

English 1113: English Composition 1  
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## The Writing Process

[Taken from Thomas Cooley’s The Norton Sampler, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997. 7-23.]

Writing is a little like baking bread. Before you can serve it, you must go through a busy process of sifting and blending....

Many professional writers learned the art of authorship as Mark Twain did – “unconsciously.” Some writers, however, especially if they are also teachers of writing, can speak of their methods with a clarity that lifts the veil for us. One of these is the poet and essayist, Annie Dillard, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for her prose narrative Pilgrim at Tinker Creek.

The best writing, says Dillard, does not tell the reader what to feel, it “evokes” a response. The ending of E.B. White’s “Once More to the Lake,” she notes, for example, “creates a sense of mortality without mentioning it....Hemingway, I believe, taught us all this particular form of excellence; it distinguishes modern writing. All readers are sophisticated enough to grasp it – but not all writers are conscious enough to have noticed it: don’t describe emotions!

Evoking feelings instead of describing them is a key strategy in Dillard’s own “Transfiguration,” an essay about the writer’s calling [that you’ll read] in the following pages. In an effort to “demystify” (her word) the writing process for you, Annie Dillard has written a second essay explaining how she composed the first. Going back to her notebooks and earliest recollections of the death of a moth, this newer essay about writing traces the composition of the earlier piece from its inception through revisions made after it had already appeared in print.



## Annie Dillard’s “Transfiguration”

*Annie Dillard was born in Pittsburgh in 1945. She attended private school there and later, Hollins College in Roanoke, Virginia, from which she received a master’s degree in English literature in 1968. She lived in Roanoke Valley from 1965 to 1975, when she moved to Pudget Sound. In 1979, she returned to the East coast. Dillard has written a book of poems, *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel* (1974); a prose narrative, *Holy the Firm* (1977), from which “Transfiguration” (editor’s title) is taken; a book of literary theory, *Living by Fiction* (1982); a collection of narrative essays, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (1982); and *Encounters with Chinese Writers* (1984). “Transfiguration” originally appeared in a somewhat different version in Harper’s under the title “The Death of a Moth.” Other works by Annie Dillard include a memoir, *An American Childhood* (1987); *The Living* (1992); her first novel; and *Mornings Like This: Found Poems* (1995).*

I live in northern Pudget Sound, in Washington State, alone. I have a gold cat, who sleeps on my legs, named Small. In the morning I joke to her blank face, Do you remember last night? Do you remember? I throw her out before breakfast, so I can eat.

There is a spider, too, in the bathroom, with whom I keep a sort of company. Her little outfit always reminds me of a certain moth I helped to kill. The spider herself is of uncertain lineage, bulbous at the abdomen and drab. Her six-inch mess of a web works, works somehow, works miraculously, to keep her alive and me amazed. The web itself is in a corner behind the toilet, connecting tile wall to tile wall and floor, in a place where there is, I would have thought, scant traffic. Yet under the web are sixteen or so corpses she has tossed to the floor.

The corpses appear to be mostly sow bugs, those little armadillo creatures who live to travel flat out in houses, and die round. There is also a new shred of earwig, three old spider skins crinkled and clenched,

and two moth bodies, wingless and huge and empty, moth bodies I drop to my knee to see.

Today the earwig shines darkly and gleams, where there is of him: a dorsal curve of thorax and abdomen, and a smooth pair of *cerci*<sup>1</sup> by which I knew his name. Next week, if the other bodies are any indication, he will be shrunken and gray, webbed to the floor with dust. The sow bugs beside him are hollow and empty of color, fragile, a breath away from brittle fluff. The spider skins lie on their sides, translucent and ragged, their legs dying in knots. And the moths, the empty moths, stagger against each other, headless, in a confusion of arching strips of chitin, like nothing resembling moths, so that I should hesitate to call them moths, except that I have had some experience with the figure Moth reduced to a nub.

Two summers ago I was camping alone in the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia. I had hauled myself and gear up there to read, among other things, James Ramsey Ullman’s The Day on Fire, a novel about Rimbaud that had made me want to be a writer when I was sixteen;<sup>2</sup> I was hoping it would do it again. So I read, lost, every day sitting under a tree by my tent, while warblers swung in the leaves overhead and bristle worms trailed their inches over the twiggy dirt at my feet; and I read every night by candlelight, while barred owls called in the forest and pale moths massed round my head in the clearing, when my light made a ring.

Moths kept flying into the candle. They would hiss and recoil, lost upside down in the shadows among my cooking pans. Or they would singe their wings and fall, and their hot wings, as if melted, would stick to the first thing they touched – a pan, a lid, a spoon – so that the snagged moths could flutter only in tiny arcs, unable to struggle free. These I could release by a quick flip with a stick; in the morning I would find my cooking stuff gilded with torn flecks of moth wings, triangles of shiny dust here and there on the aluminum. So I read, and boiled water, and replenished candles, and read on.

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<sup>1</sup> Plural of *cercus*, posterior “feeler” of an insect.

<sup>2</sup> French poet Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891) himself began writing at age sixteen and produced his major work before he was twenty. Ullman’s novel was published in 1958.

One night a moth flew into the candle, was caught, burnt dry, and held. I must have been staring at the candle, or maybe I looked up when a shadow crossed my page; at any rate, I saw it all. A golden female moth, a biggish one with a two-inch wingspan, flapped into the fire, dropped her abdomen into the wet wax, stuck, flamed, frazzled and fried in a second. Her moving wings ignited like tissue paper, enlarging the circle of light in the clearing and creating out of the darkness the sudden blue sleeves of my sweater, the green leaves of jewelweed by my side, the ragged red trunk of pine. At once the light contracted again and the moth’s wings vanished in a fine, foul smoke. At the same time her six legs clawed, curled, blackened, and ceased, disappearing utterly. And her head jerked in spasms, making a spattering noise; her antennae crisped and burned away and her heaving mouth parts crackled like pistol fire. When it was all over, her head was, so far as I could determine, gone, gone the long way of her wings and legs. Had she been new, or old? Had she mated and laid her egg, had she done her work? All that was left was the glowing horn shell of her abdomen and thorax – a fraying, partially collapsed gold tube jammed upright in the candle’s round pool.

And then this moth-essence, this spectacular skeleton, began to act as a wick. She kept burning. The wax rose in the moth’s body from her soaking abdomen to her thorax to the jagged hole where her head should be, and widened into flame, a saffron-yellow flame that robed her to the ground like any immolating monk. That candle had two wicks, two flames of identical height, side by side. The moth’s head was fire. She burned for two hours, until I blew her out.

She burned for two hours without changing, without bending or leaning – only glowing within, like a building fire glimpsed through silhouetted walls, like a hollow saint, like a flame-faced virgin gone to God, while I read by her light, kindled, while Rimbaud in Paris burns out his brains in a thousand poems, while night pooled wetly at my feet.

And that is why I believe those hollow crisps on the bathroom floor are moths. I think I know moths, and fragments of moths, and chips and tatters of utterly empty moths, in any state. How many of you, I asked the people in my class, which of you want to give your lives and be writers? I was trembling from coffee, or cigarettes, or the closeness of faces all around me. (Is this what we live for? I thought; is this the only final beauty: the color of any skin in any light, and living, human eyes?) All

hands rose to the question. (You, Nick? Will you? Margaret? Randy? Why do I want them to mean it?) And then I tried to them that what the choice must mean: you can't be anything else. You must go at your life with a broadax....They had no idea what I was saying. (I have two hands, don't I? And all this energy, for as long as I can remember. I'll do it in the evenings, after skiing, or on the way home from the bank, or after the children are asleep....) They thought I was raving again. It's just as well.

I have three candles here on the table which I disentangle from the plants and light when visitors come. Small usually avoids them, although once she came too close and her tail caught fire; I rubbed it out before she noticed. The flames move light over everyone's skin, draw light to the surface of the faces of my friends. When the people leave I never blow the candles out, and after I'm asleep they flame and burn.

Annie Dillard's

## “How I Wrote the Moth Essay – And Why”

*Annie Dillard's essay on the death of a moth is the kind of work that makes the reader itch to interrogate the absent author. Or burn, in this case. If only we could go to the source for an authoritative answer to a fundamental question: How was it done? In particular, the editor wanted to know from the author: When did you first think of comparing the writer to a burning moth? You mention Rimbaud and the moths, but when and how did it occur to you to put the two together? How did you come to the idea of writing as burning, a consuming and purifying act? Do you still define writing and the writer that way? How much revising did you do in this essay? In the book from which it is taken? Could you describe any struggle you recall with particular words, phrases, or images? What kind of audience did you have in mind? Why did you write the piece? Why do you write? What advice would you give to beginners? Annie Dillard's generous reply to these and many other questions about the process of composing the essay you have just read was “How I Wrote the Moth Essay – and Why,” an essay on an essay.*

It was November 1975. I was living alone, as described, on an island in Pudget Sound, near the Canadian border. I was thirty years old. I thought about myself a lot (for someone thirty years old), because I couldn't figure out what I was doing there. What was my life about? Why was I living alone, when I am gregarious? Would I ever meet someone, or should I reconcile myself to all this solitude? I disliked celibacy; I dreaded childlessness. I couldn't even think of anything to write. I was examining every event for possible meaning.

I was then in full flight from success, from the recent fuss over a book of prose I'd published the previous year called Pilgrim at Tinker Creek. There were offers from editors, publishers, and Hollywood and network producers. They tempted me with world travel, film and TV work, big bucks. I was there to turn from literary and commercial success and to rededicate myself to art and to God. That's how I justified my loneliness to myself. It was a feeble justification and I knew it, because you certainly don't need to live alone either to write or to pray. Actually I was there because I had picked the place from an atlas, and I was alone because I hadn't yet met my husband.

My reading and teaching fed my thoughts. I was reading Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*. Simone Weil was a twentieth-century French intellectual, born Jewish, who wrote some of the most interesting Christian theology I’ve ever read. She was brilliant, but a little nuts; her doctrines were harsh. “Literally,” she wrote, “it is total purity or death.” This sort of fanaticism attracted and appalled me. Weil had deliberately starved herself to death to call attention to the plight of the French workers. I was taking extensive notes on Weil.

In the classroom I was teaching poetry writing, exhorting myself (in the guise of my students), and convincing myself by my own rhetoric: commit yourself to a useless art! In art alone is meaning! In sacrifice alone is meaning! These, then, were issues for me at that time,: dedication, purity, sacrifice.

Early that November morning I noticed the hollow insects on the bathroom floor. I got down on my hands and knees to examine them and recognized some as empty moth bodies. I recognized them, of course, only because I’d seen an empty moth body already – two years before, when I’d camped alone and had watched a flying moth get stuck in a candle and burn.

Walking back to my desk, where I had been answering letters, I realized that the burning moth was a dandy visual focus for all my recent thoughts about an empty, dedicated life. Perhaps I’d try to write a short narrative about it.

I went to my pile of journals, hoping I’d taken some nice, specific notes about the moth in the candle. What I found disappointed me at first: that night I’d written a long description of owl sounds, and only an annoyed aside about bugs flying into the candle. But the next night, after pages of self-indulgent drivel, I’d written a fuller description of the moth which got stuck in candle wax.

The journal entry had some details I could use (bristleworms on the ground, burnt moths’ wings sticking to pans), some phrases (her body acted as a wick, the candle had 2 flames, the moth burned until I blew it out), and, especially, some verbs (hiss, recoil, stick, spatter, jerked, crackled).

Even in the journals, the moth was female. (From childhood reading I’d learned to distinguish moths by sex.) And, there in the journal, was a crucial detail: on that camping trip, I’d been reading about Rimbaud.

Arthur Rimbaud – the French symbolist poet, a romantic, hotheaded figure who attracted me enormously when I was sixteen – had been young and self-destructive. When he was sixteen, he ran away from home to Paris, led a dissolute life, shot his male lover (the poet Verlaine), drank absinthe which damaged his brain, deranged his senses with drunkenness and sleeplessness, and wrote mad vivid poetry which altered the course of Western literature. When he was in his twenties, he turned his back to the Western world and vanished into Abyssinia as a gunrunner.

With my old journal beside me, I took up my current journal and scribbled and doodled my way through an account of my present life and the remembered moth. It went extraordinarily well; it was not typical. It seemed very much “given” – given, I think, because I’d asked, because I’d been looking so hard and so long for connections, meanings. The connections were all there, and seemed solid enough: I saw a moth burnt and on fire; I was reading Rimbaud hoping to rededicate myself to writing (this one bald statement of motive was unavoidable); I live alone. So the writer is like the moth, and like a religious contemplative: emptying himself so he can be a channel for his work. Of course you can reinforce connections with language: the bathroom moths are like a jumble of buttresses for cathedral domes; the female moth is like an immolating monk, like a hollow saint, a flame-faced virgin gone to God; Rimbaud burnt out his brains with poetry while night pooled wetly at my feet.

I liked the piece enough to rewrite it. I took out a couple of paragraphs – one about why I didn’t have a dog, another that ran on about the bathroom spider. This is the kind of absurdity you fall into when you write about anything, let alone about yourself. You’re so pleased and grateful to be writing at all, especially at the beginning, that you babble. Often you don’t know where the work is going, so you can’t tell what’s irrelevant.

It doesn’t hurt much to babble in a first draft, so long as you have the sense to cut out irrelevances later. If you are used to analyzing texts, you will be able to formulate a clear statement of what your draft turned out to be about. Then you make a list of what you’ve already written, paragraph by paragraph, and see what doesn’t fit and cut it out. (All this requires is nerves of steel and lots of coffee.) Most of the time you’ll have to add at the beginning, ensuring that it gives a fair idea of what the point might be, or at least what is about to happen. (Suspense is for mystery writers. The

most inept writing has an inadvertent element of suspense: the reader constantly asks himself, where on earth is this going?) Usually I end up throwing away the beginning: the first part of the poem, the first few pages of an essay, the first scene of a story, even the first few chapters of a book. It’s not holy writ. The paragraphs and sentences are tesserae—tiles for a mosaic. Just because you have a bunch of tiles in your lap doesn’t mean your mosaic will be better if you use them all. In this atypical case, however, there were very few extraneous passages. The focus was tight, probably because I’d been so single-minded before I wrote it.

I added stuff, too, to strengthen and clarify the point. I added some speculation about the burning moth: had she mated and laid her eggs, had she done her work? Near the end I added a passage about writing class: which of you want to give your lives and become writers?

Ultimately, I sent it to Harper’s magazine, which published it. The early drafts, and the Harper’s version, had a different ending, a kind of punch line that was a series of interlocking statements:

*I don’t mind living alone. I like eating alone and reading. I don’t mind sleeping alone. The only time I mind being alone is when something is funny; then, when I am laughing at something funny, I wish someone were around. Sometimes I think it is pretty funny that I sleep alone.*

I took this ending out of the book version, which is the version you have. I took it out because the tone was too snappy, too clever; it reduced everything to celibacy, which was really a side issue; it made the reader forget the moth; and it called too much attention to the narrator. The new ending was milder. It referred back to the main body of the text.

Revising is a breeze if you know what you’re doing – if you can look at your text coldly, analytically, manipulatively. Since I’ve studied texts, I know what I’m doing when I revise. The hard part is devising the wretched thing in the first place. How do you go from nothing to something? How do you face the blank page without fainting dead away?

To start a narrative, you need a batch of things. Not feelings, not opinions, not sentiments, not judgments, not arguments, but specific objects and events: a cat, a spider web, a mess of insect skeletons, a

candle, a book about Rimbaud, a burning moth. I try to give the reader a story, or at least a scene (the flimsiest narrative occasion will serve), and something to look at. I try not to hang on the reader’s arm and bore him with my life story, my fancy self-indulgent writing, or my opinions. He is my guest; I try to entertain him. Or he’ll throw my pages across the room and turn on the television.

I try to say what I mean and not “hide the hidden meaning.” “Clarity is the sovereign courtesy of the writer,” said J. Henri Fabre, the great French entomologist, “I do my best to achieve it.” Actually, it took me about ten years to learn to write clearly. When I was in my twenties, I was more interested in showing off.

What do you do with these things? You juggle them. You toss them around. To begin, you don’t need a well defined point. You don’t need “something to say” – that will just lead you to reiterating clichés. You need bits of the world to toss around. You start anywhere, and join the bits into a pattern by your writing about them. Later you can throw out the ones that don’t fit.

I like to start by describing something, by ticking off the five senses. Later I go back to the beginning and locate the reader in time and space. I’ve found that if I take pains to be precise about *things*, feelings will take care of themselves. If you try to force a reader’s feelings through dramatic writing (“writhe,” “ecstasy,” “scream”), you make a fool of yourself, like someone at a party trying too hard to be liked.

I have piles of materials in my journals – mostly information in the form of notes on my reading, and to a lesser extent, notes on things I’d seen and heard during the day. I began the journals five or six years after college, finding myself highly trained for taking notes and for little else. Now I have thirty-some journal volumes, all indexed. If I want to write about arctic exploration, say, or star chemistry, or monasticism, I can find masses of pertinent data under that topic. And if I browse I can often find images from other fields that may fit all these materials handy. It saves and makes available all those years of reading. Otherwise, I’d forget everything, and life wouldn’t accumulate, but merely pass.

The moth essay I wrote that November day was an “odd” piece – “freighted with heavy-handed symbolism,” as I described it to myself just after I wrote it. The reader must be startled to watch this apparently calm, matter-of-fact account of the writer’s life and times turn before his eyes

into a mess of symbols whose real subject matter is their own relationship. I hoped the reader wouldn't feel he'd been had. I tried to ensure that the actual, historical moth wouldn't vanish into idea, but would stay physically present.

A week after I wrote the first draft I considered making it part of the book (Holy the Firm) I had been starting. It seemed to fit the book's themes. (Actually, I spent the next fifteen months fitting the book to its themes.) In order to clarify my thinking I jotted down some notes.

moth in candle:

the poet – materials of world, of bare earth at feet, sucked up,  
transformed, subsumed to spirit, to air, to light  
the mystic – not through reason  
but through emptiness  
the martyr – virgin, sacrifice, death with meaning.

I prefaced these notes with the comical word “Hothead.”

It had been sheer good luck that the different aspects of the historical truth fit together so nicely. It had actually been on that particular solo camping trip that I'd read the Rimbaud novel. If it hadn't been, I wouldn't have hesitated to fiddle with the facts. I fiddled with one fact, for sure: I foully slandered my black cat, Small, by saying she was “gold” – to match the book's moth and little blonde burnt girl. I actually had a gold cat at that time, named Kindling. I figured no one would believe it. It was too much. In the book, as in real life, the cat was spayed.

This is the most personal piece I've ever written – the essay itself, and these notes on it. I don't recommend, or even approve, writing personally. It can lead to dreadful writing. The danger is that you'll get lost in the contemplation of your wonderful self. You'll include things for the lousy reason that they actually happened, or that you feel strongly about them; you'll forget to ensure that the *reader* feels anything whatever. You may hold the popular view that art is self-expression, or a way of understanding the self – in which case the artist need do nothing more than babble uncontrolledly about the self and then congratulate himself that, in addition to all his other wonderfully interesting attributes, he is also an artist. I don't (evidently) hold this view. So I think that this

moth piece is a risky one to read: it seems to reinforce these romantic and giddy notions of art and the artist. But I trust you can keep your heads.