

The Keys and Me

Composers throughout the ages have written exquisite music that is beautiful to play, but sometimes, when the mood is right, I can just sit and let original melodies flow out from my fingertips. It is such an emotional experience. It encompasses my whole body, requires my complete focus. That is how I play the piano. Sitting down at a computer keyboard to write is somewhat like that for me. I am ever excited and surprised to see what the keys and I create together.

My writing style is flexible. It largely depends on my emotional connection with the material and who the audience is. Because I want the audience to have a favorable reaction, I adapt my style so that, hopefully, they will connect with the piece. Regardless of style, I write how I talk. Even if I'm writing academically, I can't help but infuse a bit of wit to engage the audience or expose a little personality to maintain a conversational tone, not a textbook drone.

If I am given freedom to choose the topic, of course I will select something that intrigues me or something about which I can contribute some insight. After some minor preliminary research and pondering, a basic outline appears on a sticky note beside me or typed at the top of the page.

When I begin writing, I don't have a clear idea of exactly what I will say or what the main point will be. All I know is the general topic, but my stance, my angle, my fresh way of looking at it develops as I write. The piece molds itself, and I refine my thoughts, as I write. The content is not explicitly decided beforehand, but is eventually formed from the items that rise in importance during the process.

A broad vocabulary and a detail-oriented attitude cause me to use the backspace key a lot! I do most of my proofreading and sentence structure manipulation on the spot. I don't just throw down sentence fragments to come back to later. Leaving a paper mid-page, even mid-paragraph or mid-sentence, pains me! I like to only have well-worded thoughts down on paper, even if they get deleted

or altered later. In an effort to have a consistent voice, I won't take a break, if I can help it. This results in a first draft that takes many hours to produce, but one that is fairly decent when I stop.

Even though writing in one sitting helps keep the first draft consistent, taking a break and returning to the words with fresh eyes does wonders. My best revising occurs after I've let the paper sit for several hours or even a couple of days. Awkward words, unnecessary phrases, or inconsistent ideas stick out a lot during a second read-through. I sift through the paper, actively editing as I read. To determine what sounds the most clear and natural, I might catch myself muttering under my breath to make sure it is something I would actually say. The introduction and the conclusion are the parts of the paper that get reworked the most. Like a good movie, my paper has to have a memorable beginning and a meaningful ending.

My thoughts are usually closely connected and so proper punctuation plagues me. I have to watch my sentence length and be careful not add too many commentary clauses. My mother is a secretary and my wife has a technical writing degree, so if I ever want input, I ask them! It is usually to double-check a grammar principle, ask for a synonym, or to ask their opinion of a specific aspect of my paper. I typically don't have others read it until I have a thorough draft completed.

When the paper is complete, I always read it through multiple times, slowly, tasting every word. This helps me get an overall feel for what is emphasized. There isn't much left to edit by this point. If I change anything, it is usually to add a new insight or to connect the ideas better if something is lacking. When I am entirely happy with it, I feel very fulfilled and I want to share it with whoever will listen. For me, it brings the same feelings that applause does at the end of a musical performance – relaxing, inner praise for beautifully capturing a thought worth expressing. That is how I write a paper.