best Newspaper Writing volumes happened into my lap. While I was mulling the launch of the ASNE Writing Awards, Dr. Roy Peter Clark came to see me in February 1977 from the faculty of Auburn University in Montgomery. He had landed there to teach English with his doctorate fresh out of SUNY at Stony Brook. He was restive and wanted to write for newspapers. Instead of teaching freshmen how to write, I said, why don't you join me in teaching professional reporters how to write better? Come to the St. Petersburg Times for a year as a writing coach and make our newsroom your new classroom. He quit Auburn and showed up. Roy's self-deprecating wit gave him a sure foot as he prowled the newsroom desks and held voluntary writers' lunches but reporters kept a certain suspicious distance at first. He won over the doubters when he marked up and tacked on the newsroom bulletin board an embarrassing example of awkward writing—my signed Editor's column from the previous Sunday. A year of his coaching noticeably sharpened the literary edge of writing in the columns of the St. Petersburg Times and concentrated the staff's insistence on clarity and grace in use of the language. It dawned their extra effort was being watched and appreciated. At that point I asked Roy to move to the faculty of The Poynter Institute as director of its Writing Center, which he had devised, and spread his techniques nationally. As one of his tools he launched the Best Newspaper Writing volumes and inaugurated their interview segments with the winning writers. These books now are a long-established text for teaching and learning in our field.

3. Through Roy, I have met Don Murray, but I regret I have missed knowing well a person of such high reputation and measurable contribution to the goal of good writing.

Gene Patterson
Author’s questions for Gene Patterson, sent 24 June 2009, 12:08 p.m.

Mr. Patterson,

I'm sorry for the delay in sending this email. I am currently a student at the University of Missouri and am writing my thesis on Don Murray, who was a writing coach and columnist for The Boston Globe.

I have a couple questions for you, particularly about Poynter, the St. Pete Times, and what could be called "the writing coach movement."

1. First, how did the idea for Best Newspaper Writing come about? Many journalists I have talked to note how influential it was in making sure good writing stayed in newspapers.

2. How did the idea arise to hire a writing coach to the St. Petersburg Times? What did this mean for the paper? Roy talks about how he was able to be a part of this from relatively early in his career.

3. How did you see the St. Petersburg Times evolve from when you first arrived? I know this is a pretty broad question, but I'd like to know how you see what trends or changes came out of the paper.

Finally, if you did happen to know or meet Don Murray, I would love to hear anything about that – your impressions, how you met him, etc. Roy said he was uncertain as to whether you had met him.

I'm sorry – these are pretty broad questions. However, they cover the terrain. I would also like to say that I find read your columns in The Changing South and find them very inspiring.

I unfortunately have to leave St. Petersburg early. I am in town only until Friday. I have been video recording brief interviews with folks at Poynter. If you happen to have any time, I would love to meet with you briefly, however, having one of my own right now, I certainly understand a busy schedule.

Thank you,
Seth Graves
As far as I can tell the guy wrote about twenty hours a day.

I was an Anglo-Saxonist specializing in Beowulf and teaching Chaucer at Stony Brook. Roy Peter Clark was a student at Stony Brook and I directed his dissertation (farting in Chaucer). I got him a job at Auburn teaching Chaucer. Academic life was too slow for him. By a series of coincidences, involving an op-ed piece in New York City, he ended up as a writing coach at the *St. Petersburg Times*. Roy moved over to Poynter in 1980, and asked me to come and help him teach his first seminar in February 1980 (writing and editing). My job was to question assumptions, and so I came into the first seminar and questioned assumptions. I was such a hit in doing that he invited me back seven more times. In 1984, he and I were having lunch and decided that nothing that was written on journalism was worth reading except Lippmann. I decided we would recruit a basic faculty in journalism and write a base literature of journalism that would be worth reading. I joined them in ‘84 permanently and stayed there through late ‘93. I met Don early. Typically Roy would borrow two or three outsiders to help teach a seminar. Don was one of those visitors. He was just a knockout teacher. A huge presence. I’m six foot two, and he was considerably taller than I was. He looked like Santa Claus. He was a very jolly guy anyway, and quite fat. I was told that he paraded around Vermont in shower shoes and a bathing suit. He never got over World War II. He said to people several times, “I may look like Santa Claus to you but inside I look like an 18-year-old paratrooper.” After that he thought of himself as a guy who just liked writing. We were giving those workshops, and the one I remember the most vividly…we had this big blackboard across one side of the room. Don stood up and extemporized an article. He wrote it down on the board. This was part of a discussion about process, and he was showing us his drafting stage by actually doing it in front of us, with all of the errors and so forth. I think of all of the things he did that was the most influential on me. It led to a whole bunch of risky things that Roy and I did after that. That’s my first memory of him at Poynter.

Week-long seminars with sixteen people and four or five faculty. We essentially lived together for the whole week. We used to say that we’d screw your head off on Monday and give it back to you on Friday.

People had never met anybody so enthusiastic about writing. He also was very influential on Roy in terms of the writing process. We took all of the things that people were doing and kind of rationalized them. We put them into patterns. We ended up using very different versions of the writing process, but the most fundamental influence Murray had on us was this story he told. He was the writing coach at the *Globe*, and one night a reporter came in and walked up to the night city desk and said “How much time do I have?” and the editor said, “You have a half an hour.” And the guy said, “Good, I have time to eat dinner” Don followed him to eat, and his mouth was moving even when he wasn’t chewing. He banged out the story in fifteen minutes. Don said, “What were you doing when your mouth was moving?” and he said, “I was rehearsing.” That anecdote
became the center of the idea that Roy and I put together. It was about organizing stories. Great many good journalists just say, “What’s my lede” and then don’t organize the story. The story then just has a solid top but no second half. We used the word rehearsal in our models for a while.

He used to write while driving. Minnie Mae was the perfect wife for a writer—a fabulous typist. Don traveled a great deal, always driving long distance. He installed a table in the backseat of his van for Minnie Mae to sit at with a laptop. I think it started with a typewriter. Don would drive and dictate to Minnie Mae, who would essentially type up everything he was saying, and he would revise that into book. He could get an enormous amount written.

He would always say you have to imagine me looking like Santa Claus and dressed in shower shoes. Evidently where he lived in Vermont was a fabulous newsstand. Don would stand with his back to the racks of magazine, and then he would reach back and take the first magazine that touched his hand. He would buy it and read it from the back. He was trying to absolutely randomize. He says the secrets and story ideas are in the back.

A lot of our students have gotten into major positions. The most influential program we had was one in the summer in which we would take sixteen people who had just graduated from college but who did not major in journalism and teach them how to be reporters in about two days. We created a weekly program to work on for the rest of the summer. Outside of that, Poynter’s influence was partially from the people who came to us to teach in the seminars. After that it was our writing and speaking at conference, and, to a certain extent, our consultant work.

Hudson was very influential on us. He was particularly good at talking about how to interview damaged people, and how to get interviews that nobody else could get. He was very humanist. He was also very influential on Chip Scanlan.

You should read Elbow’s *Writing With Power*. Peter Elbow and I were colleagues at Stony Brook. He’s just a stunning writing teacher. Very precise and humane and inspiring to other people.

*(Bill Blondell)*

He retired from the WSJ to California. Poynter would be able to track him down if anybody would. I think he’s living somewhere on the coast of California. He was part of this team of people who would come in and teach. He is fabulously influential because of *The Art and Craft of Teaching Writing*.

*[Murray]* and Donald Hall were in a seminar together. Hall is also a very inspiring figure, a wonderful teacher. We regarded Hall’s poetry as almost journalistic.
Noel Perrin, who was a New England nature writer. He knew Don quite well and was influenced by him.

The way Don did coaching was not very well described. It was very casual. Roy and I took the methods and made them into systems. The basic breakdown is between coaching stories while in progress and coaching writers when not in a story. It’s called process coaching and long coaching, short and long. The first one is little intervention in the process itself. Long coaching is interview coaching to get at problems. We took off from Don’s ideas.

I have a book that I’ve just finished that you should take a look at online. [Www.donfry.wordpress.com](http://Www.donfry.wordpress.com). The book is about how the writing process is individual, and it’s a collection of techniques that work for you, as opposed to a collection of techniques that you were taught. Roy doesn’t like that approach. He says it’s like tinker toys. However, it does work very well. Most of the criticism we’ve had of our writing process work was either it wasn’t poetic enough, didn’t allow people to be free, or tried to clamp people into molds. The other criticism came from people from English departments who saw it as not intellectual enough, reducing writing to a series of steps, which was our point exactly. Our ideas were if you thought about what you were doing in a series of quick, patterned ways, you ended up with better stories. One of the problems with journalism is that it’s not a thinking profession. Somehow the English departments thought of it as not thinking enough. We were teaching people how to ask standard questions quickly in order to make standard dead decisions.

Roy and I are basically literary critics at heart. We were trained at what is called close reading. The people who criticize us in English departments are sort of metacritics. They were looking at larger issues. Very much influenced by French theorists, and so on. If there is a sort of scale of specific to abstract, we were about halfway up. The people criticizing us were very abstract thinkers. We had a series of seminars for teachers of writing. The whole audience was English professors. We did a writing exercise based on the writing process, and the English professors wouldn’t participate. They wouldn’t do it.
Peter Elbow. 17 January 2010, phone.

He would just keep one notebook and put everything in it. Insofar as I keep records, I always try to have a different folder or notebook. He was absolutely right. Even though it’s a total mess on one particular day, but actually when I try to find something I can’t find it. Anyway, his method in a way was conceptually chaotic but actually was very practical.

He was just a person that I looked up to a lot. He seemed to be more established. I think he had books before. My first book was 1973, Writing Without Teachers. Even though I had 1973, I didn’t feel like I was a big person in the field. I experienced him as someone who was a bigger authority. When I was writing Writing With Power, I wanted to get a blessing form him. I was invited up to UNH to give a talk, and I gave him a manuscript before it was published of quite a lot of it. I was very worried about if he would like it okay. I was really just saying would you please tell me that this is okay. He did say he admired it, though I don’t know how much he read of it. I did see him as someone who was further down the trail as I was. I admired his character, his non-snob, non-pretentious, not hiding behind scholarship and the fact that he was a journalist and not just or primarily an academic. I admire people whose relationship with writing is practitioner. He was kind of a showoff. I remember going to a workshop of his where he asked people to freewrite and he freewrote on the board. I was intimidated by that vicariously, but I don’t know if I’d want to do that. I had nothing but enormous admiration and gratitude—because it feels like he pushed the snow back ahead of me—and I felt like we were working toward the same end.

Process approach—freewriting, trusting yourself, making a mess before trying to clean it up, being willing to be personal, to use the first person and talk about own perception, not to try for disembodied, detached thinking. There’s always a person writing.

Obviously there was a period—and I’m talking about the academic world—in the eighties, late seventies, when his influence and mine were both very large and sort of permeated things. It seemed almost as though the writing profession was taking that direction. And then there was the turn—I don’t know dates—but there was an anti-process turn where people said this is too simplistic, too personal. It came along with what you might call the social turn. Too much about the self, too much neglect of the social dimension of writing. That reaction against the so-called process movement…it was called romantic as a term of criticism…became very powerful and very dominant. You really got to a place where graduate students in almost any department felt like it would be a mistake to say anything nice about Don Murray or me. We were in a theoretical doghouse. I think the reaction was a little wrongheaded. There’s a good book by…looking at the actual romantics and making a defense of Murray and me. I think Murray and I both put a good deal of emphasis on the social dimension of writing. There’s an ethnographic study of him. He made this point where he said, “I don’t talk about paying attention to an audience.”
I think I wrote much more than he did about the theory of turning off audience. I have an article about learning to ignore audience. He made this point that he had to make a special effort to turn off the audience because the influence of audience is so powerful that you have to work hard to turn it off...there’s a piece called “Closing My Eyes as I Write,” on learning to drown out or push aside any awareness of audience.

The influence of audience is so pervasive that you can’t get rid of it unless you make a special effort. Instead we were being accused of neglecting the audience. I think in terms of your question of influence, people would say that well, eh and the process of movement sort of went out of fashion. What’s paradoxical, the main thing was learning to write in stages—you don’t try to write a first draft as a final draft—the whole process movement said make a mess first and revise later. The thing about the kind of disowning of the process movement, the term process of movement is sort of itself as old-fashioned. The fashion is to think of process as this old thing, but in actual fact the main legacy of the process movement is to assume A. you need to allow yourself to not write right, and then do a major job of revising AND you need to get feedback on drafts, with teachers and peers. That didn’t used to happen. Those things permeate the entire profession of writing now without people saying, oh, this is the legacy of the process movement. I would say that his influence was really just swallowed and digested.

In literary studies, new criticism. It’s a phenomenon that happens a lot. New criticism got very out of fashion. People loved to make jokes about how wrongheaded it was. Whereas the legacy of new criticism is totally digested, that is really close reading and looking at the resonance and implications of words. I think Murray’s influence is very large and under-recognized.

I think the prime criticism came from Jim Berlin. He was the main guy. He really led the attack, and he has that prime article. I think it’s four theories of composition and how his was right and the others are wrong. Somehow that article is very oversimplifying and yet was very deeply accepted in the profession.

The other person who comes to mind is Ken Macrorie. He’s very important and very underappreciated. I think the three of us are close cousins.

One thing you’ll find, of course, is that ever since this very, very strong reaction study, which became very dominant in the field of composition....

Let me digress: I think part of this reaction against Ken Macrorie and Murray and me came along with a period in the late 80s and 90s in which the field of composition wanted to be a real grown up, fancy position like physics. It’s always from the beginning been linked with teaching, and that’s a bit un-fancy. It lacked a kind of unified theory. Physics has a unified theory. Composition was a big fat mess compared to physics because there was no unified theory. What Berlin was doing was saying we need a theory, a right and single theory. So it was an attempt for the field of composition to become a fancy, grown-up field unified by a single theory. That meant criticism of people like Macrorie and
Murray and me. We didn’t talk much about theory, so that’s that. The implicit theory, Berlin’s thing, was wrong because it was too linked to the person, self, individual. So that helped explain the reaction, and when the field went that direction—we need a theory and Berlin is right because his is attractive in the most modern era—the degree to which this way of writing went into the doghouse is very strong.

I think you’ll find people who feel loyal and affectionate to Murray feeling a little besieged and defensive, a little shot down. There was a party line, and the party line was Berlin. It said Murray and Elbow—they really neglected Macrorie—were not on the party line. There’s a lot of defensiveness with people who looked at Murray and me because they felt under attacked. The party line is less rigid now—feminism helped break it down. It’s more diverse, more catholic. It used to be all about politics.

Part of the reaction was an anti-inspiration thing. In a sense there was a suspicion of strong personal-personalities.
Jack Hart, 5 February 2010, phone

I was aware of him and influenced by him long before I met him personally. Maybe the first time I met him personally was at that Poynter session when he turned his papers over, which was a wonderful session. Very moving. But I had exchanged emails with him before that.

Influence spreads out from an individual in ripples, and a lot of times it’s second or third-hand influence. As I developed my career as a writing coach, I became more and more aware of the writing process in the success of the people I worked with. I think a lot of my awareness of its success came from Don. First from his books and second from Poynter. I think Don was quite influential in the world of writing instruction in the schools. I think a growth of emphasis on process in the schools bounced around and came back in my direction, too. When I did my first book on writing, I devoted the first part of it to process and made it very clear that I thought that was the most important thing to a writer.

My approach is, like most things, an amalgam of influences. I certainly developed my own style and emphasis and values over the years. Don’s influence is in there, as I said I think when it comes to an emphasis on process. I haven’t developed any ideas that contradict anything that Don ever wrote or said, but I think there are a lot of other influences in what I do as well.

As I worked with writers over the years, it became clear to me that first of all to understand how they did it. I needed to understand their process, and I needed to spend a lot of time interviewing them about their process and looking at their notebooks. Secondly if they were going to change the way they wrote they would need to change their process.

So were others, and so were people like Roy and Chip.

My association with Poynter started very early when it was the Modern Media Institute. The Institute established an awards program for teaching journalism and writing. I don’t know if I was in the first class of award winners or the second. It was when the Institute was still located in an old bank building on Central Avenue in downtown Pete. I remember sitting in a conference table outside the vault. I go way back to the early days. Roy of course was there. Chip wasn’t there yet. I just kept going back, over the years, as a participant. As a member of that awards group, I think of ten—we constituted a seminar class—I started getting invited down to act as a visiting faculty member. As the world of narrative journalism grew, that became one of the things that I emphasized in my teaching. I’m just finishing a book on the subject of narrative nonfiction, and proofed a chapter that starts with a Don Murray quote.

I have worked with individual newspapers and been a guest working with other organizations. Jacqui (Banaszynski) and I go all the way back to being reporters together
at the Eugene Register-Guard. I think the biggest influence was the Poynter Institute. They had an ideal position for spreading influence, since they were regularly bringing in people from all over the country. That was a great way to spread the word. Don (Fry) has done a lot of traveling around the country, spreading the gospel. And Roy.

I think that in public education the emphasis on process to the exclusion on content caused some reactions. The idea that kids could create things with the exclusion of grammar and spelling. I certainly don’t disagree with the idea that not sweating the small stuff during the early stages of writing is good practice, but you can’t ignore what makes the rest of a living human being either.

I worked with people who have never written a narrative in their lives who have been finalists for the Pulitzer Prize and who have won Pulitzers. That’s an extreme example, but certainly with dozens and dozens of reporters for example who were just bread and butter police beat types who managed to put out beautiful pieces of narrative as a result of learning how to get ideas, find themes, and complete their writing. It moved them to a whole new level. So I’ve seen it work too many times to count.

Theme, statement, job outline.

I think the main opposition from writing process comes from these people who have a mystical idea about how writing is.

What about Don as a writer? I think one of the most moving books I ever read was Don’s autobiography. His columns in the Globe were influential.

**Jack Hart second interview, 7 April 2010, phone**

I went to the Oregonian after having been a tenured associate professor at the University of Oregon where I had done a lot of writing teaching. Eventually at the Oregonian I became the editor of the Sunday magazine, Northwest. We were very interested in upgrading the magazine, bringing in more talented freelancers, and getting the newspaper staff involved in doing true narrative nonfiction writing. That involved a lot of teaching on my part. In house, because the staffers didn’t have much experience with that kind of writing, and out of house because in Portland in the 80s we didn’t have a lot of national freelancers familiar with that kind of writing. That evolved into writing coach. I became the staff developer involved in all the training and the improvement of writing. That was 1989. I was writing coach until I retired in 2007.

We had a growing interest in styles of writing that went beyond the standard news inverted pyramid. Every one of the four Pulitzers I was involved in coaching involved narrative styles that we introduced through the magazine. Tom Hallman Jr.’s first narrative nonfiction piece was in the magazine in ’84/85. That was the first piece of narrative nonfiction that he wrote. He went on to win every national award in feature writing. Rich Read has won two Pulitzers now. Julie Sullivan. The list goes on.
There were interested in working with me because we had a half million dollar freelance budget. They were also interested in improving their skills. Eventually we were attracting freelancers who had those skills already. The freelancers publishing at national level are much easier to work with than amateurs.

The paper eventually ended up as a sponsor of the Neiman Narrative Conference, very well known for its narrative nonfiction. Which is why I’m writing a book on the subject now.

We had a national organization and a national community. There was a newsletter for writing coaches at one point. At one point, somebody did a census. When Roy Peter Clark became writing coach at the *Saint Petersburg Times*, he was the only one. Somebody eventually did a census and found sixty. I don’t know the figures now. It may be less because of the way newsrooms have pulled back because of a variety of areas. Poynter was a major organizing principle for that. I went to Poynter before I joined the *Oregonian*, because they had a national award for teaching writing. I was one of the first winners of that. I went down even before they were in the new building. That was the vehicle where a lot of people met Don Murray.

Roy, Don [Fry] and I came from academic background. But I was in the newspaper business for a long time before writing coach. Having some teaching background makes you more inclined to do that kind of outreach.

Working with the paper’s editor was job one: to change the culture of the paper. And to overcome the newsroom anti-intellectualism and to get people to care more about writing. There was some resistance from some of the old hacks. They are hard-nosed straight reporters. The old notion among some of the real newsroom traditionalists is that those are dichotomies.

I’ve seen it even fairly recently. One of the *Oregonian*’s police reporters, who had never worked with me, in 2006, finally decided to take the plunge and write a narrative when he was covering a big flood we have. He did a terrific job on it and got so much praised for what he produced that he totally turned his head around.

Newspapers have one product to sell, and that’s words. They better damn well do a good job with them, whether it’s a single sentence or a three thousand-word feature. Obviously I think it’s tremendously important. Newspapers all over the place are cutting back on quality because there is less money to put back into the product. I was just hired to come up and do some more coaching, so it’s not like that priority has disappeared all together.

I’d say that most journalism research is pretty well useless for most people who have to go out and do it in the real world. Once I got involved in coaching, I certainly ran across research that was helpful. For example, a couple of Harvard guys produced a book called *Thinking on Paper*, which was a metastudy. It looked at all the studies done on writing
and how professional writers work, and that sort of thing. There was quite a bit of research done on newspaper writing. For example, comparing narrative approaches to pyramid approaches, etc. Northwestern, Medill, has done some really extensive research on newspaper readership, and it had some valuable findings on what kind of content is effective and researching readers. It validated what a lot of coaches were saying years before that. That’s the readership institute at northwestern. They have a good website, and that study is on the website.

There was certainly a strong community that developed from the late 80s on through the 2000s. A lot of us became really good friends. I’ve known Jacqui since we were both beat reporters in Eugene, Oregon a hundred years ago. Once you’re on the circuit, going to conventions, and appearing together, you get pretty close. Paula LaRocque, people I wouldn’t have known otherwise. Bruce DeSilva of the AP has become one of my closest friends.

I certainly wrote for that newsletter, but it disappeared long ago. Things like Neiman Narrative, API’s writing instruction, and the Poynter Institute—probably the most influential—but these were all forums for people to come together. Often a couple of us would be hired to work together. I worked with Jacqui and Paula. If you put us on a three or four day program somewhere you get pretty tight. Society of Professional Journalist programs. American Society of Sunday and Feature Editors. Those were forums where people who were speaking and teaching and running workshops on writing would come together and get to know one another and influence one another.

When we started our writing improvement program, we brought in one expert a month to teach. That wasn’t all writing but probably eighty percent of it was. These people were coming in and spending time with me and continuing on their way. I don’t know how many newspapers I taught at over those years.

Carl Stepp would write for AJR in Maryland about these things and quote me and quote Jacqui and quote Don Hallman. It tended to feed upon itself.
Wayne Worcester, 18 February 2010, phone.

You could spend a long time talking to the people Don had a serious effect on.

I was a freshman at the University in the late 60s and not a very good one. I really didn’t belong there. In fact I flunked out my first year. I was interested in writing and heard a lot of good things about Don. Before I left school, I walked in, introduced myself and said, “Listen, I’m going to be out of school for a year because that’s what’s required, but I’m going to come back and take journalism. Is there anything I can do in the meantime?” He said, “What are you going to be doing?” I said, “I am going to be working in a factory in a small town in Massachusetts.” He said, “Well write about working in the factories. There’s plenty to work with.” And I did. When I returned I showed it to him, and he kind of liked it. For the first time in my life there was someone there regardless of my academic past who said, “You may have a talent,” somebody who paid attention. He was a very likeable man—a big bear of a fellow. He encouraged me. When I came back to school I became a good student. I majored in English because at the time there was no major in journalism.

It took off from there. He was just absolutely inspiring. There were small groups of students, but Don just kind of pulled us in. if we were interested in writing, he was interested in that fact and wanted to know why and what we were reading. And pressed that you can’t write if you don’t read. The backdrop of all this was fairly exciting because it was the sixties. There was all the tumult and seriousness.

There times were very important too, because part of the whole tumult of the whole sixties and early seventies also involved extraordinary changes and experiments in journalism. He tuned us into those. He’d bring things into class. Willie Morris was the editor of Harper’s at the time. He published what became Norman Mailer’s Armies of the Night. Rolling Stone was the new. Hunter Thompson was on the scene. All of the rules were being challenged. New York magazine burst into public consciousness and was publishing some great stuff. And different. Really pushing and testing the forms. We all know about the legendary excesses of New Journalism, but also the successes. In the middle of it, you had this marvelous man who was an extraordinarily skilled and an absolutely gifted teacher who made you want to please him. You wanted a nod from him about your story. For me, Don was very much a father figure. My own father had died when I was 15, it wasn’t that I was out searching but it may have been why I was very warm to Don initially. When we left school, we remained close to him. We were in constant contact for years and years and years. We’d send each other things and make comments. I feel very privileged to have had the opportunity to learn from him. I am convinced that more than any other single person in the twentieth century, Don Murray probably did more to demystify the process of writing and enable a good many writers. Anybody else, Roy Peter Clark and Chip Scanlan.

He was the first person I met that I could say, “Son of a bitch. This man is having a good time, and he’s doing really good things. If I had my way, I would like to be in that kind of
a position.” Low and behold, I have been. I became a reporter and worked for a good long time. In 1987 I came to UConn to teach journalism and work on my own projects. I’ve been balancing the two and mimicking Don’s lifestyle—in my own feeble way. Though I don’t put myself on his level. He was extraordinary and a generous man. I think it’s not easy for somebody who’s as serious about his craft to be as generous as Don always was. He always made time. You could call Don with a problem, if you hadn’t talk to him for six months, and it’d be like you talked to him at breakfast. I suspect this was not an easy kind of thing, because there always had to be a tension between the time that, as a writer, he wanted and needed to devote to his craft and projects and the time that apostles and disciples like me kind of demanded from him, pulling him away from his first love—his second love, his first Minnie Mae and family.

I teach in much the same way. I teach feature writing, the first in a two-semester program. We’re the only accredited journalism program in New England, so we teach rigorously. To the extent that it was reasonable, Don taught in a consultative way and by example. The real measure was did it work.

I think that’s why there are literally legions of people out there who would talk for hours and sing his praises. He gave so much of himself and never kept writing. Everything he learned he shared. I think that alone set him apart, because there are all kinds of teachers out there who for years have been peddling the notion that if you’re going to be serious about writing that is all you can do. You have to hole up in your attic and suffer for the sake of your art and just write. Don says, “Bull shit. You have lives to lead. If you can’t make a life as a writer, what are you supposed to do, stop writing?” He’d point out things like William Manchester. Manchester was a lawyer but he wrote every day. He’d get up at five in the morning, write for two hours, and go to work. UNH was also sort of a microclimate that showed us the way this work. To the extent that Don could—he always had his daybook though—there were other people there too who were fine writers. Ted Weesner, John Withers, Robyn Young. People who were big deal publishing authors. In a consultative way, he taught. By that I don’t mean in a touchy feely, everything you say is wonderful—none of that crap. It was a matter of writing and knowing that you were writing to be read. Writing to be read meant that your work was going to be subjected to scrutiny and criticism not just by him but also by your classmates. God knows how Don was able to do all that he did. In addition to all of his own writing and being the heart of his family, he was a dramatically important member of the academic community at UNH and widely respected, involved in committee work as he would have to be, and publishing. One of the huge things that I learned from Don and then relearned later when one night I called him and was grousing about how it was just a bad semester and felt like I had a bunch of dunderheads as students (laughs). Don said, “Let me interrupt. If you think for a minute that you can kind of unzip their heads, and pour all you want in their skulls so they can use it, then forget it. You have to create an environment for learning.” Seems like a simple thing once you say it, but once you say it and it’s out there you have to recognize the honesty and truth of that. That’s what Don did so very well, in a classroom or in an auditorium with three-hundred people, and he also opened his house to us for God’s sake. When we had a small seminar sometimes, we’d meet as a group in a
class, and then sometimes we'd go over to his house, and we'd sit in his study surrounded by all these books and get down to business.

Everybody who had him as a teacher (was influenced). Don also did a lot of consulting work as well. I was at The Providence Journal in Rhode Island, and Don was hired to do several training sessions from writers. Nobody walked away from any of those sessions who wasn’t a kindred spirit all of the sudden. I’ve meet secondary school teachers who practically genuflect when you mention Don’s name.

I think his greatest contribution really was the fact that…he said, but never said flatly, “Listen, the Muse is a whore. If you sit around and ask her for a date you have a long wait.” He never said it that flatly, which I do. I tell my students that in those words. Don demystified the process of writing. There are a lot of people who I think for years and years made it a habit of …it’s sort of a self-aggrandizing approach. “Well, I published a couple of novels, but you need extraordinary talent to do it,” et cetera. Don said, “all that’s true but you can do it. You don’ have to hole up someplace.” Don had little tolerance for people who would bitch about the work of it, because to him it was fun. Once you get into writing, you share the same feelings. There’s nothing like the feeling of being in a good story and having a great time. The demystification comes in every book, every monograph, and every article about the process of writing that he ever wrote. Everything he has to say is geared to accessibility. God knows how many books on writing there are out there, but none of them do quite as much to break it down into elemental things that the merest of us can grasp and understand and use. I always use Writing to Deadline in my classes for that reason alone. It’s a great guide. There’s something to take away from each one of them, but with that book everything in there is helpful. I tell students, “This book, if you play golf, this can take five strokes off your game.” They understand that.

I was at Providence from 1971 to 1987 though away for a couple of years. Even when I came to the University in 1987, until I had tenure I went back and worked three nights a week on the copy desk. I was there with Bruce DeSilva, Kevin Seldon, Ron Winslow, Peter Perl and all the others. We had a great time. It was exciting. I felt as though I’d gone from Don Murray’s class to a newspaper that was also a huge classroom. Number one it was in Rhode Island. I don’t know if you know Rhode Island, but Rhode Island is sort of like a theme park for reporters. It was just a wonderful place for a reporter to work. There was a little bit of everything, you never knew what the hell to expect. One day it’s a murder and the next day it’s political chicanery. Another it’s a feature, and in those days Rhode Island was the seat of organized crime in New England. Just added to the fun of everything. We were encouraged to try to break the mold and do things differently. Those places are rare indeed.

When I left the University of New Hampshire, I had enough of a chip on my shoulder to say, “Well, I’d at least like the opportunity to turn down a good graduate school.” I came from a small town in the fifties, and flunking out was like wearing a scarlet letter. I was very ashamed that I had screwed up so badly my freshman year. I spent much of my
freshman year screwing around, so I flunked out. That was kind of a stigma for me personally. When it came time to graduate, I applied to one school only—that was Columbia’s graduate school of journalism. Not only did I get in, I got a big scholarship. I was hired out of Columbia to work at the journal. The journal was a great place for the reason I mentioned. It had greater market than organized crime, and that was saying something. If a busload of people from anywhere, Rhode Island took off to go to the Bronx Zoo, and the bus broke down, who do you think they’d call first? They’d call the city desk. What the hell are we supposed to do about it? It was an integral part of the community, and the paper that pulled no punches. It was really a great place to learn. I had a lot of fun there. I had eleven different jobs in the time I was there. Sharing the editorship of the Sunday magazine, to reporting all over the state’s staff, working on the city staff writing statewide stories, and for the longest time—and Berkley may have done this—I worked the heart attack beat. It was called the heart attack beat and one of us would get picked to do it. We’d go in about eight in the morning, sit through the wires, go through and pick out what we thought would be the best story of the day, grab a photographer, and just go do it. Because of the nature of the story, it was a high visibility piece, so you’d leave the building knowing you’d have to be reporting and writing enough to know it’d make page one, or at least a display page. We’d cover everything within about a three-and-a-half or four-hour radius. We’d do it about four days a week. I did it about nine months, and that was one of the longest tenures. Scanlan did it, and Berkley, I think, did it. That’s the heart attack beat. The life lessons Don put into that: one of the ways you get unpopular is to do very well. People get jealous. That kind of thing happens. Don always told us to do the little things well because it becomes the mark of a professional. You don’t have a five-dollar job or a ten-dollar job. You do the best you can on whatever is before you period.

He taught us early on—and this was reinforced once you have professional experience—that you are not to go out, report, and write in a sloppy fashion. He didn’t want anyone of us to say that’s what the copy desk is for, because it’s not professional. That’s a juvenile kind of thing to say. Even worse to say, and worse to act upon.

After I’d been a report for several years, I began to wonder about editing. I went to work as a copy editor there. At a place like the Journal at least, and particularly in those days, if they liked you and they were good they didn’t want to lose you so you’d say, “I’ve kind of tucked out on this. I think I’d like to learn copyediting for a while.” You’d be immersed in it. It’s not a matter of becoming a dilettante. One of the things I found out while editing: it would be a good time to freelance on the side. So I did magazine pieces, and just kept on doing it. I had a hell of a time. I’m still having a hell of a time.

Because I saw in Don a happy man personally and professionally who was writing and had a great deal of discipline to create flexibility for himself so he could also work on his writing projects, I thought, “Jeez, there’s an awfully good lifestyle.” I really did aspire to that, but not immediately. I suppose there are some very good people who go from graduate school to teaching, but for my money the best people in the classroom are the ones who have gotten their hands dirty. And their hands are always a little bit dirty.
think they have to be involved in their craft in order to maintain vitality. Otherwise your stories grow old and you start to feel a fraud. If I didn’t have things of interest and important to me that I was writing on the side, I’d feel like a failed writer. I think that’s true of anybody who is creative. If you talk to a sculptor they would say the same thing. They worry.

One of the things that Don also very quickly disabused was that old goddamned Charlie Brown notion that those who can do do, and those who can’t teach. I think he shot that down a long time ago. Don’s way of thinking was if you can, you teach—if you’ve got a talent and a skill that’s important, then you’re obligated. It obligates you to use it and to share it.

I’ve been at writing conferences, but never been down to Poynter. I’ve talked to Roy and Chip. Chip was also built to share.

Don’s sewn a lot of good seeds in the world. There’s not a one of us who miss him like a son of a bitch.

Anyone else I could talk to?

Kevin Sullivan. I’m not sure where he is right now. Kevin was at the journal. You could find out by talking to UNH, Andrew Merton. I want to say he went to the Times or the Wall Street Journal or the L.A. Times, but he was a terrific reporter and he was also one of Don’s people. He’s an awfully good fellow.

I think a lot of people have kind of misinterpreted Don’s approach. They get awfully caught up in the process approach to writing, which is important to understand and use, but I think the key word is there to use. If you spend too much time with it, you’re talking about doing it instead of doing it. It was always a means to an end, and the end was always the writing. He insisted that you could take what people referred to as the process approach and use it in the newsroom on deadline, if you were good. It was not a matter of walking into a newsroom and trying to be a prima donna. I do think that a lot of people kind of misinterpreted that—usually older editors. The idea is nulla dies sine linea. Every one of us knows that was from Horace, 69 BC, and means never a day without a line. Don was a great advocate of that. It was how you do it. You didn’t even have to have a huge project in front of you. But if you could get yourself sitting down every day with your fingers moving, the juice will follow. Writing every day, not journaling. The goal was writing for publication. Don was a hell of an act to try to model yourself after. There were a good number of years—well, Don had a big blue van. Minnie Mae had been an executive secretary and a very good one for many years. Don would be juggling projects and deadlines. So he wanted to go on vacation, so Don had a table built into the van. He’d drive and he’d dictate into a Dictaphone, give it to Minnie Mae and she would transcribe it into the back of the van.
Talk about lucky; I went from the crucible that was Don’s class and Melvin Mencher’s at Columbia. I had two of the very best, and they were different—different in approach and both brilliant. At one point my advisor was John Hohenberg, who wrote one of the all-time great journalism texts. Lovely man. Nice, nice man. This was near the end of school. I guess Mel was leaving for a month or two so I got shunted over to Hohenberg. He said, “I see that you are going to The Providence Journal. What I want you to do with me is go to the UN and get comfortable there. Do a few stories when you want, but learn your way around. They may want you to come to the UN.” I knew this was horseshit, but if it pleased John Hohenberg, to think that all of his students were bound for glory immediately. But I’d just had a bunch of Mel Mencher, who’d say, “You better god damn know how to…” He was no-nonsense nuts and bolts. And great for that, absolutely great. You put the two together and that reinforces and aids everything that I had soaked up from Don. Mencher was terrific, and he still is. He’s still a crusty old guy, and good. His eleventh edition is coming out. There are a lot of good textbooks out there on how to teach news writing, but Mel’s book was the first of his kind. It really did set a pattern. The damn book was translated into twenty-two languages and pirated in China, for crying out loud. It is just a very good book. Mel is on our professional advisory committee here. I’ve been using his books, and Don’s and Roy’s, since forever.

Mel’s much rougher than Don. You put the two of them together and, outside of anyone who came from Missouri, they’ve got most of the working journalists covered. Mel was terrific and no-nonsense. He was persistent about getting it right and doing the ethical thing. Long before people were talking about getting outside the box, Mel was saying, “Move in with people you don’t even like.”

I think my name is on the back cover on the 10th and 11th editions. I think initially he was suspicious of this whole groundswell of this process approach to writing. I think it sounded to him as somebody out there in the north woods was advocating doing too much ruminating about writing and reporting and almost committing heresy. The heresy would be to insist that writing is more important than reporting. I suspect that’s probably the way that Don sounded to him initially, but once he became familiar and understood what Don was all about that ended. That was never the case. At no point did Don ever so much as intimate that writing was more important than reporting. It was from Don I first heard the phrase you can’t write writing. If you don’t have material, you’ve got nothing to write about. And also the notion that until you get to be a Hemmingway or a Joan Didion, you are never more important than your material. Don’s emphasis was always on the reporting, on doing the legwork and being there and getting in front of people. What he added to that whole big ball of wax was the ability to teach people that they could write it better, and that they could write it for real.

You must know the *Elements of Journalism* by Kovach and Rosenstiel. At one point in the book by those two guys, who are extraordinary, they talk about the ageless old argument over whether is it the job of the people to give people what they need or what. They said that’s not the right argument. The job of the media is to handle what people need in such a fashion—to present and writ it so well—that they will see that they need it.
That’s a very big deal, I think. It’s not as though a knowledgeable person is from one school or the other. It really is one school. You have to do the reporting, and write it better than the next guy.
General history

I met [Don] when I came for a job interview in 1977. I wasn’t really that familiar with his work at that time, but he was on the committee that helped hire me. I got to know him better around 1985,6 when I moved to Durham. We bought a house right across from his. I began to know him as a personal friend. We’d go to breakfast once a month or so. We became personal friend. I would talk to him about projects. He was a real help to me in terms of helping me write. I would say, “I want to show you this thing I’ve written,” and he’d say, “bring it on over” and set me straight on it. That was great—and great to see how he worked. He was very public on how he worked: his process and project. That was the perfect model for me, to see how he worked. It’s amazing how many people had a close relationship with him and really felt powerfully instructed by him. That continued right up to his death. The morning we’d talk about everything. I got to know him really well that way.

Writing process

I was interested before, but for me witnessing his process helped me see how you could take on a longer project and work at it. We all had these myths about super smart people who write books. But I watched him just go at it. He wrote every day, just cumulatively. You never just kind of burn yourself out. I was 29 when I came here. All the other work with the writing process and his friendship with Don Graves is hugely important. Graves took Murray’s model and said you should treat young kids as writers. That was hugely important in terms of transforming public education.

I was hired in composition, so I was teaching in the first year writing program. I became really interested in elementary education, just because Graves was here.

My first book was actually in children’s writing. Children’s writing is not story writing.

I think that all of them were different. Murray was a practicing writer. He was a professional. I don’t know …Macrorie wasn’t. Peter Elbow wasn’t, but he sold a lot of books. Murray was a novelist, editorial writer, ghostwriter, wrote for the slicks, and wrote for the newspaper of course. He came into it as a professional writer. His stance was that we have to learn from it as professional writers. I don’t think the others came from that background. Peter Elbow came from introspection. Macrorie came more out of teaching. His books were so practical. I think people thought there was more of a group than there really was. Macrorie was very critical of Murray in a kind of unfair way in Uptaught.

In terms of Murray and Graves, that was kind of older brother younger brother teachers. Murray was publishing writer’s commentaries on how we wrote and what you can learn from yourself by looking for yourself. He would say, “If you want to be a writer, here’s
what professionals do. Here’s the habits, the way they look at their work. Just step up to the plate.”

Some people saw him as expressive, but I think that’s kind of bullshit. He was just saying, “Do it: be aware, write, and step up to the plate.”

**Origin of “The Writing Process” terminology**

In ’72 Don says teach the process and not the product. He was one of the first to say there were two very distinct ways of looking at it. That goes to ’72 whether you can find a reference to writing process before that I don’t know.

One time he was giving a reading at this bookstore. I got there about ten minutes before it was about to start and the room was packed. I had this moment of irritation. I thought, “I’m his neighbor and I’m not even getting a seat at this damn reading.” Then I looked in the room and thought every person in this room had the same kind of relationship I had with him. He had the ability to seek people out when they needed support or guidance. It might just be like coffee at The Bagelry once or twice. He had an understanding of when people needed to be stabilized, encouraged, or prompted. Then it might fade out, but people remember that moment. He had a really powerful effect on a personal level for a lot of people.

When we had his memorial here, there were people who didn’t just know of him, they knew him and had a powerful relationship with him. It could be a middle school kid who mails him stuff and says he wants to write, or someone at The Bagelry who would pass him something that he had written. He made himself so available. He was so receptive. People would indicate interest that he would reciprocate.

He saw journalists as having to be writers. Sometimes journalists saw themselves as reporters. They convey the news. His point was that people get the news elsewhere. What they have to get is context, stories, and depth. They are going to get the headlines elsewhere. What you have to be as a journalist is a writer, and you have to look at your process and be more self-aware of what you have to do as a writer. That was a big message that he sent on to people. There are tools that transcend just journalism. You need to think of yourself as a writer.

*Writing for Your Readers* was his columns that he did for *The Boston Globe* reporters. He had a part of him working towards public school teaching, on the National Council Teachers of English. Obviously his work with journalism was close to his heart.

I think that was exactly right, that people like James Berlin and people who were interested in cultural criticism—people more interested in academic writing—saw what he was doing as not aligned with a sort of analytic academic mission that they saw themselves part of. His approach doesn’t give you the critical tools to challenge the kind of cultural ideologies that you need to talk back to. You write a personal narrative about
your mother coping with cancer, but it doesn’t necessarily give you the tools to discuss
disease and medicine in our culture, etc. There’s kind of an intellectual component they
thought of as not being there as Don and others described it. I don’t think that’s
necessarily true, but there are other kinds of writing that can go on. It’s just that Don
wasn’t talking about them very much. They were likely to have the same approach to say
John McFee as Don had to McFee. McFee is not their hero. Michael Foucault is their
hero. They almost turned Don and Peter into caricatures. They made their positions seem
almost infantile. That’s unfortunate. It’s almost like you have to kill off the older
generation. That happens a lot in academic work. There’s like a toning off of the previous
generation to make a case for what you want to do.

It’s too bad about James Berlin. He died of a heart attack in the ‘90s. You criticize him
and you can’t participate in the debate anymore. He presented Murray and Elbow as
expressivists. I think it was a term used to diminish them. Then I think there were other
people in the field who took that up. Once that term was used, it almost put all these
people in this box. Don was interested in expression but he was also into craft and
construction.

Murray was never really part of the PhD program. For PhD dissertations—he was not
doing any research of that kind so it wasn’t his thing. I think the long lasting tradition
carried from Murray would be that we retained an interest in pedagogy. A lot of our work
comes out of teaching classroom situations. Not that that’s unique to us, but I think some
places have become more archival. Ours tend to originate out of a classroom and teaching
situation. I think that there’s a kind of writing that Don favored: the personal direct that’s
not theoretical in such a way that it excludes a more general reader. I think that at our
best—if you look at Lad Tobin, Michelle Payne, Bruce Ballenger—I think they have the
capacity to be theoretical, accessible, and grounded. I try to write that way. I think that
there’s a kind of writing that you increasingly see in the journals that I find just very hard
to wade through. As composition embraced critical theory, I became alienated from a lot
of it. We tried to say appropriate it, but try to write it in a way that does not isolate
yourself from generally informed readers. You have to look at yourself as a writer,
consult experience, and not just follow rules and principles. Any assertion has to be tested
against your own tradition. You see William James looking at religion saying what’s the
experience of somebody who is a Buddhist. I think that core term of experience is
something we come back and back to. There’s this root of pragmatic tradition.

There was no program in composition then. There was in Texas, which is still an
outstanding program. The only way you could write in that was in the education
department. I was interested in teaching at the high school level. When UNH hired me
they wanted somebody who was interested in writing, and they realized they might not
get that from an English Ph.D. It was a transitional time. Two to three years later you
would have had Ph.D. programs. I straddle college composition and public schools. My
work now is more on writing in public schools. For me the kind of big debates about
reform and assessment are going on more at the public school level than in the college
level. I’m more drawn to that, therefore. I didn’t know who Don Murray was because I
was in this rhetoric program at Texas. The only composition we had was pretty much was classical rhetoric. When I got in they said, “You’ll be having lunch with Don Murray.” The fabulous Texas library didn’t even have a copy of *A Writer Teachers Writing*. On the plane up to Boston and the ride Durham, I read *A Writer Teaches Writing*. Don was impressed how much I knew when I got here, but it was all on the plane. It was a different world back then. There wasn’t much out there. Composition wasn’t a field. A senior faculty came up and said, “I don’t think this job should exist. I think it could be handled by current faculty.”

The writing process movement became something you could investigate. Two of the big strands were what the writers do and what we can learn from classical rhetoric that can help writers. You had people trained in classics. Then you had sentence combining. Composition was trying to find the way you can build a research foundation. Then with Bob Connors in the ’80s you started to get strands of things that could be studied. Clearly it is something you teach, but what does it mean at an academic approach. I don’t think the sentence combiners were critical of him but he was critical of them. He wrote “Writing Badly to Write Well.” He was invited to this sentence combining conference and was curious as to why he was invited. Like inviting Barack Obama to a KKK meeting. He gave this talk about how he plays with language, but not in a sentence combining way. He talked about how writers have to be open to chance and experimentation and writing badly, and how that is more organic and practical than sentence combining. It’s his most outlandish essay. I wish I could have heard it. It’s like he’s on some kind of trip or something.

Talk to Tom Romano. Romano was very close to Don and very much influenced by Don. I think Scanlan was probably the closest. Lisa Miller was the closest in the latter part of his life. Graves was close, but his health is bad now. Romano is at the University of Miami, in Oxford Ohio.

Don always thought he hadn’t quite made it as a writer. He had this novel he was working on. In my view, he still came from this generation where the writer was a novelist. In the back of his mind he never quite accepted the fact that he was a great writer, but he may not have been a great novelist. I think that in his mind he’s still part of that generation that the novel was the thing, and there’s always that lingering that he never quite did that. I was always thinking he should write a memoir. If he had written a memoir about Boston, that would be his book. He knew Howard Johnson in Dorchester. He was the driver at 17 for the Secretary of State of Mass. You know that old boss…or Scollay Square? He could have written a book.

In “Waiting for the Sheets to Move” you get a sense of what that memoir was like growing up in Boston. There were some essays that were so familiar to people. There are some that are well known. Then we tried to mix in stuff that was not published. He might have written for a class. Or a handout. Or a list he might have made. We reproduced pages from the daybook. He has one toward the end called “Making Snow” that he just
wrote for the class but it’s a stunner. We tried to alternate. That was the structure. To alternate well-known pieces with stuff that could be a handout for his class.
The first time I met Don Murray was at a Wyoming University conference on freshman and sophomore English. My best guess it was like 1980 or ’81. Murray was already pretty famous and he was one of the invited speakers to the conference. I was giving a talk on responding to student writing. What’s the best way? You get a piece of writing form a student. What are your options as a teacher in responding to the writing? I remember Don Murray raising his hand, and he said, “One of my favorite responses is ‘I like the way you…’ and you could fill that in with anything.” In some ways to me that typified what Don Murray was. His approach was always positive, personal, student or writer centered as opposed to being rule-centered in any way. At the end of that, I asked people during that session to write something and turn it in. I remember Don Murray’s comment, which was after I asked them to do whatever: he said, “Thank you for talking to me rather than reading at me.” That too personifies who Don Murray is. Personal, friendly, enthusiastic, encouraging.

I was so impressed with him then that I invited him and helped him come to Miami University at least three times. I know at least twice he was the featured speaker on conferences we had here—one on sentence combining and one on teacher research that we had. What Hugh Morgan referred to in his essay on Don was the experience of the first time I saw someone write in front of an audience and on a topic that he had not prepared for before. Don Murray is here in an auditorium—I don’t think he announced he was going to do this earlier but—he said, “I think I am going to write in front of you.” He said, “I did this before and it was a failure. I was doing this at the University of Vermont. I said to the audience, Hey I’m going to write in front of you but to convince you that I didn’t write this in advance, I’m going to ask someone to give me a topic. Someone raised their hand and said, write about vacations in Canada, or something like that. Don Murray started writing and wrote two or three sentences and said, “I can’t write this. I can’t vacation in Vermont.”

The lesson is there are some topics we cant write about. But to convince you on a topic I am not prepared for, I am going to give you ten topics to write about and you pick them as the audience. We the audience chose a topic and Don Murray started writing. And he was writing on an overhead projector. This is a crude form of technology, but nevertheless it worked. Don Murray starts writing, and the rest of us could see on a screen what he was writing. While he wrote for about twenty minutes, he commented on what he was writing. He would write a sentence and say, “That’s not the word I wanted. That’s not the sentence I wanted, but I’m going to come back to it cause I’m on a streak now.” His goal was to get through that writing, get the first draft out there. You don’t want to get hung up on semicolons and syntax right at the beginning. That initial draft is what you are going to come back to again. Here you have Don Murray an actual writer in the process of writing. I had never seen that before. I don’t think anyone in the audience had ever seen that before. It takes a great deal of courage to do that. Don Murray had a great deal of courage. He had experience as a writer. He believed that what often worked for him worked for others as well.
That affected me too. It took me a while to sink in. Maybe five years after Don Murray did that, I started doing it in my own class. Not in all my classes—I didn’t do that in, say, a composition or literature course. But I taught a class in teaching writing for prospective high school teachers. I did that. I would come in with my list of ten topics: basketball, what it means to live in Ohio, *The Sun Also Rises*. I would put it on an overhead projector and write for twenty or so minutes. I would encourage them to do the same thing in their high school or college classroom to demystify the writing process. They might believe that the newspaper article or the essay in the *Times* magazine section was written that way—it went through lots and lots of revision, often. We invited him here to come on his own, to do a mini course here…

*Relationship between Murray’s work and sentence combining approach.*

The conference on sentence combining was here I think in 1983. I asked him to be one of the three major speakers. Peter Elbow was probably one. I think Don Murray and Peter Elbow are the two most powerful and important influences on the teaching of writing in the past twenty-five, thirty-five years.

I remember Don Murray calling me from Durham, NH, a month or two before the conference and saying, “Geez Don, I’m really stalk. I’ve been working on my talk about sentence combining and I just don’t know what to say about it.” I said, “Sure. Talk about whatever you want.”

Don Murray would say, “This is artificial stuff. This is writing practice, writing exercise. That’s not what I am.” I don’t think there’s much of a connection at all. If there’s a connection, it would be in the sense that during the seventies, with Ken Macrorie, Peter Elbow, Murray, and Don Graves, there was a new excitement brought to the teaching of writing. Sentence combining was like that. It brought a new energy to teaching writing. The old way was analysis of essays, and papers due on Friday with no help with any kind of writing before that. Murray Elbow Graves, etc. were all saying you really want to focus on writing itself. Sentence combining was saying hey we’re going to work with sentences and constructions, and focus on student writing and not professional writing. Each brought an enthusiasm to writing.

I have often used Don’s books, especially versions of *Write to Learn*. I found that they were as effective as any textbook.

At conferences, Don Murray’s sessions were always packed. There were always enthusiastic people there. I think Don generated more enthusiasm for the teaching of writing than anyone else. Peter Elbow tended to be a little more theoretical than Don. Don’s focus was always on practice. There were people in the field who were less enthusiastic about Don Murray. The more academic and scholarly people were, the less admiration they had for Don Murray. I remember proposing a session at the Four C’s, maybe mid-nineties, that I did with Don’s help. I don’t know how I found out about this.
He had been at a conference and given a paper, and the editor of a journal—I think it might have been *Writing Program Administration*. The editor of *WPA* invited Murray to turn his conference presentation into a paper. Murray submitted a written version of his conference presentation to the journal and had it rejected. Of the two reviewers, one said it was wonderful and the other said, “This is juvenile stuff.” I turned that event into a panel at Four C’s with Don Murray’s permission. I know one of the people there was Edward White. Edward was probably the single most important voice in composition evaluation—in writing evaluation. He’s got a couple of books on it. Edward M. White. He now teaches at the University of Arizona. A good guy. You can find him in any bibliography. But Edward White was one of the panelists at this conference in which he more or less said that he thought Don Murray’s work was not scholarly enough. It was not serious enough. It was too casual. It was too anecdotal. If you divide the composition and rhetoric field into composition and rhetoric, Don Murray was not embraced by those who did rhetoric. The more composition focused you were, the more likely you were to embrace Murray. The scholarly theoreticians would say, “What more is there to say about the teaching of writing, et cetera?”

As I remember it, when Berlin used the phrase expressivist, this was not a derogatory term. He was just categorizing things. One of Murray’s approaches’ limitations for the field of composition rhetoric is that it doesn’t often offer major possibilities for continuing research. That would be one of the arguments: how much attention can you pay for student writing? But that’s exactly Murray’s achievement. He focused on student writing. I wrote an essay on Don Murray that I can’t access. It would cost me $79.95 to access it. I had been to a Three C’s conference in Chicago. I attended a session on Murray and liked it as usual. The day after, I went to the Chicago Art Institute. I went to my favorite gallery, which was 17th Century Dutch painting. There was great, great stuff there. In that gallery were all these 17th Century Dutch masterpieces. An art student had setup an easel and she was copying a piece. When I was in that gallery with all these masterpieces, the people who came in to that gallery spent more time looking at the student copying the painting. In my essay I said, “Don Murray would have understood this. What he was always focused on was the student writing. He was always focused on the process.” What was going on in front of you in that room, with the student artist, was the process of creation. Murray recognized that that’s what were all interested in. Even if the finished process was a priceless painting. I used that as the focus of the essay that I had written on Don Murray.
Hugh Morgan, 12 March 2010, phone

Being an immature kid going to college and studying journalism. The only thing that worked for me was journalism. University of Oklahoma. I didn’t realize what was wrong with me until I returned, actually. I’ve had a successful career and everything. As a journalist. I had an eccentric career as a teacher. I won all the university’s teaching awards. I have ADD pretty severely. Don Murray’s stuff just fits into it. I have to live in chaos. As a journalist I have to live in chaos. Even when I was night editor at the AP in Detroit, I always managed to do the most difficult stories. I never was very well organized, but I had that subconscious notion that he appealed to.

That was just for me. My article was on him being a writing coach. Such as read loud. You can go to a newsroom and see who is the best writer based on the ones reading their own words.

I abandoned a career to get a Ph.D. in American history. I was still wandering around my dissertation.

We sat next to each other at a Muslim wedding where the couple sits right next to the religious head. We were sitting at a sofa at a hotel, and he just asked me about myself. I told him that it was a pretty difficult time for me. My job had ended, or it was going to end. I didn’t have a job yet. Everywhere I went I wanted to look for a job. Within the next month I had seven job offers. He just told me about the death of his daughter. I felt refreshed, as I wrote in that copy. I was working with the mid-America Press Institute, in Carbondale. I wrote about fourteen or fifteen different articles for Editor and Publisher. I taught beginning news writing, reporting. I used most of Murray’s stuff for feature writing, and Elbow’s stuff too. I could do design and layout when computers came. I was one of the leaders on computers. Doing websites and stuff like that. We did in my feature writing class some websites.

I think I knew Don Murray before I knew who he was. It was a discovery of self. I think Murray is nothing more than a discovery of self. He was about humanity, and dealing with people, and putting yourself in context. He helped me come up with a lot of different ideas. Then I came up with a lot of different ideas myself. He said, “If you have a really good idea, don’t get into a routine. Abandon it and come up with another one.” Many times I was successful as a teacher, and sometimes I was not. I was able to accept that I tried new things and they didn’t work.

I’m a fallen Irish Catholic like he was. We’re from the Irish culture, and I grew up in an Irish culture in Cleveland. All my classmates were Irish except for a beautiful Italian woman. So I think the good parts of the Irish culture … I think they were part of him and part of me.

Did it seem at one point less popular to teach the writing process?
Actually I didn’t give a damn. People scratched their heads. Some feminist theorists didn’t like Murray because he was touchy-feely. I don’t understand that. I taught the way I want to teach. I learned portfolio grading, which was to me the culmination of all of this.

I just put numbers from one to fifteen. I put a number for why I took off this or that. People would ask me for grades and I would say, “I don’t know what grade that is.” I would tell them to look at it, write and tell me what works, one, and two: what needs work. Any professor who says what’s wrong with it is full of shit. What works, and what needs work—it’s a positive way. I would have them take what I wrote before, and they would write a page-and-a-half essay about what worked in their stories. First, they had to say something good about their stories. Then they had to say what needed work. They would for instance rewrite the lead. Then they would rewrite the inverted pyramid transition away from an inverted pyramid. If they didn’t know how to tell an anecdote well enough they would rewrite the anecdote. Their final was to hand it in at the end of the semester. My grades were just based on portfolio grading. They had all the chances in the world to tell me what worked and what needed work.

I said that Don Murray basically was a Taoist. The way of life of Lao Tzu. I came home and opened it up to the first poem there. It tells who Murray is. It’s poem 49 (of the *Tao Te Ching*). “The wise man’s mind is free, but tuned to people’s needs.” “Wise men hear and see as little children do.”

I took a weeklong seminar from him. He was a speaker too. That was the public writing he had. That’s pretty gutsy, isn’t it? He showed me you didn’t need to have all this…what you need to do is, well…a curious two or three hundred people at a thing, and he hunts and pecks. He has to write an essay. All he has is a line. He starts with a line rather than a scene. He sent us the finished thing when it was published in *The Boston Globe*. None of the stuff that he was talking about originally appeared in the final one. He published it about a month after his thing here, and he sent us all a copy of it.

Peter Elbow had a whole week where he talked about playfulness to get to the subconscious. I had national scribble day. I had a whole bunch of things that came to me and that was responsible for that.

We had to do a vignette on life. Most of these people were English teachers, graduate students, stuff like that. There were only a couple of journalists in the audience: me and one other. I’ve expanded on one of his ideas: the first day you came in, you went to the first two: what works and what needs work. Groups of three. One was a listener, one was the critic, one the writer. The writer speaks first. What worked first. Then what needed work. Then the critic had to respond just to the statements of what worked and what needed work. Just to that. Not to go far afield on other crap. The second day you revise. You go in there and he staples pages to our things and we pass them around for a half hour or so, and we write a vignette about our lives. People then critique that. They have to say what works, what needs work. On the third day, we bring in our revised ones to
hand in, but we have to sit down, and he asks us to write a poem about it. I wrote about witnessing an execution in Oklahoma in 1966. When I wrote the poem, it was completely different than the thing. My essay focused mainly on the execution, but it also barely mentioned this barmaid where I was staying. She says, “let’s go barhopping.” At that time in Oklahoma these were kind of illegal places to have drinks. Late night places. She says, “When we’re through let’s go.” When I wrote the poem, the poem was about her. I came back after smelling of burnt flesh. I said to her, “I can’t do it. I’m too depressed and shook up.” Because of what Murray did, I saw that she chose life and I chose death.

I had a passport system. Three times they had to meet with me. They could talk to me. I had to go over their stories. No two times in a week. I had to sign their passport three times.

I gave pretty good grades. We once had an argument in the English department about grades. I said, “Who is the better teacher: the one who just grades their papers once and grades them up and down, or the one who gives them a chance to rewrite?” They said the latter. I said, “Then that gives them higher grades.”

Tom Romano was really his friend here in town. He was a really close friend of his. I’m not a close friend of Don Murray but he had an effect on my life.

He came to campus about three times. I wrote him. He doesn’t like to write letters because he likes to write about other things. We exchanged a couple of letters.

I once interviewed Dr. King when he was booed and screamed at in Gross Point Michigan when I worked for the AP. King could have been mad and said, “How dare you say that! I won the Nobel Peace Prize!” Some Nazis got on stage and screamed at him. But he had such humanity. Likewise did Murray.
Mimi Schwartz, 14 March 2010, phone

Murray was one of the main founders of this new approach to writing when I went to school as a kid. The philosophy was that you should write what you want to say and write it down. Don was one of the major influences on an approach to writing, the teaching of writing, which was to write to discover what it is that you know. He was a great writer, so his books were quite easy to read and I think had an influence. He always talked at the 4 C’s so he had a huge influence in there. Then there was the influence that he had in his columns. That had an enormous influence on a readership of people. Subjects that Don was one of the first to articulate in print.

Writing to discover, and the whole emphasis on finding a voice—it is very freeing. If you think about the other way of writing, which is to think first and write second, you get a lot of writer’s block because your emphasis is on perfection. So the whole turning around of the movement of teaching to write it and see what’s there and then figure out how to shape that into a finished piece is a much easier way to write because you never have writer’s block. I did use for years a first draft of Don’s where he shows how he crosses things out and how he turns a not particularly strong piece of writing into a strong opening.

I think it’s also people who are willing to take a risk in the creative process. Who are writing and teaching. It’s also a symbol that represented that. Also he had tragedy in his life and managed to get through it.
Kevin Sullivan, 15 March 2010, phone

In the big picture he is the reason I am in journalism period. He was so inspirational to me when I was a student at UNH that I just thought, “If that’s journalism I want a piece of that.” He was someone who got me so excited about this business and so interested in writing and doing what we do that I think of him all the time. I’m fifty now. I was 20 or 19 when I met him. I still think of him not quite everyday but frequently. He’s still my guiding light in this business and the reason I’m here. I met him in the introductory course in journalism. I walked in there the first day. I transferred to UNH from the University of Maine. A kid I grew up with was a hockey player at UNH. He was writing for The New Hampshire, the school paper. He started telling me about this guy. He said, “You have to take the intro journalism course. You won’t believe this guy Don Murray.” I remember walking in first day; there was Don sitting in his desk with a white beard and a flannel shirt sort of like a Santa character. He said, “Okay, go leave here. Find a news story, type it up, and turn it in to me by the end of the period. You have fifty minutes,” or whatever it was. We realized he was serious.

The woman sitting next to me was Jackie MacMullan, a sports writer who had an amazing career at the Globe and Sports Illustrated. She recently took the buyout but she had a great career and has a few books out.

So anyway, Don gave us zero guidance. I spotted a janitor in the student union, and I just went over and said, “Tell me about yourself.” He told me a few things, and I went into a typewriter, banged out something, and handed it to Don. It was so weird, fun, and interesting, he just caught my attention. It was fun, and he made it fun. When we came back we started going through these papers, saying what we liked and what we didn’t like and what he thought about it. I would never look back. I would always look forward to these one-on-one conferences. I will never forget the way he taught. You would meet with him one on one for fifteen or twenty minutes. Best fifteen minutes of the week. It was like being with somebody who was so exited what you are doing, that it made whatever came next seem really dull.

Everybody loved Andy Merton. And there’s a guy called Ron Winslow—he’s great too. He worked there. All of those inspired students, but I would say that Don is kind of the patron saint of that program. He’s the one who inspired everybody. The sports guy editor at the Post, Matt Vita. I didn’t know he went to UNH. We kind of discovered that and reminisced about Don. There have been so many people I have met who know him, but I’m trying to think of an experience where I met somebody and realized they were a Murray disciple later.

I’ve been in people’s offices where there was his book on the shelf. Lots of people like that, more than I can count. A lot of them through Poynter.

I think that the way I write was very clearly influenced by Don. When I took his course, I was a regular college kid. I actually looked at some of the papers I wrote in an intro to
nonfiction writing course I took in my first semester, with Alice McDermott. When I was moving, I came across some of those papers, and you just cringe when you read them. No discipline, just air and ink. Don helped me with the structure of writing: how to write with clarity and how to figure out what’s important and what’s not. I always remember Don saying, “You can measure the power of what you’re writing by the power of what you’ve cut out, what’s on the floor. If you’re trimming out important stuff from your piece that means there is even more important stuff still in it.” I don’t mind trimming out important stuff for more important stuff to stay, because that’s what Don taught me.

Don did an exercise where he gave us all of these long and wordy sentences about Jesus crying. Then he eventually gave us the real text, “Jesus wept,” which is so much more effective. I’m an editor here. I do the Jesus wept edit on all kinds of content.

I know he did the freewriting stuff too, but that was something that never affected me. Not at least in a conscious way.

After UNH, we would talk on the phone and trade emails. Not as much as I would have liked, but I think he met my wife a couple of times and met my kids a couple of times.

I think everybody has a small group of people whose opinion they really respect. My wife and I were having trouble with the last chapter of a book we wrote together. I sent it to a friend of mine here and his critique of it was an important part of the book.

I did it when I got stuck. Don did it as part of the writing process. Those guys were trading drafts all the time. I don’t feel like I have quite enough time in my life to do that very often. I can think of two or three people who if I were ever stuck I would do that with.

David Finkle is someone whose writing always inspires me. I read everything he writes. I thought The Good Soldiers should be taught. David Maraniss is also incredible and inspiring. Another Post guy. I remember I read Joan Didion when I was at UNH and thought she was incredible.

One of the best moments of my life: I was invited to be the keynote speaker at a journalism reunion at UNH in 2003. My wife and I had won the Pulitzer Prize in April that year. It was great because Don was clearly getting older, and I wasn’t getting up to UNH very often. I hadn’t seen him in a couple years and was afraid I’d never see him again. I got to stand up in front of three or four hundred people, dedicate my half of the Pulitzer to Don, and say that he was the reason I was in journalism and that it was his prize. It was a great moment. He was kind of in the back waving me off, like “Ah shut up.” It was a great moment.
Sondra Perl, 24 March 2010, phone (recorded with permission)

So I gave you just a small outline of what I’ve been putting together. I’m doing this masters thesis for the university of Missouri for the journalism school there it is basically a biography of Donald Murray through a series of interviews that trace his influences.

I just thought I’d maybe start with an open question. Anything you want to mention about Don Murray. Your history, how you met or worked with him, and then I can get into more specifics after that.

Okay. I think the first contact with Don came as a really big surprise to me because I believe had published a very short article on my dissertation research, which was on composing processes of unskilled college writers. I had published it in an alumni magazine for NYU, which is where I’d done the research. And one day I got a postcard in the mail from Don Murray saying that he had read the article, and that he thought it was a wonderful piece of work. He congratulated me. So prior to ever meeting him, I had this sense of someone who was just a very generous and thoughtful person who would take the time to send me a postcard. He didn’t know me. I was a young graduate student and had just completed a dissertation. It sort of stood for the kind of person he is, which is that he took other people’s work very seriously and was someone who would respond wholeheartedly to what he found spoke to him. That was the first personal sort of contact. But I guess prior to that I would have read A Writer Teaches Writing and I think that book to me is one of the ones that is just sort of pure to Don at his desk writing about what he believes based on his own experience and making it available to other people to see if it speaks to them.

I’ve talked to a variety of folks, and a lot of people are interested in talking about their first experience meeting Don Murray because he seems such a very personal, engaging character from the start.

Yes.

There’s a story that I just exchanged a couple of days ago with Mimi Schwartz. She said she was in your class and because of a conversation where Don Murray was present, it led her to decide to pursue a Ph.D. I was just wondering what kind of impact do you think Don Murray was for you in terms of using him as a teaching tool, and how you felt students reacted to that approach? I know that you are the founder of the New York City Writing Project, and I was wondering what kind of relationship to...

So his influence on me and the writing project?

Yeah.

Well again I think that the approach that is very important to me has a lot to do with thinking about how people write and how important it is to understand one’s process and
reflect on writing. So Don to me sort of embodies that probably as much as or more than anybody in the field: this constant understanding that what we write is important but also how we get there and what we think about it. All of the twists and turns along the way are equally important. Personally his work just sort of resonated with me as I was beginning to formulate a pedagogy. His approach made enormous sense, as it was one that valued the writing processes that writers had and also valued responding to students as writers. I guess also his influence or his talking so often about listening—I think there’s an article called “The Listening Eye”—and his notion that good writers really need listeners. A lot of transaction that occurs to make writing better occurs between readers, writers, and texts. There isn’t so much we have to do to fix someone’s text as it is to listen to what they’re trying to say and help them get further. All of those ideas very much were with me when I was involved with my colleagues in setting up the New York City Writing Project. It was very much a pedagogy that we would have called in those days a process approach but very much grounded in the ideas of Don Murray. We would have read him in the early days. We always would use an article or two of Don’s and make sure his voice was a part of what we were relying on to move the whole process forward.

I was wondering if you had an opinion of the relationship between Don’s process approach and how that translates to teaching on a grade school level?

Well I often use the ideas of Jerome Bruner, which says that, I think, anything can be taught to anybody, you just have to figure out the right level. Again I think that if I’m describing Don’s approach accurately, it was just that writing begets writing. You need to write in order to become a better writer. I think that works as well in first grade as it does in Ph.D. seminars at the graduate level. In fact, it may work maybe simpler in first grade because—and Don Graves has said this more than Don Murray, but they worked a lot together—first graders don’t know that they can’t write. When you say, “let’s write,” they think “why not?” So I think his approach, if that’s how you’re seeing his approach, is one that’s very open to doing some sort of prewriting activities, generating texts, moving from those texts to getting response, reshaping it—certainly his notion of revision and seeing again—work on all grade levels. My approach would be very similar if I was working with five-year-olds or fifty-year-olds.

I talked to Peter Elbow a little bit ago. One thing [he] was talking to me about was that in the early ’90s there was kind of a backlash against the writing process. They felt like it was too…I think the word he used was “expressivist.” I was wondering how you have maybe deviated from Don’s idea of the writing process, or if you feel like you’re defending your area of scholarship in that approach, or if you feel like there was a need—after absorbing Don Murray’s work and the work of your contemporaries now—you felt a need to deviate from that and establish your own pedagogy.

That’s a hard question. I think that critique is always valuable. It’s useful to bring new perspective and update certain things. What’s useful in some of those critiques, and probably were around in the ‘80s, was probably a misunderstanding of expressivism. But there was originally a misunderstanding of it. I don’t think expressivism ever meant that
the writer was a lone person eking out words in a garret, totally individualistic and private as if there was no outside reality. I think sometimes expressivism gets critiqued and—ridiculed is probably too strong a word—but the notion that there was a social turn in composition where we were beginning to think of writers as part of a social world and writing about things other than what they think about, well that doesn’t say it right but writing about things other than those that are purely personal—so the writer in relationship to the world, the writer who has a social context, the writer as being contextualized and created out of race and class and gender differences—that there isn’t just a writer alone contemplating the world. We’re much more complex than that and all of our language comes out of our interaction with the social world seemed to be one of the critiques of expressivism. I would say expressivism never was really quite that naïve, that it was never meditating just on one’s self. So while I appreciate making writing process approaches more conscious of context and political, I never thought they weren’t. On the one hand, I would want to defend the work of people like Don Murray and certainly Peter Elbow as always understanding that writers had audiences and writers were writing about all kinds of issues not just their private musings. So I understand the critiques and I think that they’re useful to remind us how complex it is to be a writer and that there isn’t just one composing process, there isn’t just one solitary writer. But I think process approaches used well in the classroom are as important as they ever were. For me that is very much grounded in the work of people like Don Murray and Peter, because the writer may have many voices, it isn’t just one voice, we can choose to write in many different voices, but whatever voices we’re writing in, we still live in a body and that body is in a location and you write from that and you still have writing processes. I don’t think my pedagogy has changed all that much. I think there’s something very grounded about sitting in a room with other people and writing and knowing how to listen very responsively and carefully to the words of other people and attend to their language, honor it, and let it be in the room so other people can hear it, so for me all of this is very much a transaction, it’s not narcissistic. I sometimes think process gets misunderstood to some extent in the 90s when there were a lot of critiques.

It seems like every time I ask somebody if they’d be willing to talk about Murray, everyone is very excited. When he passed away, everyone was very excited to have a dedication to him. I never got the chance to meet Don Murray when he was alive and I’ve been trying to wrap my head around how he had such a great impact on so many people. Some people who say they met him only once or saw him at a conference for fifteen or twenty minutes or something like that. I was just wondering how you felt about him as a person in terms of being an influential character for who he was.

I don’t think it’s the same anymore, but I used to think that people who were drawn into composition studies tended to be decent and maybe by decent I mean teachers who are interested in their students. For me that just had an ethics of caring in a sort of responsible way, in a way that, again, wanted student voices to be the center of a classroom, wanted student writing to be privileged, and therefore the interest or the stance of people in comp studies, at least as I was getting into it, and the people that I admired, was very much towards the human beings in the classroom and perhaps less than towards the texts, so
that we weren’t privileging texts or already finished pieces of writing as much as we were privileging the creation of pieces of writing which meant we were very much focused on our students. So if you have that kind of situation, I think it just drew people for whom that was really pleasurable and important and did have an ethics and morality and a sense of purpose. So those kinds of people tend be, to make a sort of broad generalization, warm and approachable, and Don was warm and approachable and I’m sure lots of people have described that he was big and had this beard and twinkly eyes he just seemed to find pleasure in human interaction and people were drawn to him and he welcomed them and I think I visited him in New Hampshire and he was one way at work and another way at home and another way at conferences. I think with Don it was you saw what you got and it was really warm and loving and again, he was someone who would take the time to write to a young doctoral student to say that he appreciated her work, and it was just an act of generosity. I think he probably did that over and over again.

It’s been kind of overwhelming, the amount of response to the queries. It seems like he had an influence in quite a few people and a large body of academic work, obviously. I had a question related to that. I was just thinking about your program in New York and I was wondering if anyone has questioned or asked or sought kind of quantifiable proof for the effectiveness of this approach in teaching.

Well I’m sure people have asked and I’m sure they’re still asking, and I’m sure there are people who will give it to them, but I’m not sure how you quantify growth in writing. It’s a really difficult thing to do. So I’m not sure how to answer your question.

No, it’s fine. I’m just kind of playing devil’s advocate and saying has there been a backlash to this approach, saying that it perhaps isn’t as effective as it claims. I know there’s always debate in the academic community and among different approaches to pedagogy but I was wondering if you had had a personal experience with that kind of debate.

I can tell you one story and then maybe some other things will occur to me, but many years ago I was doing research in a school on Long Island where I had done a lot of teacher training, so I knew the teachers well and they were doing what we might call a process approach. They were having kids write and revise and publish their work, and it was across many different grade levels, and of course the Board of Education out there was concerned, “well how do we know kids are really learning what you say they’re learning?” And all I can tell you is that a first grade teacher looked at them and she said, “How do I know my kids are learning? I look at their faces.” So I just thought that was a wonderful response, that I think by and large good teachers, effective teachers know when their kids are learning. I think it can be that simple. When kids, certainly talking about young people, show their delight and excitement and want to read their work and are excited about what they take home and you see them visibly improve from draft to draft or story to story and shift genres and become more fluent and take home books and I think you know, they’re learning and I don’t know that it’s all that different as they get older. And I know there are good reasons to have assessments and there are people who
want to, without that assessment they think it’s suspect, but you know, it’s not something I end up trying to respond to too often. There are other people who take that on and I’m not directing a program I have to defend to anybody and if I did have to defend it, I’d have to find ways to do it but I’ll also say a number of years ago, some colleagues and I at CUNY were funded to collect writing samples at CUNY to try to chart growth in writing and we had a federal grant and we were going to discover something we called a measure of rhetorical maturity. Because you know you could count sentences and you could say that sentence length got longer and you could do all kinds of things you could count, but we wanted to try to come up with something that showed that thinking matured. And the truth is, we never did it. We couldn’t figure it out. But I guess for me, and I don’t know if Don would agree with this, but for me, I think the excitement is in the creation of products, it’s a lot in the process, it’s a lot in watching what happens over time and the actual product to me as a point in time, and then you move on to something else. So I’d like to have my students write a range of different genres, I’d like to have them see the strength of different genres, and I think if something is going to be published, that’s the time you’re going to think about how to make it fit so that readers don’t stumble and it’s clear and it’s accurate and it’s concise and it does whatever you need it to do, but I’m not trying to prove that to someone who wants to know if a program works. I don’t know if that’s a satisfactory answer.

No, absolutely. I think that the rhetorical maturity thing is kind of an interesting, I mean, it’s really hard to quantify this stuff and I agree with you that what’s visible, there’s an impact that you can see that you can’t quantify.

And also, I guess if I had to go down the assessment road, I would argue for self-assessment, I would argue for having students write reflective pieces, on their work, so that they have control over, they can talk about their own rhetorical maturity, they can describe who they were when they started the course and who they are at the end how their writing has changed and what they learned about writing, and if they can do that in some articulate fashion, well then I’m satisfied. And I think Peter Elbow has worked really hard to sort of get his head around the assessment questions and to come up with ways of thinking that are sane and teachers can use and I really admire that he takes that on and tries to do it. I think it’s really hard and it’s just a really tricky issue because you can’t compare, it’s like comparing apples and oranges. Writers are different from each other, and if you really want to compare writing samples, you have to have a bunch of people write on the same thing at one point in time and the same topic at another point in time and if they’re writing on different topics, can you compare them, do you want to count verbs? The things you can count are not always going to be the things that tell you whether somebody’s learned. So again, I understand how complex it is, I’ve tried my hand at it, and what can I say? Life is short. Those are not the questions I want to spend my time thinking about. With assessments and high-stakes testing and schools and rubrics and there’s just a huge machinery that’s out there that’s generated to prove that what we’re doing, that we’re doing what we say we’re doing, but honestly, you can look at their faces. I’m not sure all those rubrics and assessments and high-stakes tests and standards have made anybody into better writers.

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The last question I was going to ask, which is kind of the key theoretical binding element to this thesis, being what it is, I’ve been trying to wrap it under the theories of writing culture, or a community of writers’ influence, however I could define it, and Don Murray always said that it was really important to have kind of a community of like-minded writers or workers or thinkers, some people who you could always know that they would be available to talk to you about your ideas or exchange work, and I was wondering A) If you witnessed that or was part of that with Murray and felt like there was something either in the writing process approach or otherwise that was some kind of community like that and B) If you have a community of your own?

Those are great questions and I think absolutely what drew me to this work was this being part of several different kinds of communities of writers and I guess in my extended community I would love to include people like Don, I mean I don’t think that he and I ever spent time sitting together and sharing drafts, although I do think, I visited him. But I think the community aspect…again the social nature of this is really important to fully appreciating a process approach. And so I would say every single one of my classes, it probably doesn’t matter what the topic is, I look to create a context in which the classroom becomes, even if it is a short-lived community, it starts in September and possibly ends in December, but through those fourteen or fifteen weeks one of the things we’re pursuing is writing and setting it up so that voices are respected and heard and appreciated and certainly celebrated and also critiqued if that’s a piece of what we need to do. But to me a community of writers is central and I think the writing project for me was always and continues to be an important community of writers, so whether it’s the New York City project or the more national network, the PhD program that I’m essentially sort of the coordinator of at the CUNY graduate center, at least in my classes and the composition and rhetoric PhD community, I think we would also say that we write together, that it’s important to spend time writing. We don’t just talk about what we do but we actually do it. And my current work is more, right now, in the area of Holocaust Studies, I direct something called the Holocaust Educators Network and I run some summer seminars primarily for teachers from rural America who come to New York, but it’s very much again, as much as the Holocaust and genocide and social justice agendas are of course a part of what we study, there’s not a day in that seminar when we’re not writing. For me, writing is the glue that binds the community together, even when the content is not necessarily about writing or the teaching of writing.

Something that just came to mind, and I am doing this for a journalism degree, and I’ve been straddling and kind of separating out his contributions to the practice and teaching of writing in the composition field and his work in journalism, both as a writing coach and instructor and a journalist himself: He seemed to use a lot of journalism techniques and a lot of techniques of writing for example, columns and things like that. To him, it seemed the structure of a column or news article was a very good teaching method, and likewise, he used a lot of his teaching methods that he was using in composition to take into the newsroom and encourage reporters to also be writers. I was wondering, I’ve had a lot of talks about reporters also being writers but I was wondering if you have felt like,
or have ever used yourself, journalism methods or techniques or maybe a structure of a column or something like that to help inform your teaching?

I don’t think I have. It’s just not something that’s ever sort of come across my path so I don’t think I have. I think what my work has veered towards is memoir and creative nonfiction, which isn’t all that far away from personal essays. I sort of spent my last numbers of years reading lots of memoirs and thinking about memoir as a form and questions about voice and self and authenticity and what that means, and I think creative nonfiction is a wonderful form for composition classes, but I don’t think I’ve sort of immersed myself in the universe of journalists and how they talk about writing, although it was always nice that Don somehow wore both hats and could call on each one to sort of enrich the other, but I don’t think that’s anything I’ve ever done much with.
Meeting Don for me was like meeting a life-long hero. He had influenced me so much in his writing. Just the experience of being around him was fantastic. What I really enjoyed was just the time spending with the daybooks. There are off the cuff observations that he made—things about writing that I found in the daybooks that I still use today.

I think one of the things that Don brought to the table was the fact that a lot of people who teach writing were teachers who discovered that they needed to teach writing. Don was a writer who became a teacher. Not a teacher who taught writing. It makes all the difference in the world for his understanding of the process. There are a lot of writers who are really good writers who still don’t understand what they do.

I think I really relate to him as a journalist. If I told you that somewhere in America there was a department of journalism and a department of English and they had gotten together to bring a speaker in, you would just know that’s Don Murray. If I told you there’s a school of English and a school of education and they were bringing somebody in to speak, that’s definitely Don Murray. Don brought areas together, helping people to understand what it is that they were teaching.

There are so many people I run into around the country. I kind of bridge all of these areas. I started as a journalist, became a journalism professor. I am friends with Roy Peter Clark, and he told me back in the eighties that if you want to understand writing you have to go back to elementary schools and observe what it is they are doing there at the beginning. I have now written six books on teaching writing. It all began with Roy. I speak to schools, work in the university, and work with professional writers. When I talk to people who do what I do, the name that always comes up is Don Murray. You’re somewhere in Colorado and you discover that Don is what you have in common, even if your backgrounds are so different. It may be somebody who had some chance to spend time with him—less and less because of the time factor. Maybe someone had not met Don but had been influenced by his writing. I run into people who teach writing to primaries, and you find out their influences. Don has application there, but it’s really not oriented on that level. But here’s somebody who is a great writing teacher—I am thinking specifically of one in third grade—and you find out wow, influenced by Don.

In that colloquium…As a former journalist you meet a lot of people. We tend to be a little jaded. That is sort of like sitting at the seat of the master. Minnie was there too. You realize what a gentle soul Don was. Just the experience of getting to know him. I can’t remember what he talked about or what we talked about. I kind of remember the experience more than anything else. I was influenced by just getting a chance to go through the daybooks. They were just there at Poynter. I don’t remember a soul who was there though.

I have been to several seminars and workshops at Poynter. Right now I work with a new center for community journalism. We work with small dailies and weeklies throughout
Texas. We do a series of seminars here. I really used the Poynter model in terms of how we do our own work here. What I was trying to do was to have a Poynter Institute model for community journalists who would never have a chance to actually go to Poynter.

We moved from being a department of Journalism to a school of journalism when I was chairman of the department. The department and program goes back to 1927.

I have taught with Don Murray’s books. I used his *Writing for your Readers* in journalism classes at the university. I used it in a public affairs reporting course. I refer to Don’s work a lot in things that I do—presentations and things like that. I recommend Don constantly and quote from him frequently.

I’ve been involved in speaking about writing for about fifteen years. I’ve done it nationally. Don was very instrumental in helping me to take the writing that I had done and to understand who it all fit together—how the parts of the process fit together—and really to understand what I was doing experimentally. I think a lot of people have been influenced by that as I have spoken nationally and written in the books and things like that. If you listen to me for three hours you are going to mention Don Murray at some point being mentioned. If somebody comes and listens to a couple of seminars, you might hear Don’s name once or twice but the whole set of time is like a tribute to what Don has done.

I worked for the Associated Press in Arkansas. I have been in public relations and copyediting. I bounced around. I worked at a sports information department for a university.

I had read Roy’s stuff, but I first met him sometime in the mid 80s at Poynter. We became friends. We have talked since then, and I had him here to the university to speak at the workshop seminars that I have done and speak otherwise. It’s interesting—I am using one of Roy’s books right now in a feature writing class that I am doing.

Here in the department of English…departments of English and journalism kind of run on separate tracks, but with Don we kind of all came together. You’ll find people in departments of Rhetoric who respect and are influenced by Don. You don’t find that cross-pollination anywhere. I can’t think of anybody else that an English composition professor and I could sit down and talk about, where we both would talk about insights that we had gotten and things that we used in classrooms.

When you look at *Writing for Your Readers* and you see that the term writing is in the title, but so much of what he is talking about you cannot separate out reporting and writing. Some of my students have a writing problem, but at the core of that problem is a reporting problem because there is no way to write around the reporting that they’ve got. Don brought all that together. He did make it possible as journalists to be able to talk about writing. He was talking about how it’s not just the reporting. You can learn from literature. You can learn from poetry. You can learn from novelists. You can pick up
techniques about dialogue and description from people who knew nothing about journalism but were all writing. Don bridged the gap between fiction and more literary kinds of approaches and journalism.

If Don were still alive and you were to tell him you talked to me, he’d probably say, “Who?” I mean, we met a few times and maybe at one point he knew my name and who I was, but I was not close with him in a way where I would expect him to remember my name. However there’s something about that that makes this important—a large body of people so influenced by Don who may only have met him once, or never.
Lisa Miller, 26 March 2010, phone

I met Don first when I was an undergrad at UH. He was my adviser for one semester. It was very brief. I went back to graduate school at UNH in January of 1987 and got a grad teaching assistantship. I was teaching 401 and was using Don’s book Write to Learn. We had lunch at the Bagelry. He was very amazing, welcoming, and glad to talk to me about anything I wanted to talk about. He was interested in anything I wanted to do, not just with the teaching but with everything, and that was how the friendship began. I was lucky enough to have don as a mentor and friend from that point on. I don’t know if there is a specific incident to tell you about.

I teach journalism now at UNH. One of the things I remember best happening with Don: he was always very willing to talk to students. He would meet a student once and get their address and send them a packet of stuff. He would always do that. I had in one year two students who were on the women’s basketball team. I asked Don to a game. He had never been to a women’s basketball game—never been. He was a big hockey fan but never went to women’s basketball games. I got a call from him that he now had tickets to all the games and was sending the students packets of information. The next semester one of the students was taking my class. He got her address and sent her stuff. He just loved to communicate with the students and be part of that.

I had never really taught anything except a couple of beginning journalism courses at a community college. The writing process was a revelation to me as a teacher and writer. I think it gave me a great way to talk about writing with students, to talk about different parts of the process that they could work on and improve on. In my own writing I think it just changed the way I wrote. No longer did I sit and wait and wait until I knew what I wanted to say. I was willing to plunge in and write. That had a huge impact on my own writing.

I occasionally did exchange drafts with him. He was always very much … Don always made you feel like you could do anything. He might look at a draft and point out the things he thought worked with it. He would tell you if something didn’t work, but was better to emphasize what worked.

By the time I got to know Don he had left the department.

I think a lot of composition people, including Tom Newkirk, were influenced by him. At that time I was working with the other teaching assistants. We were all teaching Don’s book and were very influenced by that.

I do think that in terms of journalism part of what Don brought to that was this writing process and this emphasis on writing, and that, I think, the idea that journalism should be good writing too. I don’t think that was necessarily deemed applied to journalism before Don. I think he gave a lot of journalists another way to think about their writing that was important.
Andrew Merton is my colleague at UNH but was my teacher when I was an undergraduate. I think a lot of my teaching grew out of what I saw him do.

I can’t imagine teaching writing any other way than the conference system. That contact with the student, that chance to get the student to talk about what he or she was trying to do—to have a chance face to face to explain what I think about a piece and get their reaction to that—is really important to me.

I had conversations with Don about some of that (criticism of Don) and I certainly think in part people were misreading him on some ways. There may have been a sense that what Don was trying to get everyone to do was write personal essays but I don’t think that was the case.

I have used his *Writing to Deadline* book. Certainly a lot of it deals with the writing, but the point that Don makes in I think all of his books is that you can’t do the writing without good information. I think that particular book helps students pursue that.

I have in the past used the Missouri group book.

I ended up staying and working as an instructor for a while.

Tom Newkirk and I spent two days to put together his papers in Poynter because we were putting together the *Essential Don Murray* book. They’re great and are taking great care of Don’s papers. The other connection is just that I have known people who worked at Poynter. We had a couple students who went to the summer fellowship that they used to have for journalism students.

We wanted to put into the book some things that we knew people would expect to see. We also wanted some surprises. We found some wonderful stuff going through all of his papers. We brought all this stuff back and pulled out what we thought was the most interesting. We already decided which were the more famous pieces we wanted to use. We tried to find things that didn’t repeat something that was said in the other pieces and that showed something of Don and his writing and thinking. We wanted to give a flavor of Don when we included the Daybook pages. Anybody who knew Don knew about the Daybook. That seemed important. And his poetry, because that seemed important to him. We wanted to have Minnie Mae mentioned. She was his partner for so long and helped him through this work. We wanted things that people would have seen but also some surprises.

I was one of the speakers at the memorial service at UNH. I think there was a real outpouring from lots and lots of people that really touched me and made me feel supported during that time. Not necessarily people coming out of the woodwork but I think Don knew so many people in so many different ways that I was often being surprised by someone coming up and saying, “Don talked bout you” or “Don talked
about that experience, or that experience.” It was a great support and help during that very difficult time. We put this memorial service and we held it in the theater on campus. I think the day before, somebody from the dean’s office called and said, “Are you sure we should have it in the theater? We are afraid the theater won’t fill and won’t look right.” We just laughed. The theater was just full and packed, and I don’t think we realized the impact Don had on so many people.

I think it is important to have people to exchange work with. You hit the right phrase when you said writers you can trust. You need people that you know will give you the kind of reading that you need and will tell you what works as well as what doesn’t work. I’d think also to have a kind of relationship in some way where you both share you work is really important. It shouldn’t just be one-sided. I think that kind of community is very important. I was in a couple of poetry workshop groups with Don. It was very important to have people in the group that you trusted and that would be constructive. I think that was important for Don. Not necessarily to have someone to help him with his writing but to have the interaction and people to send his writing to—an audience. It was important to have his wide circle of friends and acquaintances.

When I was at the paper there had been some tensions or certainly some sense that academics were people who weren’t actually doing journalism and so they didn’t really understand it, and that whatever was going on in academia didn’t really have anything to do with what journalists were doing. I think Don changed that with some of his writing and coaching. I don’t know if it is as strong as it used to be. The journalists I deal with as an internship coordinator for UNH, I would say, don’t really have that feeling that academia doesn’t have a connection.

We went to a women’s hockey game. I had a student who was a manager for the women’s hockey team. The next day he had joined the friends of the women’s hockey and talked to the coach. He would come to classes too, probably stay after, talk to students. He encouraged students to call him or email him or visit him. Students sometimes interviewed him. He was great about that. He was generous with his time.

I don’t know how he got everything done. I don’t know how much he slept. But it all worked together. He was always writing. So if he was going to a conference he was writing on the way there. When he was there he was writing. When he was meeting with people he was not necessarily conscious but unconsciously gathering stuff for writing. If you met Don for lunch, you were liable to find him waiting in the restaurant writing. He was sort of always doing that.

I think there were a couple columns in which he wrote about some things we talked about. He always asked if that was okay before he published them.

I think he certainly wasn’t writing those columns to tell people they should be writers. I think he was trying to just talk about his own experience of a person at his age in the world and hope that other people connected with it. The point wasn’t necessarily him being a
writer but what he was doing with his experiences as an older person in the world. I think a lot of people connected with that.

At UH I have been really lucky to be in a place where that (conflict of abstractions) is true. No matter what kind of writing you are doing people see value in it. I think the writing faculty has been very much accepted by the literature faculty. I don’t necessarily see that much at UNH. I think it happens in other places. The thing that I don’t see and don’t understand in the way that some people have interpreted Don’s work is that sense that what he is writing about is only applicable to the personal essay or the column. I just don’t think that’s true.

I use the words journalist and writer interchangeably in my classes. I can call them writers but also talk about them as journalists. Don used that to put more emphasis on the writing and say good writing is good journalism to. I probably use all three of those words interchangeably. I think whatever term I use I am always thinking about it as someone who does writing. They do reporting and writing.

I think that especially in the later years he had that kind of a community online. The email really afforded him a whole other way to keep track and keep in touch with all of his friends and colleagues. I think that there were a lot of people in his circle, partly because they did share his ideas about writing. I think one of the things that will always stay with me the most, aside from his generosity—he was always generous with his time advice and friendship—is that Don didn’t just talk about writing—he was doing what he was talking about. He was always trying to do it better, see it in new ways, and find new ways to talk about writing. He didn’t stand still. He kept trying to learn and change and grow. He wanted that for other people too.
Carl Sessions Stepp, 26 March 2010, phone

I only met [Don] once at a seminar at the Poynter Institute in Florida. We corresponded a couple of times about other things, so that was the only time we met face to face.

I was certainly personally and professionally influenced by his work. He was a pioneer in a lot of things that I became influenced in. He was a writing coach, and I spent time as a writing coach. He wrote books on writing, and I wrote books on writing. He was a teacher; I was a teacher. He was a newspaper writer, and I was a newspaper writer. So we had a lot in common. His books are exceptionally clear, accessible and wise, and great examples of good writing about good writing. I have used him in class and used them for myself. From what I can tell he was a very generous person with his time and advice. I think writers in general are needy and generous both. They love to talk about their writing and also help and be there for other writers.

It helped that he was a great writer, I think. A lot of people who teach well are not necessarily best at doing what they teach. But I think he was an outstanding writer. I found that his life and work was really very important for people who do writing, editing, coaching, teaching—all of the things that go into the writing business.

It would go back to my early days of teaching—the early 1980s. It is possible the first person who mentioned his name was Don Fry or Roy Clark, who both had great respect for him, but I don’t know that for sure. It was relatively late when I met him. Would have been fifteen years later probably. He became by that point to me kind of a legend in our field.

It is obvious—and I’m sure you know this—that he is not the only person who was doing this kind of work. There are a lot of people who have research written and taught about all of these processes. One shouldn’t just single him out, but I think the coaching method that he was a part of, which came to involve listening to writers and talking to them at various steps through the writing process and trying to help them focus on their most important problems and develop plans for dealing with that problem. It’s a great way to teach students and develop professionals. His writing advice is unusually useful for a similar reason, and that is he was able to break the process down into steps and help you get better at the steps. I particularly like his advice about revision and the many examples of his own work that he has used to show how the revising process works.

I like his advice about organizing, getting ready to write, and writing multiple leads.

Bill Blundell of the Wall Street Journal and his book, which is called something like the Art and Craft of Feature of Writing: it’s a very good book based on the Wall Street Journal model of writing. That is one that I am using in a class this semester, in fact. My colleague at the University of Maryland, Jon Franklin, has a book called Writing for Story. It’s a great book on longer-form writing. There is a body of work by William Zinsser. Probably his most relevant book on this book is called On Writing Well. I also
like the people who approach writing from a right brain/left brain perspective. There is a writer named [Henriette] Klauser who wrote a book about writing from both sides of the brain.

I’ve been at Poynter as a teacher and as a participant in their seminars probably a dozen times. I haven’t been there in a while. So I’ve been involved mostly regarding writing and editing. I certainly think it has had a huge influence on loads and loads of writers. It is hard to do cause and effect on these things, but I think that Roy Clark and Don Fry and Chip Scanlan and Karen Brown Dunlap and so many of the people who have come through Poynter have been such greater teachers and motivators. I think they were inspired in part by Don. There was a mutually enforcing admiration going on there.

I think people like Murray and Poynter have done a lot to blow apart that kind of cliché thinking about journalism and academia. There is a lot of bad writing. There is a lot of bad teaching about writing just like there is a lot of bad anything. But there is a lot of great writing and teaching. I think to generalize about academics and their ivory tower and journalists who are cynical is way too oversimplified. I’ve worked with probably thousands of writers in my lifetime and I think I could count on the fingers of one hand the writers who didn’t care about getting better. Writers love to get better, listen, and talk about what they do. They welcome advice from an editor, teacher, or colleague.

The coaching movement that Don was so much a part of was phenomenally healthy because it increased the amount of time that people paid attention to writers and writing. I was certainly inspired by Murray, so that is on your point. I think it was the summer of 1984, having a conversation with Roy Clark at a convention one day. I had just moved from newspapers into teaching. He said, “Well why don’t you try coaching?” I said, “Well there are a lot of coaching. What I’d like to do is editing, be an editing coach.” I spent a lot of my time working with editors. There’s not nearly as much attention to editors. All of those books I just talked about were for writers, but there’s less for editors. I was trying to help the editors become better coaches of writers. I did it for probably twenty-five years. I don’t do it much anymore. To be honest I did it because I liked it in part, but basically it was how I put my kids through college. My last child graduated college in 2006, so I haven’t done it as much recently.

First of all, it was good for my own writing and teaching. To go into newsrooms and talk to writers and editors gave me all sorts of materials that I could bring back into the classrooms for my students. Newsrooms have changed a lot in the last five years, and one of the sad things is that I think there is a lot less coaching now over the last fifteen or twenty years prior because of resource and money issues. Newspapers particularly—and to a lesser degree, magazines—are such busy places. There is a myth that you sometimes hear that we’ll teach them to write in the newsroom. But that doesn’t happen much anymore because they are such busy places. But an editor bringing you into their wing and spending long hours over copy is very rare in newsrooms. What I found is when an outsider like myself was invited into a newsroom there was such a hunger. They were just lined up outside the door to talk bout their work. It was a treat to have your work taken
seriously. I started using the line in some of my speech that if what we were doing was doing any good, we should have revolutionized the business by then. I guess we didn’t—it’s not like the solved all the problems, but I think a lot of writers got a lot out of it.

In my experience, during the 1980s and 1990s there were probably a couple dozen of us that kept in touch a lot and ran into each other at conferences. There were a lot of venues, something called a Wilmington Writers Workshop, which became the National Writers Workshop, which ultimately became sponsored by Poynter. There was a circuit of conferences and conventions. You would go to four or five of them a year. For a while there was a newsletter called Coaches’ Corner published by folks up in Milwaukee. I can’t think of their names right now (Paul Salsini). But I can send you their names. Roy and Don Fry were certainly toward the center of that.

There are a number of good books about it too. Fry and Clark did a book on that. Just look at the names and bibliography in that book.

Jack [Hart] has a Ph.D. I think. He was a teacher, working coach, and visiting coach. He was one of the best I ever knew. I did a section in his newsroom for a while in Portland. I think there were a number of papers over the years that I worked with. I worked in Allentown, PA for several years for the Morning Call as their coach. The arrangement was to come in once a quarter and spend maybe two days or something like that. That gave you a sense. Every few months you were back in the newsroom and you could talk to them and watch their development. It really did have the feel of seeing people getting it. it is very much like a class, or like being an editor. I used to argue that you shouldn’t call them coaches, that coaching is editing. That any editor who wasn’t coaching shouldn’t be called an editor.

I think we all did it differently. Here’s how I did it: first of all, whenever an editor or publisher called you they almost always had something specific in mind. They maybe were reading the paper and were annoyed that the headlines were too long or something. You’d listen to them and see what was worrying them. I would recommend two or three days of activities that would try to focus on those issues. I recommended one or two large group sessions for everyone in the newsroom to come in and talk about one topic. It could be ledes or writing long-form. Then I would do smaller groups, like all of the copy desk or all of the feature or government writers. Then I would recommend one-on-one sessions with writers. Some liked to read stuff in advance. I started that way but ended up thinking that wasn’t the best way to do it. When the writer came into the room they would inevitably have some new story or crisis to talk about instead. I thought the most effective way to do it was to ask them to come to our thirty or sixty minute meeting with some recently piece of copy that they really liked, and another that they really struggled with or disliked. Then we would frame discussion around those two things.

That became the common conversation of coaches. Maybe that it all goes back to Murray. I wouldn’t claim it was original with me. I’m sure I wasn’t the first person to see this, but when a writer came in and talked about their writing, they’d start with the bad
stuff. It became conventional wisdom to get them out of that. Tell me what is the best thing bout you as a writer. Then get them to think a little bit about those lines. I may have learned this from Don, but it is hard again to do cause and effect. Who taught you to have these questions for me, you know? Someone did along the line.

Writers are always hard on themselves. There is nothing wrong with doting with the positive. When you go into the newsroom, tactically, you did not want to be perceived as there to do remedial work. You didn’t want to be perceived as having to put all the bad writers through this session. I think I learned this from Roy Clark, but I’m not sure. A lot of the people who preceded me with this used to say that you want to encourage editors to get one or two of the best writers in the room to sign up for the coaching first. Then if you are the best writer on the paper and everybody sees that you’re going in with the writing coach, then everyone else thinks you can do that, too. You have to keep it a little positive, and that’s so you didn’t come across as some curmudgeon coming in to beat people up.

I prefer the collaborative style of teaching in the same way that I prefer the collaborative style of editor/writer relationships. You break down the process into steps, help them, and do all sorts of workshops and activities to get and give feedback, stressing positive and constructive feedback—and also honest criticism in a professional way. I don’t think Murray invented those methods, but he personified them for us.

I was excited to meet him because I was influenced and heard his name invoked as an icon in many ways. It was a conference soon after he had donated some of his papers to Poynter. I remember getting access to some of his notebooks and being almost electrically charged by the kinds of notebooks he kept. He would jot down notes, and every few pages there would be a photograph that he cut out of some catalog about some kind of cool tool associated with writing—a cool keyboard, chair, desk, pen that writers used. It was as if he were secretly in my head. A lot of us had an idea that, I think Walt Harrington wrote a book about writers and their tools, of the idea that tools were so important. At that stage in his career it made a deep impression on him.

Correspondence wasn’t much. I remember that I did a book review of something that he wrote. He wrote me this very gracious and charming letter saying thanks for the book review and chatted about what was going on and happening with his work. I would have replied in some way or another. That’s really about it. We were never together or weren’t friends. We weren’t close or really had anything other than that tiny professional relationship. He definitely comes across in everything that he writes as a friend of the writer.
Robert Wyss, 29 March 2010, phone

When I met Don Murray, it was probably in the early ‘80s when he came to *The Providence Journal*. He was hired by the executive editor at the time. Hauser wanted to have a writing coach and he wanted Murray. Murray had limited time, and so he came in and ran these periodic seminars.

I remember first being very skeptical of the concept that reporters at a place like Providence needed help with their writing like that. I was very skeptical when he arrived, but by the end of the first day he had convinced me that I was stupid to think that a writer doesn’t need help their entire career. He was always learning. He was always trying to master writing. Although I think he was an exceptional writer, teacher, and coach, I think he could be very modest but could convey those lessons to people who were very skeptical. He won me over within hours of meeting him.

Chip showed you the first two versions of the book, right? What happened is Murray developed a culture that he passed on to Chip that Chip has passed on nationally. I don’t know how many years Don was there as the writing coach. At some point we created this thing called the writing committee. There was always a chair at the writing committee. Usually the top editors would ask people to be members. I know Brian Jones was the writing chair before me. There might have been somebody between Chip and Brian. Then there were people after me. It kind of dissolved a few years ago when newspapers hit the stone wall, financially, that we have today.

Chip put the book together. The first book was based on exercises that Don Murray did. I always thought the *How I Wrote the Story* concept was an absolutely great tool, and we used it for years. Eventually we developed the Power of Words website. My idea was to move it from a book form to an electronic form, which it was for years. It’s still up there but is no longer living the way it once was. I guess they ran out of money.

I think that Don Murray was very effective because he was a great communicator. He was a great storyteller. He could tell stories about himself. He could communicate ideas. He was also an incredibly good teacher. A teacher is a communicator. He was a teacher; a teacher is who he is. He was a better inspirer than he was anything else. He awakened something inside people that was there that I hadn’t thought about. By the time Murray showed up, I had already begun teaching basic journalism classes as an adjunct. I certainly had ideas about teaching good writing, but I hadn’t thought about the idea that good journalists needed or could go back to school, which was very stupid on my part.

After he was a writing coach, I think I only saw him a couple times down at Poynter. He would go down there for a couple months each winter or something like that. I’ve only been down there a couple of times, but I happened to bump into him. I was kind of flattered because I hadn’t had much contact with him since he left. I had stayed in contact with Chip. Don remembered me very well. We had a really nice conversation. I suppose he was keeping up with things going on at Providence Journal, especially the writing
committee, considering he was the person who created it. That was the only personal contact I had with him. I had tried to keep up with him in his writings. I used Murray’s book in my feature writing class. The most recent book, the one he did a few years before his death. The final exam question is that they have to write sort of a bio feature story on Don Murray, the idea is that it is forcing them to read the book. I tell them that they can go out and talk to people if they want to. Some people end up calling folks like Chip Scanlan and produce really good stories.

When I was at the journal, there was more of a culture of that writing community. Murray had created that culture and we all bought into it. We did consult with it and it was important. I did it many times, and we did it in many ways including the final product of How I Wrote the Story. I have to say that since I left the Journal eight and a half years ago, while I still preach that to my students. And with the whole concept of having a feature or magazine writing course, I encourage sharing with the class. When it comes to my writing personally, I don’t do that as often. Which is interesting. I hadn’t really thought about it until you asked this question. I don’t really have that culture anymore that I once did. I have one person, my wife, who I consult with. She does read everything but is not as critical as I really want her to be. There is always someone to read my work, but there’s not a culture of colleagues and peers as there was at The Providence Journal.

I don’t have a Ph.D. Berkley has a Ph.D. I did not go the Ph.D. route. Instead I was an adjunct for about twenty years while I was a reporter. Eventually I found a program here at UConn, which is an undergraduate program. There is no graduate component at all. It is practitioner-oriented. People hired here can do either academic research or professional writing. I chose professional writing, and did go through the tenure process and got tenure two years ago. I really was doing the same sort of writing that I was doing at a newspaper. The difference was that there was a far greater range of writing and reporting and there was also the expectation that you had to produce a book. It was not totally overt but pretty out there that you had to produce a book. I’m probably going to come from a different perspective than a lot of other people, because it think the kind of academic work I’ve done here is still in keeping with journalism. You have more time to do the pieces, and there’s the book. I did a narrative nonfiction book and a textbook, too. It’s very applied, not theoretical at all. The relationship between what I’ve had as a reporter for twenty-eight years at The Providence Journal and I would have had in eight years at UConn really isn’t that much different. I had a specialty covering environmental issues. I have maintained my membership, and actually I restarted it again, with a professional group called the Society of Professional Journalists. Between the listserv and colleagues and people on that, I am in daily contact with people. I know what is going on and go to the national conferences each year. That’s the primary way I try to stay abreast. I do stay in touch probably with a lot of professionals. Of course everybody in the department is an academic, and I’ve tried to reach out of other academic departments here through a range of activities. As opposed to Missouri, which has a couple hundred journalism faculty, we have like eight journalism faculty here—a little bit different. It’s tough to break that down as whether it’s more contact with journalists or academics, but
it’s a strong relationship I have. And the way the world is in journalism, it’s critically important to stay on the cutting edge with what’s going on in journalism these days.

I was involved with WriterL until about a year ago when I had too many things ago, and I guess that was the other way I kept up with narrative writing. With Jon Franklin. That was really the only way I did that.

The primary Poynter seminar I can remember is one that Roy Peter Clark did. It was with the Journal, about ten or twelve years ago. It was about serial writing. I think he only did it once. So anyway I was playing around with serial writing at the time, and I was involved with that particular workshop. I don’t know if Murray participated in that or not. He might have, I can’t remember.

Perhaps talk with Barbara Rosenberg, my agent, who was executor for Don, interestingly.
Joe Hight, 24 March 2010, phone

Colloquium: I think 1996. I would have just became an assistant managing editor here (Oklahoman). That would have been a year after the Oklahoma City bombing. I’ve always had great admiration for the Poynter institute and the type of work that they do. I think they have consistent been on the cutting edge and are the best about teaching writing skills, especially in the area of narrative. Since that time I served as a faculty member one week there and attended other workshops. I coordinated several Poynter workshops and sat in to many as well. My memories go back to how Murray was portrayed at that workshop. They held him in very high self-esteem, probably higher than he wanted to be held himself. He accepted his high profile as a means to communicate to others the importance of writing and storytelling in our culture. I still believe today that storytelling is important not only in newspapers but also in multimedia as well. Maybe more important online than in newspapers because studies have shown people read more online than in text.

Back then I remember him as being a very calming type of influence who would give his insight as the workshops were being conducted. I valued the one on one type of perspective that he had on individuals as well as providing his thoughts on what was being taught at the time. I remember his coming influence and a man who very much knew what he was talking about but was not overly charismatic or anything like that.

That’s my memory of it. If you ask me particularly if there is anything that I remember him saying or anything like that, it’s not. I remember more Roy Peter Clark and Chip Scanlan and the rest because they were the leaders of the workshop and he provided that wise man on top of the mountain image at that point. There was no doubt that he was very well educated and a thoughtful individual about the craft of writing and what was important in order to write well in the nineties and even beyond that.

You can go back to 1954 when he won the Pulitzer Prize and you can go from that. He founded the school of journalism and continued to give back to the profession about what it took to write and tell stories. You can still use those types of tips to teach good writing. I believe you can tell stories in 140 characters or in 400 inches, it’s just how you tell them and portray them. He was certainly someone that provided insight on how to tell stories properly.

After that we did a National Writer’s Workshop in Oklahoma City. I went back to Poynter to talk to crime reporters about coverage of disasters and things like that. We have someone from Poynter coming this weekend, Al Tompkins, to do a workshop at the Oklahoman. I’ve had interaction with Poynter through the years especially in conjunction with coverage of victims and violence and things like that after my coverage of the Oklahoma City bombing. I have always found Poynter to be an outstanding, collaborate organization that works with others to provide education, especially in the crafts of reporting and writing, and multimedia these days.
When I talk to college students and younger journalists, they have no concept of what Poynter is for the most part. They really don’t understand the wealth of knowledge that is there, now on the website. They might know Romensk Greatest, but they should really look at the kind of knowledge that Poynter provides. It is a wealth that we continually have to tap as journalists in order to improve ourselves.

It has influenced me in a positive direction and allowed me to do my job in a positive direction. It’s been a positive influence on me. If there is ever an opportunity for people to learn from folks like Roy Peter Clark and Chip Scanlan, I would always strongly recommend it. It is something that I hope continues to be funded by the St. Petersburg Times and continues to be an influence on journalists’ lives. In some ways I worry that it is not valued as it once was. I hope it is. There are so many things coming at us in the journalism world.

My experience was that I was coming from Oklahoma to a place where he was set as the wise man on the mountain. You see it as a different kind of perspective when you are looking at that. I wanted to absorb everything that was going on at that point, and certainly he was an important part of that. In terms of making connections with people and connecting over Don Murray, not particularly.

That workshop built for me as a solid foundation how important it was to continue to work with the craft of writing no mater what stage as a writer or journalist you were. That’s a foundation. It solidified that idea.

Dean Miller—he’s now at Stony Brook College. He’s been an editor and a fellow at Poynter. I think I may have met him at that particularly workshop. I don’t know if your list has his name on it. Dean and I have had connections through the years.

At that point I also started to begin thinking that this was not a huge group, but it was an important group to me. It’s not particularly the huge crowds that are important when you are speaking to people or discussing, but it may be the smaller group setting when you can have more discussion and influence and be influenced more in a one-on-one connection in a smaller collective. I tell people today that I really don’t think the big crowds are the best thing ever, usually it’s the smaller crowds that might be better for you to be working with than the three or four hundred people. They might get a few laughs and learn something, but they really don’t get the knowledge provided through those small group settings. I was honored to be accepted to that and was excited to be in a group setting with such influential people who could certainly teach us how to do our jobs better and write better.

I look at Bob Dawson, for example. He’s a great example of someone who keeps talking about the importance of storytelling, whether it is in a print, broadcast, or online setting. The true storytellers will learn how to adapt within those platforms. Don Murray, twenty years ago. Today, Bob Dawson. There are always people in this profession able to give that knowledge and such.
I have taught a class before. I taught as an adjunct for Oklahoma University. I am also kind of a liaison for my news organization to colleges. I’ll bring professors in and also speak at colleges. I’ll put together workshops and functions and things like that. It keeps me involved with the academic world as well as journalism.

Academics are more concerned with research, the future, and what has been done in the past while having issue with keeping up with the present. I think there is great value in solid researchers who know how to break things down and provide background for why something happened the way it did. There needs to be practical instructions on how students can do the job that needs to be done today. Then you can get people from the field to teach classes, so the students are up to date on how to work in journalism today. I know academics that also do both well. Jim Willis. Mark Massé at Ball State. George Getschow at North Texas. There are certain academics who have a background and understanding of the practice of journalism and research and the academic world. You need a balance and combination of both. I serve on a board of a local university and their communication school as well. Actually two different universities here.
Ben Yagoda, 1 April 1 2010, phone

I do remember he was a very nice man, but that’s hardly original. I don’t remember any of the specifics of the conference. He gave some of his beliefs in writing. The most famous is probably write a little every day, and he had a Latin quote about that. That’s all I remember.

I’m friendly with Roy and Chip Scanlan. Roy had a comment about something in my book on parts of speech that we had a good-natured back-and-forth about it. I like them both and think they are smart. When you asked about texts that had a big influence on my own writing, that’s not something that comes to mind. I’m familiar with those concepts, but you know much more about them than I do. I’m not really part of that world at all. I was at the Poynter that one time, and Chip Scanlan came to my campus in Delaware one time and gave a workshop. I’m not part of that world.

I would say in my own particular case that they’ve complemented each other (academic and journalistic communities). My teaching writing now for eighteen or nineteen years has given me insights into my own writing and things that I might not have thought about before, or felt that they were instinctual. I hadn’t been un-analytical, but having to teach has crystallized some things so that my last two books—the most recent ones—were both about writing and about language. I don’t think I would have been inspired to write that kind of book if I hadn’t been a teacher. It was complementary.

Starting as a freelance journalist, magazine writer, staff writer—journalists are really big borrowers in the sense of reporting and finding out a lot of different things about subjects from a lot of different sources, but not in any systematic way. When I was writing Sound on the Page, a book about style, I tried to become a big vacuum cleaner and do a survey about what everybody who had anything to say about style said about it. Whether it was philosophical, or English literary criticism, or psychological, or things like that. That’s definitely my approach—to kind of put down a very big net on anything I do.

I don’t associate with those folks who are part of a community focusing on writing, but I kind of catch wind on others. Bill Walsh comes to mind. I’m really not involved in any of these groups or circles or anything. I’ve kind of caught wind of it. But I am not involved at all.

I’ve written I guess five books now. Then I co-edited The Art of Fact, which is a journalism historical anthology of literary journalism. It’s kind of similar. They linger. I don’t think any of them in a sense become household names or anything like that, but they’re all still in print, and they all get referred to on a fairly regular basis. I get a call or email from somebody like you, or just this morning someone else emailed who wanted to talk about some writer from the New Yorker or someone else used the Art of Fact in his classroom and wanted to talk about some project he was doing. It’s sort of what I would have expected if I had to articulate it. Absent household name, the next best thing is that they are kind of out there and somewhat available.
I’m very fortunate that my department doesn’t require “scholarly publication.” I can write for *Slate* or the *New York Times Book Review*, and that counts. There was no compromise on that part at all. I had just written my first book, and while it’s not an academic book, it’s for a general audience but I wanted to have it be scholarly in sort of the best sense that things would be attributed and the sources would be known. It was endnotes rather than footnotes, but it was the kind of thing that was good for me in my personal writing career. The *New Yorker* book was similar in type, but the recent books have perhaps been less scholarly. They take these huge topics and really digest them. There aren’t endnotes in them, and especially the parts of speech book is really more a fun book.
Ron Winslow, 24 March 2010, audio recorded in-person interview, New York, NY

*When I do these I usually start by saying, say anything you want to say about Don Murray. Maybe when you first met him, or the connections that you had with Don. That’s usually how I start. I ask more specific questions later, but if you just want to talk about Don in any form or fashion...*

Well, I was at UNH in the late sixties and graduated in ’71. I had been working at the campus radio station. In my sophomore year, it was pretty much serendipity. I had no real prior knowledge of who he was. I just saw a journalism course in a catalog and went to talk to him. He let me in and for better, and not too much worse, I was a journalist from pretty much that day on.

*You didn’t know that you wanted to do that?*

Well I had kind of an idea. I’d done some high school journalism, and I had done a little bit of newspaper reporting in sports for my local hometown paper. But I wasn’t doing any newspaper stuff at UNH at the time. I was by the end of that first semester. So it wasn’t a premeditated thing. His initial assignments I still remember. We had to hand in...one day was twenty-five tastes, the next day was twenty-five smells, the next day was twenty-five touches or something. There was this sensory sort of immediately encountering the world through your senses and just enriching your content that way. Then I also remember he had all these quotes. He collected quotations about writing for his whole life, or his whole academic life, I think. These are all about reporting. They were things like, “a reporter is always on the job.” They were quotes from other people. But there was just something about that whole thing that was an immediate introduction into, not just a topic, but sort of a value system of journalism and writing. What made it stick, I’m not sure. I wasn’t intimidated by writing. Another assignment that was really good, and this speaks to the main think I’ll talk about: one of the assignments we had that first semester was rewriting ledes in the *New York Times*. You had to go buy the New York Times and rewrite every lede on the front page of the Times three times. So there’d be three different versions of that lede. What became apparent pretty quickly was you could do it, and sometimes you could do better. So you were taking the class of journalism—although I’d argue there’s a better paper maybe—you’re taking the best in the business, looking at their words, rewriting it, and coming up with something that’s good. There was this immediate recognition. There was a way in, a belief that you could do it. I think his fundamental effect on me and on other people was that he recognized people right away as part of a community of writers, a community of journalists. The relationship between mentor and mentee, and teacher or student...I mean there was certainly a dynamic there that was traditional, but you were quite quickly considered a fellow writer. There’s something inspiring about that and confidence building about it. It makes you think you could do things that you couldn’t do or didn’t think you could do or didn’t know you could do.
One of the major pieces I did for that semester—he read it and said, “Should you send this to *The Boston Globe*?” I didn’t because it was written about my hometown, and my dad in North Dakota was active in politics then at the time, and I didn’t think it would be appropriate for that. Anyway, I mean it was pretty good, but still there was that sort of situation. There was just an openness to being part of a community right away. That was a very enriching and nurturing thing to be in.

**Did he help you figure out what you wanted to do next, when you got out of school?**

Well, I took another course from him. He actually went on sabbaticals, and we had another guy come in. Then I just got on this track. I don’t if they had an internship program yet or not. I applied for a couple summer jobs, and I worked two summers in the business. I mean, I just got interested. Another thing about me, though this isn’t really about Don: A radio station sent me to cover a press conference for the governor-elect of New Hampshire, who was giving a press conference on the university budget. The radio station sent me to cover that. The person who was going to cover it for the school paper got sick, and so they asked me if I would do it for both. I got on the front page of the *New Hampshire*, and I didn’t do much for the radio station after that. That isn’t to say that Don cared about what media you were working for, but…Anyway, so I guess it was certainly continual encouragement and continual support. It just sort of followed that things works out as they mostly do.

**When you started working for a journalist after school, did you still share drafts with him?**

I don’t think I did that, but I know a lot of people who have done that. I certainly did share some ideas with this book, which was about an oil spill. I consulted with him on that. Then I went back to teach there, so that’s a whole other kettle of fish. Then I got involved in that in a much different sort of way. We had this thing called the writing process, which was people from composition, people from journalism, and people from education. One of the people was Don Graves, who I am sure you have heard about…So we had this group, and we would each meet every week and share drafts and stuff there. Usually I think we’d rotate. Usually you’d get lots of graduate students in there or people who were graduate students who were also teaching in the composition program teaching undergraduates, plus these other folks who were sort of multidisciplinary. It was from an academic perspective.

*I know that that was Don Murray and Newkirk was also really active in that. Who else comes to mind in terms of being involved in that?*

Well Don Graves certainly was. Becky (Rebecca) Rule was. She’s sort of a folk storyteller in New Hampshire…She’s older. She’s an interesting person. Anyway, it was just part of an ongoing process of looking at writing and looking at the evolution of writing through drafts. The other big thing about Don was the process and really trying to analyze it a lot for his own work, just what he was involved in: the translation from the
heart to the page, and then the revising. And certainly the notion that a first draft is hardly ever a finished product.

How do you feel about the relationship between journalism and the academic world?
One of the big things in my paper is that Don started that. What a lot of people have told me is that Don made journalists more comfortable with working with the academic community and academic writing, and vice versa. But did you ever feel a conflict between the journalists and academics?

No. I didn’t, personally. There’s always tension. I shouldn’t say there’s always tension. You’re in an English department, which is a Ph.D.-driven. A lot of literature positions were Ph.D.s. And the writing program was separate. I think his own stature, his own accomplishment…I do think the fact that he included composition and the study of composition in his particular way was probably a bit of a bridge.

What got you back into journalism after working at UNH?

Well part of it was I just missed the daily journalism. Part of it was I was actually coming up on tenure decision and was ambivalent about whether I wanted to go through that process and how committed I was to actually wanted to do that. I think I would have been fine, but you never know. In the course of that I had been doing some freelance work in Boston. One of my former colleagues at The Providence Journal was working in the Boston bureau. I went in to have lunch with him one day. I met his boos. I really wasn’t even looking for a job. It was sort of in my mind, but I was nowhere near done with this project. It wasn’t what I was up to, but I just had one of those conversations, and that sort of clicked. Again, so much of my life is not particularly premeditated. It was not a great day when I gave notice, I have to say. It was a fine day for me, but I’m not sure it went down all that well there. In academia you’ve got to give like a two semester notice, and I gave two weeks. So anyway, just kind of wanted to get back into the day-to-day world, and I also thought that if I were going to do that I’d want it to be at an A-list place. The timing was just sort of [bad].

And what year was that?

That was ’83 that I left. I was teaching from fall of ’78 to the spring of ’83.

And you stayed in contact with Don Murray?

Oh yeah. Yeah. It wasn’t like every week or every month. I mean, did not do the Chip Scanlan thing. Obviously I was not as close or worked with him as he did. I’d call him when I went back to town. I’d bring a couple copies of something and maybe a film.

I mentioned the theoretical framework is a discussion of writing culture. So I’m using ethnography and tracing a web of influence as a binding factor for the thesis. So it relies heavily on interviews with people who feel either they were a contemporary or were very
influenced by Murray’s ideas at certain points in their life. From there I trace it to all his different community—his journalism community, his composition community, and then sort of the hybrid in-between, Poynter and all of those connections. It’s really interesting that you intersect with both of those communities. It’s really interesting what you were talking about—that everybody would get together in the writing process movement and write together, work together. Did you feel a lot of cohesion there? Was it attuned to people with a similar ideology, or promoted a similar ideology?

Ideology is an interesting word. Again, there were people who were writing about teaching writing an education. We had a couple of academic people in the English department who were writing more academic papers. There were probably three or four different genres of writing represented in there. I was probably the only journalist…But the ideology was more about exploring the process…

The writing process is kind of a hybrid between that practical writing about writing and academic writing, too, right?

It’s an intellectual inquiry about how people do it, which is where I think Don’s bridge was. He certainly did a whole lot of writing. He read a lot of ideas about composition, but he didn’t do research into composition in a conventional way.

He was using himself as a subject?

Most of the time he was using himself, whether it be his own journalism or his own personal kind of—almost his own journal, if you will…and some of it was through story and some of it was through exploring the process. From the academic perspective, it was interesting.

…

I don’t know if this came from Don or not, but it certainly reflects so much of his work: writing is like thinking out loud. It’s a process of thinking, and it’s sort of getting thoughts out in some sort of external place where you can massage them and see whether they make sense. You can rephrase them and make them more articulate, or more specific.

Do you feel like you have a group or community of people who you write with or who you know that would be immediately available to jot drafts back and forth? I feel like a lot of writers have a small community outside of the people they work with who they send drafts back and forth. I guess it’s probably harder to do on a really quick deadline.

I don’t. If I were to do a book…well I can’t freelance for any publication that I would want to freelance for. Plus this job is plenty draining. I will work with a couple of editors or colleagues and show them stuff from time to time, but it would be internal. I show my
wife stuff. We’re probably each other’s worst readers, which is kind of weird. I don’t have that. Again, if I were to write a book I would certainly want to chin one up.

Did you have that when you had your book?

Yeah. It wasn’t like a big community, but it was...one of the books was before I went to teach, and I did have two or three people that I shared that with. The second one I wrote at the University. In fact I read some of it with that writing process group, and I got terrific insight from them, which was an issue about point of view and how if you’re writing a narrative, once you select your point of view you can’t...I was writing from the perspective of one particular person, even though I was a third person, but you can’t have that person know things that he or she doesn’t really know. That was from a fiction writer, from a short story or a novelist kind of perspective, which was a part of this thing.

Murray was not big on genres. He thought that writer is writer, and all writers can inform each other regardless of genre.

I think that’s true. It’s really interesting: the second book I was writing with a defense attorney. It was a really crazy criminal case in which a woman was hypnotized into having her husband murdered. So I’m a freshman faculty writing in the English department working on this. And I got invited—and I’m not even sure Don was involved with this—but the chairman invited me to give a presentation on my work in progress at a faculty meeting. These people are all dealing with the third act of some Shakespeare play and trying to figure out how it relates to the second act of another play or something. They’re all really into this sort of very arcane academic stuff. And I talked about this, and they loved it! They were eating it up. I don’t know exactly what it was, but there was some way that that sort of crossed this bridge. I mean it was a book, and people were pretty pleased that I was writing a book. It was just a kind of credential that was not your normal one.

... 

So Charles Simic and I think Donald Hall were up there (at UNH)?

I don’t think Donald Hall was full time. Thomas Williams was there when I was there. They had [Ted] Weesner. John Yount. That was an incredible lineup. And Mekeel McBride was still there.
Paul Salsini, 7 April 2010, phone

My job title was staff development director at the *Milwaukee Journal*, this was before the merger of the journals, which began in 1995. I was at the paper since 1959 in various jobs. I was state editor before staff developer. I convinced the new editor in 1984 that we really needed somebody to help the staff and do training and recruiting. The basic part of it was as writing coach, which intrigued me because it was a new idea then, and there weren’t many papers having them. It sounded like something I really wanted to do, not to mention I had been state editor for fourteen years, and that’s too long of a time to be in a job like that. He said fine. Part of my new duties was writing coach.

I went to Poynter and did some training there, and read a lot. There wasn’t really a “how to be a writing coach” kind of manual that point. We were all sort of doing our own thing, but I did go to training sessions. I just kind of pushed it with the staff. I said,” Here I am. I’m available.” I wanted to emphasize that this wasn’t a remedial thing, not for people who needed help. I wanted to help them move along and let them know that I am there. I am not aggressive or come on strong, but I did kind of encourage all people to come over and I’d work with them. I worked with some of the best writers on the staff, I believe, because I have found that they are the most vulnerable and insecure. They really want to improve their writing, but they are not sure how, so they do what they can.

Don Fry was a great help. If anyone was a mentor, he was. I would go to him. I knew Don Murray. I read his books, but I don’t remember if I met him. I did appreciate Don’s help. We went to conferences together and spoke at things. He was very helpful when I ran into problems of management, or not giving time, or reporters. The main problem I think that gets a writing coach caught is that senior editors say, “You’ve got to work with this guy because he’s not writing very well.” How do you do that? How do you force someone to come to you voluntarily and say they need help? It’s really a bad situation. And I never resolved that. We had reporters who did come reluctantly and kind of pushed toward my direction. They didn’t really want to, and I don’t know if they were ever very successful in improving their writing. And I was frustrated. Management was saying, “Why aren’t you helping them more?” It got kind of testy. For all of that, the job was still extremely satisfying. I would see the story at copy level and see it in a paper and see the contributions that I think I made to it. Also the reporters were so appreciative of what I’d done.

On Coaches’ Corner
I worked with a writing coach at the *Orange County Register*, and I think she’s dead. I would put it together, but she would do some of the writing. I would do some of the writing. It was a newsletter for writing coaches. I duplicated it and sent it out to however many there were. I put out a little newsletter for this paper (the *Journal*), as well.. It was just a one-page sheet.

It lasted several years. I don’t know why we stopped. Well, my job ended when the journal merged with the *Sentinel* in 1995. They did not replace me, which says a lot.
They sort of divided up the duties among various editors, but nobody was official was named writing coach as I understand it. I am not really close to the paper anymore. There are some editors who do this really well, but they are editors and not a separate part of the process. That’s different, of course. I don’t know how many papers still have writing coaches anymore. I’m sure this is one of the first things to go. I also did all of the recruiting for the paper. I handled all the applications for jobs. I didn’t make the decisions but I handled the applications. I did other staff training, including diversity training, which was big at that time. And I handled the internship program. I’d do that every summer. It was a diverse job, but writing coach was a big part of it.

I’d been teaching at Marquette University part-time since 1970, one writing class every semester. I’ve done everything: basic reporting, public affairs, critical writing, and feature writing. I’m teaching a new course called narrative writing.

I asked the dean if he wanted a writing coach for this college, and he said sure. So I did that. I’m the writing coach for this college at Marquette University. The college includes journalism, broadcast, advertising, communication, and theatre. And it’s fun. Students come to me with drafts of their papers or stories. It’s a different kind of situation because a lot of them aren’t journalism, or what they are writing isn’t journalism. It’s a different kind of paper. Something for PR or Advertising, for example. What I tell the faculty is this is completely confidential. I don’t talk to them about who comes to me. I tell them it’s like a confessional between the student, and me and that’s respected.

There is a writing center at the University, but that’s remedial. It’s not how to make the flow better, how to organize, how to focus.

[Coaches’ Corner] helped create a community. We kept in touch, I’d see them in conferences. They contributed to Coaches’ Corner as well. I think I had some regular contributors. It is a lonely kind of thing. You’re working with your staff, and that’s your job. You need support just like reporters and writers do. It’s really an independent kind of thing. I think probably every writing coach does it a little bit differently. I guess it’s past-tense now.

Have you talked to Jack Hart? (Yes). He was a model, as was Paula LaRocque at the Dallas Morning News. She was very good. You should talk to her. She had a regular column; in fact, she was syndicated as a writing coach. She’s written a couple of books about writing. I keep in touch with her husband, who worked at the (Milwaukee) Journal before he went to Dallas. She was good, and also one of our little network things. As I said, she wrote a column about writing, which was syndicated. I think she was in Editor and Publisher as well with a regular column.

Poynter was the place for newspaper people who wanted to improve…it wasn’t at that point so much a watchdog kind of an organization, which I think it’s become now, but more of a training place. There wasn’t any other place like that in the country. It was an
amazing place. I spoke at other regional writing events on weekends where they would bring in people, and reporters would come.

I did a little part-time coaching with newspapers. After I left the paper, I thought I could make a living by being a writing coach. That was a dream soon shot down. I spread the word among papers and editors I knew. I did a couple of papers, but the economy was such that this was not a thing that they were willing to invest papers on. I did a couple of foreign things. I did the stars and stripes in a base near Frankfurt. I did the Singapore daily times. Both of those jobs were given by Don Fry because he couldn’t. I soon decided I wasn’t going to make a career about this, and I devoted my time to Marquette. Then I began writing novels. It’s wonderful. I just published my third book. I’ve written a trilogy. I never thought I’d write a novel, but I got an idea for one in 2004. These are all historical novels, so there is a lot of research involves, which is basic journalism. I write fast, which is also basic journalism. And I write characters, which is also basic journalism.

The course I teach is narrative nonfiction writing. The students pick a topic of their choosing and immerse themselves for the entire semester. It allows them to immerse themselves into a shelter, or fifth grade, class or a football team, or a store or something. They do really good work.

The kind of courses I teach, I use John McPhee and Tracy Kidder, and other kinds of—Dave Eggers—I use models rather than helping me figure out what I should do. I’ve got books about how to do stuff, but I’ve been doing this for so long I don’t find them terribly helpful. This is my fortieth year teaching. I started in 1970.

I think there has always been this separation [between academia and newspapers]. I try to create bridges, but there is still a gap. Marquette does use Journal-Sentinel people as part time instructors. I suppose they rely on them. But officially I think there is a separation between the paper thinking those are people in their ivory towers, and academics thinking they are not really interested in the main issues of journalism. And they don’t really talk with each other. I don’t think there’s an ongoing relationship between the paper and school. And they’re only twelve blocks away.

Definitely talk to Paula LaRocque. Jack Hart. Don Fry. Those are the biggies, the triumvirate of the really big ones. Talk to the guy at the Wilmington News Journal. He’s now the opinion editor and used to do it a lot. He hosted a number of these regional conferences.

Everybody says we want to improve the writing in our newspapers. They don’t talk so much about the reporting. With newspapers having seven-inch stories or less, it’s pretty hard to create storytelling. But you can still have good writing. I do think consciousness has been raised about writing in newspapers. I think there was an effort, by simply establishing writing coaches, that the editors wanted to improve [writing]. Having writing coaches, the effort was somewhat accomplished. It’s unfortunate that I think writing
coaches are a thing of the past by name. But I think the consciousness was raised. It’s up to the individual papers to see that it continues to be raised. After I left the paper, I gave a little reward to who I thought was the best writer on the paper for the preceding year. I don’t do that anymore, because I don’t think there are any great writers there anymore, or the great writers there already have my award.

I think the St. Petersburg Times was known as the writer’s paper. I think the New York Times has some wonderful writers. Maybe it’s because I read it every day. I really get engrossed in their narrative writing and their series. C.J. Shivers is wonderful. They really do have good narrative stories in the Times. I don’t know that the Times is recognized for writing as much as everything else it does.

*What was the primary subject matter of Coaches’ Corner?*

Better writing. And also hot to coach. Again, this was three centuries ago. Maybe we should talk after I find it and have a better sense of what it was. It had two functions: how to help writers and also better writing.

I think it was our idea. Somehow we were at a conference and we thought, “We need to continue the conversation that we had here.”

Contact Paula. Paula and her husband live in Arlington Texas: 817-274-9700.
I think the first time I met him was he invited me to talk in his class. It was probably in the mid 80s. Subsequently, I hired him as a writing coach for the Globe there was an interesting story connected with that: after I had hired him he had not been in the Globe building, so he came in on the first day and walked across the newsroom to my office, which was in the corner. So that meant he had to walk through the newsroom. When he got to my office he said, “I know who your three best writers are.” My head went up and I said, “Oh?” so he pointed out three writers in the newsroom. I forget who two of them were, but I remember one of them was Ellen Goodman, nationally syndicated columnist. I said how do you know they are the best writers. He said because their lips move when they write.

At any rate, that began our relationship. That later became a personal relationship after he retired. We pretty much went for lunch every week. Maybe not every week but every couple of weeks, I had had a couple of other people who did writing coaching and other kinds of coaching. I had ongoing seminars for staff. In addition to that, he also had been writing coach at The Providence Journal, and I think that was resulted from the fact that one of his students was an editor down there. That lasted I guess a couple of years and ended. So I probably heard about that. I don’t know. At any rate, he came to the Globe after that.

He did really three things: he had a regular seminar, and we tried to give everybody a shot at it. We sometimes would do it different hours. Those were fairly formal seminars in which he had a particular theme that he was driving at. He usually passed out something in writing for them to take with them. It was more of a writing exercise than a lecturing kind of thing. That’s really what his style was. He would get people writing right away. And he would write along with them. As time passed, it was kind of on a volunteer basis. In other words, he had gone through the whole staff. We would setup times and people would go. Interesting, the best writers were the ones who got to the seminars. Also he did a little newsletter critique. He also was available for anybody by telephone or to meet with them one on one to talk about a specific story, or a specific writing issue that they were dealing with.

Writing was definitely improving. It was a contagious kind of a thing. He was a great advocate of experimenting. You could see people trying things, and we tried to create an atmosphere to do that. He also wrote a column for us for a while. When I was there it was called “Over 60,” I always liked that title. It wasn’t about the elderly so much as sort of centered on aging. It was really a powerful column. In fact, his license plate was OVER60. After I left, he was still writing the column and they changed the title to something I don’t particularly like.

He didn’t like it. I didn’t like it. But his wife didn’t like it. But it grew out of a luncheon that the tree of us had. He said they want to change the name of my column. I said that’s a shame, it’s like a trademark.
He had kind of a whole set of acolytes. They weren’t just *Globe* people. They were really kind of everywhere. He was in constant contact with them. They would critique his writing. He would critique their writing. At least half of his dozen people were from the *Globe* who kept this ongoing conversation going.

His newsletters were put together in a book. I have all of his books here. It was called *Writing for Your Readers*.

He was in love with writing so much that it was pretty much all he would talk about with them. He had a knack of being able to spend a few minutes with someone and being able to convey a lot. Mostly it was by having that person give him something in writing which he read before they talked. This went back to his days as a professor. He had regular meetings with his students one on one. They used to tell me that the meetings would last about three minutes. He would have them give him samples of their writing, and he always would have read it and absorbed it. So that when they walked in, the first thing he would do would be to get them to talk about it rather than have them talk about it, then he would respond to them. He used that same technique with professional writers. So I think they felt it was his interest in their work, not so much his interest in getting his point across. It’s a subtle point, but it was pretty special in the way he operated.

I would meet him for lunch, and he always arrived early. My picture of him is sitting on a bench, either outside or inside, writing as I came up to him. He had a little daybook. He wrote snippets—stream of consciousness things that struck him about that particular day and that particular moment. One of his techniques was called the line. He would say that every story should have one line that was the essence of the story. So he used to say, write the line and then write it again and then write it again. For most of his stories he would write that line twenty times until he got it straight. That line would end up somewhere in the story, beginning middle or end, but it kind of traced back to Faulkner. There was a story that Faulkner used to have on a 4” by 5” card on his typewriter with about three words that was the theme of his book. He wrote these long books with the short theme in front of him the whole time.

He was also quite an artist, particularly pen and ink or pencil sketches. His daybook was full of little sketches. He was very visual as well as word conscious. I guess this is true of a lot of great writers: he never wrote a novel, and yet he worked on a novel most of his adult life. And he never finished it.

*About World War II:*
He was pretty self-deprecating, but he would often talk about it. That was very much on the surface of his mind. He was in the military police for part of that. So he was involved in a couple of points where he had to be rough with people. He’s not a violent type of person. He was a very tender type of person, but he used to say that growing up it became being the strong and macho. As they years went by he became less and less macho.
I noticed several writers were at his funeral, which was quite a few years after he had stopped being a writing coach.

I did a lot of interacting with the academic world before Murray. I was chairman of the national education committee for the editors organization. That threw me into contact with a lot of journalism schools. We also had a visiting editor program, which I participated in for several years. I can’t remember how many universities I went to: twenty or twenty-five. It was a very structured program. You’d go for two and a half days. Arrive at night, do a dinner, talk at the dinner, then teach one class after the other. I taught seven classes in one day in Richmond. That was a program that I don’t know how many editors participated in. I was involved with that for about twenty years. I had a lot of contact with universities.

I always thought it was arrogant of professors who didn’t appreciate what was going on at journalism schools, especially in the East. They didn’t take the time to figure out what was going on and realize some good work is being done at journalism schools, and some dedicated instructors. I found the Midwest schools were very terrific. I not only learned a lot by being involve with professors and students, but I also did a lot of recruiting.

There were people who initially were not crazy about the idea. They were always in a hurry to get out on their assignments. They didn’t like the idea of stopping for an hour to deep think. Usually it took about one session before they were won over. People were very positive about it. As I said, the better writers couldn’t get enough. The other interesting thing that he did, and I believe that he did it in providence as well, is that he insisted that the editor be present at seminars as well. There would usually be twenty people, and he insisted that I not only be there but participate. Most of the session was about writing, and talking about your writing. He made sure that I was involved. Writing for him was part of the deal. You had to do what everybody else was doing. I used to travel around. Those days we had seven or eight foreign bureaus, and I’d try to get out to some of them. I’d write abroad or on the way back. I remember I wrote a piece and sent it to Don to critique. He was really vicious. He told me, “That wasn’t writing, that was a corduroy treatment.” Meaning that I was just unloading my notebook with quotes and things like that, and not really writing a story. He made me start all over again. Just like I was a rookie. But you are sort of a rookie every time you write, I don’t care who you are. Editors in particular have a problem writing because they are so anal about what is in a story that it is hard to make that transition to good writing. I think by being at these seminars I started to get back into it and wished I had more time to write.

I don’t know anybody that has a writing coach. Everything is getting cut to the bone. The first things that go are people that you would bring in to work on a particular problem. It wasn’t that we were having a particular problem. We were known as a writer’s paper. You can always improve writing, and I think he went a long way to bringing it into a much higher level of quality. It was very contagious. People were talking more about writing in the newsroom. It was a much more conscious effort to do good writing and try different things. So it created a culture in the newsroom.
I think that there was a point where people really didn’t talk about it. It was almost like a private matter and they did like criticism. Don sort of opened up the doors to self-criticism and to writers being able to criticize one another or speak critically about one another. But bear in mind I think his emphasis was more on the positive than on the negative. He would dwell much more on what worked as opposed to what didn’t work. There was that positive reinforcement that I found the writers were seeing things in others work and going out of their way to say I like that or I think I’ll steal that or something like that. There was a much different emphasis. On the other hand, if somebody thought a piece wasn’t written well, they would just say it. I don’t think that would happen before he came along.

They talked a lot more about writing as opposed to talking about the Red Sox. It became something they were very excited about. They were looking forward to the next story. Not just to convey what they had for the reader but also the satisfaction they would get out of being able to write something really well.

Ryerefections.com is my community journalism website. We meet weekly for a couple of hours and talk about stories. Just like a regular newsroom. Then we publish monthly. Except for one person in the group, nobody had any experience writing or being part of a publication they’re learning as they are going along. We use a lot of Don Murray’s tips. I do tutorials. Well I’ve written a whole book about this subject—the subject of group, online community journalism. It’s called Coach. I stopped teaching a short time ago. This book is called Coach Potato Sprout. It’s about the phenomenon of people who are citizens who have come together in groups. You don’t hear too much about that. You mostly hear about bloggers and people operating on their own. My theory is that citizen journalism will sustain itself better if people will come together in groups. Like book clubs and that kind of group. There is a lot of data around that being intellectual stimulated adds years to your life. For people in my age group, it has a lot of positive effects.
Shirley Bryce Heath, 25 April 2010, phone

I think that a lot of what I’ll have to say will be related to the point of view you are taking.

Bread Loaf University. Dixie Goswami brought him there and was responsible for that. People were brought there with little understanding of nonfiction writing for the public media looks like and what nonfiction norms would be.

I knew Don through Poynter. I went to Poynter several times when they were working on the whole issue of how to diversify genres in the newspaper world. They were trying to draw an interest in reading newspapers. Don and I went there a couple of times to meet with Chip, who was fairly young then and a reporter for the Philadelphia Enquirer. We went to talk about the aspects of genre in the newspapers. Don, having not only written the usual range of genre in newspaper writing but also being in the English world, was able to elucidate what it would take for newspapers to rethink not only their genres but the timing of their presentation material.

For example: often features in newspapers will talk about the mother who has overcome huge odds to go back to college despite having to raise a kid on her own, having her home burned once, et cetera. But just as people are interested in following news stories, they are also interested in following feature stories. So they should be thinking about that in the press, but also be thinking about how to identify topics that young people would be interested in. And at that time, young people would be interested in following stories. It may well give you some kind of hook to link his connection in the education world with his connections in the newspaper worlds.

Don was always innovative. One of the things he did at the Bread Loaf School of English was to introduce not only how they could get the news but to also get a sense of what good, bad, and indifferent writing would look like. He spent a lot of time meeting with kids themselves.

I have thought about, as we see the rise of small town newspapers and the big threat to international and national newspapers, how Don would have been gratified by this small town newspaper scheme and would want to bring good writing in these places. Not every newspaper has a Chip Scanlan.

We would have workshops looking at newspapers, often the St. Petersburg Times, and talk about how to use the writing process to address some of the issues that we were addressing. For Poynter I did a research study that was used across the country and distributed in a session called Truth to Tell. The basis of that little booklet was this survey of young people and ways in which they read newspapers and what it would take to read more. These were kids in under read communities in 27 cities across America.

Nancy Atwell would have known him very well.
When he wrote about aging and his life with Minnie Mae while she had Alzheimer’s, there was in a sense the creation of a new genre that didn’t have the features that many columns generally had. His column was personal, but applicable to one segment of the population—the aging population. That was quite typical of Don. Certainly he touted himself rightly as a writer, but he was also a very readerly writer. He always thought about what the readers might be wanting. What were those segments of readership that might not be touched by newspapers?

Similarly, what were teachers doing about writing and reading that could work for their students? Don had a view that enabled him to take a much wider view than composition teachers were usually able to take. Don thought that their view was very fine, however that was not the way Don defined himself, clearly. I think he was one of the first individuals in the world of English education that I would consider a real crossover figure. Crossover meaning he crossed from what we typically called the real world into the academic world, and back. He was always crossing over as a writer but with the mindfulness of a reader.

I’d urge you not to short going the other way—that is how he brought the newsroom and the newsreader perspective to the academic world. But how he also drew from the academic world in order to go back and urge groups like Poynter to do something different.

There were people who were not on board as fully as with others, as with many of these things. Just as you see the debates on the future of newspapers now, those people tended to be those who were: “I’m a newspaper man. I don’t need to hear this. I’ve been in this business.” It was not to say that Don hadn’t been [a newspaper man]. But there was just something about the attitude of some people there. Here is a man across the field of a whole range of genres, including one of the most difficult: war reporting. I would say it was some of the middle-aged ones who said that we had enough battles to fight. I wouldn’t say it was unsuccessful, but there are always going to be doubting Thomases in any such group.

One of the things that he confided to me as he did to other academic friends: I’m certainly one who can cross over between the academic and public world, but sometimes try to keep them apart. But I could see the same skepticism from English teachers. “Who is this dud trying to come in like this?” But because Don had such a sensitivity, he was perceptive and moved through that. He also had an ally in Don Graves, and in Tom Newkirk.

UNH is kind of a Don Murray world still. In the room with both of them (Don Murray and Don Graves), what a great privilege that was. I have this huge picture on my bookcase of the last time [Don Graves and I] were together, hugging each other at an NCTE meeting. He seemed so vibrant and physically healthy.
I am an intellectual historian at heart. I pay a lot of attention to questions like this. I’m afraid my answers are a bit dinosaurish. And I say that with regard particularly to my observations. I’m writing a book on this at the moment having to do with “parenting,” that there is no sense of history anymore. History is yesterday’s hour of six-o-clock. And that’s about as far back as you can go. If someone challenges your view of history, the typical retort is “I heard this, and so and so said it.” That’s why this new process on a television channel where a program is going to fact check is causing such a stir. The general attitude is, why bother? Of course facts are all about power and politics. That’s a big problem: why bother? Then again, why are you bothered by the facts? What you want is a media effect and you want to rally for the effect. Facts are no bother. It’s been fascinating to watch this in a set of domains fort thirty years. You would not find many people in the classroom who would know Murray’s work or Graves’ work. Except for one of those graduate school classes where people are assigned one of ten theorists to research. There is a loss of memory for the importance of history, and along with that has come the importance of depth. That is really digging in. We could talk about why that has happened. NCLB, changes in the College Board. Changes in the admission criteria in the most elite colleges. It’s what you did outside, not in, school. The loss of writing in the business world. The point being that I do not think with either of them in 20 years we will be able to track any influence, except at institutions like Poynter, which has as its business maintaining some kind of intellectual history. That’s why they have archives and some pretty stellar leaders. I can’t be encouraging, but you can’t exactly trust my view. I am an intellectual historian, and they tend to lament something they have dedicated themselves to in their lives.

Postmodernism is all about eradicating history. It and post-structuralism’s half-life is over. It was sad to watch young people get caught up with it, when you realize what you have been around in the world. Don’t go there. Don’t get into ethnic studies. Employers say, What’s that? You use mushy words like “identity.” It is not surprising that the few postmodernists that are still breathing don’t have any respect for anybody like Graves or Murray. The same thing has happened to Ken and Yetta Goodman. But they are alive and kicking and able to keep driving a number of forces that remind people that, in the end, the hard data will come back and bite you. I hope they are right.

Murray was a giving person, unlike many intellectuals, many in power, and many in the newsrooms today. He would be certainly sad to see what is happening now. He was as hard-nosed as they come in terms of standards of writing, but he could never distance himself from the human aspects of what was going on.

Dixie is a great storyteller. I will give you her email. She knew him better than any other at the Bread Loaf school of English. She would know things like his teaching at reservations, et cetera.
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