

## CHAPTER ONE

# Running and Writing

**I** may never have the words to describe a good run. Especially the feeling when I finish and the sweat cools on my back, forehead, and arms, the fresh, cool air is still pumping through my lungs, the blood is pumping through my body, and my tired muscles quiver uncontrollably. It is a special kind of afterglow.

Then there is the mental triumph, the feeling of accomplishment that comes with pushing my body for 5 more minutes and then 10. The mind clears, stress dissolves, problems are solved, and the soul is at peace. Along with that comes the realization that the person who once said, "I only run when someone is chasing me," is the same person who just sailed through the neighborhood with her 80-pound dog in tow.

It has occurred to me lately that writing and running have quite a bit in common. Both take dedication and practice, and both abilities disappear if they are not used. Running is always hard for me in the beginning. I stand at the end of my driveway, Doc, my yellow lab, wagging his tail and ready to take off like a bullet. I look up the hill and think about the miles ahead of me. Taking a long breath, I put one foot in front of the other, and I am off. About halfway up the hill, my heart starts to pound, my lungs start to burst, and my legs begin to cramp. I think, "I will never make it up this hill, much less the 2 1/2 miles left ahead of me."

The stretch of pavement ahead is the blank page that must be filled with writing. I sit before my computer screen, staring at the

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picture of a moose with shaggy hair on my desktop, knowing that when I click on the Word icon, a blank white screen will be staring at *me*. I finally drag my mouse over, double click, and there it is. I start to type one or two words, and they are truly horrible. My pulse quickens, my brain cramps, and I think, "I will never be able to write the first three lines, much less fill 10 pages."

I begin to think, "Okay. I'll just run (or write) until I can't possibly run one more step (or write one more word)." The pain in my legs and brain is searing, and I am sure that the next step or word will be my last. I know that my husband will come home to find me lying in the street or crumpled on my desk. However, that step is not my last, nor is that word, and suddenly I'm not thinking about the pain any more. My legs and brain stop cramping. I'm running without thinking, I'm writing what I'm thinking. Words fill the screen and the miles fall away. I'm flying.

Sometimes when I run, I never achieve flight. Each step is painful. By the second mile, I've had it, and I walk home disappointed and sour. I talk to myself, saying, "Today, I did not have a good run. But I did run; that is something. I built a little muscle today, and that will help me tomorrow when I run again. After all, even two slow, painful miles is better than sitting on the couch watching TV."

Sometimes when I write, my words never take flight. I sit and painfully churn out several pages of what I know is pure garbage. My thoughts refuse to come together, and the pain in my brain never goes away. I get very little accomplished in the time that I allotted that day for writing. I tell myself, "At least I wrote, and I have built a few good ideas in the pile of pages I have created. Those can be used tomorrow when I sit down to write again."

When I finish a good run, I am exhilarated, but dog-tired. I'm sweaty and worn out, but I'm also pumped up. I can't possibly rest. When I finish a good piece of writing, my eyes are blurry from staring at it and my hair is standing up all over my head. My brain feels like a big pile of mush, but I can't rest. I am totally exhilarated. In both instances, as I bask in the afterglow, I think to myself, "Now why did I dread this so much, why did I get so discouraged? I know the reward for sticking this out!" I can never answer the question. I can only vow to continue to push myself again and again.

Many people have misconceptions about writing. Dr. Sam Watson of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte loves to tell his students that “writing is not sitting in the garret with a skull on the desk beside you, furiously filling up pages with brilliant ideas. It is the act of putting pen to paper; it is an action, and something we *do*. It is work!” I must add to that statement that writing is not sitting in a sunny room with the spring breeze blowing from an open window while you tap out brilliant and perfectly formed ideas. Indeed, at this moment, I am in such a room and I am attempting to type, struggling to strain my thoughts through my fingers and willing my hand to write.

People do not expect to go out and run the Boston Marathon without training. They do not expect to run even a mile when they have never run more than the two steps it takes to get in front of someone in the fast food line. Why would they expect to sit down and write the great American novel if they have never before spent time trying to compose?

People can easily be convinced that there are some tricks to running. Holding your head, your arms, and your body in the right position helps tremendously. Focusing on your breathing to keep it as even and as deep as possible will get rid of cramps. So why would people not expect there to be a few writing tricks that could get a person over the tough spots? It is accepted that there are good days and bad days in running, so why would writing be any different?

People know that running is painful. They see the runners in marathons sweating, limping, and throwing up. They know these people are highly trained. Writing is a very similar process. Those who do it every day limp and sweat and get sick over their work, but like runners, they keep at it because they know that there will be a reward at the end.

People do not know these things about writing because they do not understand writing in the same way that they understand running. Their understanding of writing, like most other things, comes out of their own experience, and for most people that means the experience they had in school. Our students' parents expect their children's writing instruction to be similar to their own. They expect to see papers marked to the *n*th degree for spelling and grammar. They expect their children to write five-paragraph essays, each paragraph containing a topic sentence and three supporting sentences.

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The teacher down the hall preaches such a form and wields a red pen should any unlucky student create a faux pas as he writes. Students are given an assignment with cursory comments about drafting and revising and are expected to turn in a finished product at the appointed time. Anyone seeking the guidance of another student will be punished for cheating, and the teacher will not read and comment on drafts because that would be giving students the answer. The paper will be graded, and the grade will be recorded for all time in the grade book. Some teachers may store the writing assignment in a folder of some sort that will be given to the student at the end of the year. In most cases the folder will be thrown away or placed in a remembrance box under a bed. The writing accomplished in such settings is almost never revisited or revised after it is graded, and rarely is it used for any real purpose other than as part of the justification for a final grade in a course.

As teachers who are under the gun of public scrutiny, it seems as if we should adopt the practices of “the teacher down the hall.” We want to challenge our students. We want to get them ready for the real world and for college. If we make things too easy for them—and many are convinced that the process approach does just that—we are letting them down. However, such practices and methods do not allow students to have bad writing days with which to build writing muscle, and they seldom give students a chance to fly. More important, these methods are not realistic. Professional writers describe a process that is much more like that of the runner. (Donald Murray’s *Shoptalk* [1990] logs many such thoughts.)

*If it turns out to be a novel, then I will have wanted to write a novel. But if it turns out to be stories, it’ll turn out that that’s what I wanted to do.*

—Grace Paley

*I remember that I started writing *Sleepless Nights* because of a single line. The line was: “Now I will start my novel, but I don’t know whether to call myself I or she.”*

—Elizabeth Hardwick

*What civilians do not understand—and to a writer anyone not a writer is a civilian—is that writing is manual labor of the mind: a job, like laying pipe.*

—John Gregory Dunne

Writing is hard work that follows no form. The stories and thoughts carry the writer along if she is astute enough to hear them and disciplined enough to follow them. The notion of writing carrying the writer through the text she is creating is similar to the way a runner's legs seem to take over and propel the body forward.

## **THE WORKSHOP CULTURE: A STUDY OF COACHING**

To create a picture of the workshop-based classroom, let's return for a moment to our running and writing image and carry it a bit further. Imagine sitting a track team down in a classroom and lecturing them on the finer points of running for competition and then holding them to these practices, perhaps taking away points for every so-called "mistake" of form, even when the "mistake" allowed them to run faster. We would not expect to have a successful season under these circumstances.

What if we coached the team by offering them advice from what we know about running and have continued to learn through reading all of the latest running magazines? What if we offered this knowledge in bits and pieces as we watched the students run? The things we suggested would be contingent upon our observations of the runners and our assessment of what they needed. We would expect to model the ways we wanted the runner to hold her head. We would *show* her how to use her arms to make her way up a challenging hill. We would then watch closely as the runner tried to emulate our actions, offering encouragement, praise, and more suggestions all the while. I think we could expect quite a bit of success if we were to use this approach to running instruction.

Let's continue with our ideas for coaching running for a bit. We would run with our athletes. Maybe not as far or as fast as our

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best runners, but they would see us out there sweating and working along with them. We would run in order to keep our own running muscles active, to model what real runners do when they encounter real problems, and maybe, most important, to remind ourselves of what it feels like to be out of breath, to get cramps, and to hit “the wall.”

We would expect our runners to do much more than perform on the day of the race. We would expect these young runners to practice under our supervision. We realize that, if we expect them to improve, we need to push them each day in practice, when they can focus on their form and stamina without worrying about the outcome. Surely on non-race days the students could run on their own without us watching them, but our very presence pushes them to try a little harder and grow a little more while ensuring that they will have much-needed encouragement when they think they cannot possibly run another step.

And that’s when we would step in to help. “Coach, I always get a cramp in my right calf on the last mile; what can I do about that?” “Coach, I think I twisted my ankle.” “Coach, I don’t feel well and I’m just so hot.” We are expected to know how to respond to all of these complaints so that the runner can continue to improve and excel. By being there, we can help them to push through their discouragement and pain.

Also, in practice, we encourage, cajole, and even require our athletes to step out of their comfort zones and try new things. We know that stretching prevents injury, so we require that. We encourage and require our runners to experiment with different warm-ups so that they can find what is best for them. We help our runners to build muscle and stamina in practice that they will need in the race. Practice rarely emulates the race; it simply prepares the athletes for that performance.

When time for the performance comes, we trust the runners to know what they need to do. If we had a runner who always ran best when she wore green socks, we would allow that. We would also allow the other team members not to wear green socks if such attire did not help their running in any way. As running coaches, we would be accepting, within reason, of what our kids prove to us helps them improve their athletic ability. For instance, green socks are not a problem, but we would never allow a runner to begin a meet without warming up because of the damage we

know it can cause. On race day we must step back and watch closely. A good coach notes what a runner does for a meet, so that success can be repeated and failure can be altered and improved upon. The coach is the careful observer at this point.

What would happen if we followed such a model for writing instruction? It seems a little bizarre at first; teachers simply do not act this way. So why does the word *teaching* not bring forth the image of the kind of instruction we have described? For some of us, the word *coach* may not have even called up this scenario. A “coach” may be a large man with a protruding belly and baseball cap, blowing his whistle at kids and spitting tobacco juice. In writing this book using a coaching metaphor, I was concerned at first about the way people—especially serious teachers—perceive coaches. As a high school teacher and cross-country coach, I found that there was a very clear distinction between teachers who coached and coaches who taught. I wanted to be the former. But I also wanted other teachers to coach, and in doing that redefine both words, giving each more strength, power, and prestige. I want to dispel the myth of that overweight coach, but more so the myth of the teacher as the pinch-faced crone with a red pen and a full three-ring binder, standing behind a podium, droning on endlessly to students and then requiring them to regurgitate the information. I want to create the image of adults working continually to gain knowledge themselves and then working with children to help them find their own reasons for learning.

Sadly, English teachers seem to fall into the crone category a little more readily than teachers of other subjects. Every time someone new finds out that I teach English, they say, “Well, I’d better stop talking before you have to correct my grammar.” Or, “Ugh! I hated English.” They always look a little frightened for the rest of the visit, as if I may whip out my red pen at any moment and begin writing big fat F’s on their foreheads. Such adverse reactions make me sad, because we are the people who get to teach the fun curriculum. We are the ones who get to explore life with our students. We are in the position to help them discover how they think and what they feel. We can watch them explore the gold mine of their own ideas and experience the beauty of ideas around them. We get to demonstrate the power of words and, by learning to experiment with words, the power that they themselves possess. We can help them discover flight.

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We cannot show our students how to fly from our exalted position behind the podium. Students can never experience flight trapped inside a formulaic box. We have to come around to their side, push up our sleeves, and work right along with them. We have to model writing and thinking and reading for comprehension and enjoyment. We have to watch them closely so that we can nudge them when they need it. We must stay abreast of the latest findings in writing instruction so that we may best know how to nudge them. We have to praise and encourage and cheer. We have to allow them to practice under our supervision, and we have to allow for meaningful performance. Most of all, we must give our students real and meaningful experiences that make them want to write. We have to get them stirred up over something more than a grade if we ever expect them to take risks and grow. We must coach them.

We have to allow for their differences by meeting and teaching each child at his level and then challenging him to move past it. We cannot force structure or style, and we must enable our students to become confident and fluent; then we enable them to choose the appropriate style for what they want to say. Nor can we dictate the process that each writer goes through in order to reach the final destination.

## CONCLUSIONS AND MISSION

In many ways, this is another book about teaching writing, but there is one key way in which it is very different. Donald Graves (1991, 1996), Lucy Calkins (1986), Nancy Atwell (1987), and countless others have written wonderful books about writing workshops for elementary and middle grades. I have learned quite a bit from these teachers, and you will see them mentioned often in this book. But, these books do not really deal with high school curriculum. Tom Romano's book (1987) does deal with teaching writing in high school, but only two chapters deal with writing in and among literature. My hope is to take good writing instruction and explain how it works hand in hand with good reading instruction, thereby helping teachers institute real writing instruction into their literature-based classrooms.



So you see, my aim is not to trivialize the teaching of writing by comparing it to coaching. My aim is to empower both teachers and students to work together in the high school classroom to ensure that students master and understand the power in their own voices and feel confident in showing that voice to the world in their writing. But in order to do that, we must also give them control over their own thinking, reading, and thinking about what they read. And at the very foundation of this aim is the unwavering belief that all children can learn to write, just as all can learn to run. We've all seen people in wheelchairs racing around the track. Children will learn to write when we teach them to run. As they become stronger, they will run fast enough to fly.