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Why I Write on My Mobile Phone

Mark Shaver for The Chronicle Review

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PREMIUM

At the end of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis,* his epic account of Western literature, he says the book was possible only because he, a German Jew, was exiled in Istanbul and away from his books. He still had access to his primary texts, the great works of Western literature—Homer, Dante, Virginia Woolf—but he was separated from the academic libraries of Europe and thus liberated from the influence and obligations of scholarship. He had nothing but himself and his texts.

One of the challenges of our digital age is that we are rarely away from our books—not only our Google Books, but also the ideas of others that flood the Internet and our research notes. This challenge is especially pointed given the purpose of academic writing: to make an original contribution to a scholarly conversation. Academic writing requires originality, but it can be elusive, especially in fields such as history, philosophy, and literary studies, which interpret and reinterpret past ideas and scholarship.

There is a fine line between being responsive and derivative. Articles and books are often rejected by publishers or reviewed negatively by readers because they are not sufficiently original. Sometimes, as in the case of Auerbach, the greatest contributions to an academic field come from those who are least enmeshed in it.

"Me thinks that the moment my legs began to move," wrote Henry David Thoreau, "my thoughts began to flow." Stand up, step away from your books, walk around, and write—that has become my answer to the problem

of scholarly overexposure.

When I was in graduate school, the plan was for me to finish my dissertation before my wife and I had children. We missed that mark by about six months, which meant that I had to write the last 30 pages on my mobile phone, sometimes with a wailing child in my free arm. This "mobile composing" evolved as I began dictating into my phone on long walks with my son in his stroller. (We lived in Southern California at the time, so the weather was accommodating, and there were miles and miles of paved walking trails.)

One of the virtues of this method was that it got me away from my books, thus ensuring that I was offering my own insights as opposed to creating a pastiche of quotations and ideas from other critics, which is what much of my earlier writing had amounted to.

I would wake up at around 4 a.m.—before the world and my son awoke and demanded my attention. I would use this unfettered time to read over the literary works and passages I was writing about that day, as well as any relevant criticism I planned to consider.

By 7 a.m. or so, my son would wake up and I would make him breakfast and send my wife off to work, as the material I had read that morning rattled around in my mind, figuring itself out. At around 9, I would head out for a long walk with my son. Inevitably, whatever was important from what I had read that morning would stick in my head, and I took the time on those long walks to organize my thoughts and plan a way to present them effectively.

Then, when it came time to actually write, I would walk for four or five minutes, thinking about the sentence I was composing, revising it several times in my head. Then I would dictate it into my phone. The sentence might be only 10 to 15 words, but they had behind them several minutes of thinking about how to sharpen both the quality of the idea and the clarity of its expression. I usually wrote two to four double-spaced pages per day.

I wouldn't copy my mobile compositions over to a word-processing program immediately. Often they sat on my phone and in my pocket for several days, which meant that they were available for revisions as I went about my life. Previously some residual thought might have been victoriously nodded at and then forgotten. Now it could be captured. Mobile composing allowed me to develop my ideas organically over time, not just when I had the luxury of sitting at my desk.

When I was happy with the mobile composition, I wouldn't just email it to myself or copy and paste it into the paper I was working on. Instead, I would pull it up on my phone and manually retype it into a word-processing program. Doing so meant that I was revising both my ideas and my language as they cycled in through my eyes, back through my mind, and out through my fingers—revisions that might not have occurred had I simply imported my mobile composition whole.

Mobile composing need not be done on an electronic device, of course. The core of the idea is walking and thinking, which is periodically recorded in writing. But we now have the technology to write, via dictation, while we walk. Walking gets the mind warm, propels thought forward, encourages energy and movement in ideas through energy and movement in the body.

The process reminds me of what the poet Edward Hirsch said about writing poetry, that it's "written from the body as well as the mind, and the rhythm and pace of a walk can get you going and keep you grounded."

Just as social-media sites like Twitter and Instagram allow one to communicate thoughts and experiences "in the moment," mobile composing allows one to record, for example, the excitement of discovery in literary criticism. It allows one to capture the process of the mind making sense of evidence, as one's reader will be doing when working through an academic essay.

In general, I find myself revising my arguments dozens of times, but I find that the first time I articulate my analysis of a specific bit of information is usually the best. There is an excitement and an attention to the detail and richness of that information that can be lost if I already know where I'm going.

One virtue of using a mobile device is that walking and thinking and writing by speaking imitates the act of revising. Usually, we should write more like we talk. On the one hand, we should avoid inflated diction, which is why we often tell students to eschew jargon and write in plain language. On the other hand, we should try to imitate the rhythms of speech in our writing, which is why we tell students to read their prose aloud when they're editing. Mobile composing satisfies both demands, helping one write in plain yet elegant language.

When I go back and read a passage from the mobile-composing period of my dissertation, I can remember exactly where I was, on which walking trail, when I wrote it. This is the mobile-composing version of the "memory palace" in classical rhetoric. And because I would write only one paragraph over the course of a two-hour walk, reading that paragraph now feels like a warp-speed journey over that trail.

I've also discovered that Siri, the "personal assistant" on iPhones, is narcissistic: She always hears "theory" as "Siri." She is also philosophically conservative: She hears "Nietzsche" as "shit."

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