COLUMN
Writing takes work

Professors and students alike can benefit from attending a writers’ workshop, says Eli Lazarus.

This year, I’ve spent a lot of time working with graduate students on their writing. They were preparing manuscripts for peer-reviewed publication, and wanted to lead the writing process from first cut to submission. The result, in addition to a stack of drafts, has been an unexpected and welcome education for me — a raft of challenges in learning to write, in teaching writing and in the craft of writing.

Writing is hard work, even for people who enjoy it. In my most impatient moments, I think of what William Shawn, legendary editor of The New Yorker magazine, once said to writer John McPhee: “It takes as long as it takes.”

But for anyone undecided about whether they like to write, ‘as long as it takes’ can be a tough sell. Engaging with the writing process requires unequivocal patience — with oneself, with iteration, with the open-endedness of creative practice, which means that composition is an investment in professional development, an improvement of a craft. I’ll be encouraging any students and students I work with to enrol in one — to develop as writers and to understand that critical comments on their work are not personal criticisms. In terms of emotional effort, an objective perspective is less exhausting — but both the writer and the critic need to be on the same page.

There was a stretch when I was regularly pushing student co-authors to the point of frustration. I hacked around with an overly heavy editorial hand. Projecting myself back into the setting of a writers’ workshop has helped me to readjust. I now reply to every draft with the same question: “What kind of comments would you like from me?” I regularly remind myself that if the structure needs work, I should not also make copy edits. A retired high-school English teacher once told me that he marked student papers with the thickest crayon he could find. “There’s a limit to how detailed your comments can be when you’re using a dull crayon,” he said, “and that’s for the best.”

Everyone can benefit from a good writers’ workshop. If a workshop can help students learn how to be objective readers of their own work, then a workshop can likewise help advisers to be better guides through the warrens of the writing process. Time in a writers’ workshop is an investment in professional development, in fruitful collaboration, in the practice and improvement of a craft. I’ll be encouraging any graduate students I work with to enrol in one — and I might check out a few myself.

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