

ON WRITING SLOWLY

When I was nineteen I wrote my first story on a borrowed typewriter, and it took me three weeks to finish four pages. I remember being ashamed of how slow it was. I remember, too, that I have never written anything quicker that I liked as much.

A typewriter does three things that a computer politely refuses to do.

First, it makes a sound. Every letter costs a small physical effort and answers back. After a while the rhythm becomes a kind of thinking: you hear a sentence going wrong before you see it.

Second, it keeps going forward. There is no cut, no paste, no moving the third paragraph above the first while the first is still half-written. The only way out of a bad sentence is through it, into the next one. Drafts written this way are messier, and much more alive.

Third, it ends the line for you. The bell rings, and you have seven letters to decide. It is a tiny deadline, a hundred times a page, and it is wonderful for hesitation, which cannot survive it.

None of this is nostalgia. I don't miss carbon paper, or correction fluid, or retyping a whole page because of one word on line forty. What I miss is the friction, the feeling that the page was a place I had to walk across instead of a surface I could slide things around on.

So write the first draft slowly. Hear it. Keep going. Fix it later, in the quiet, with every tool you like.

The machine will wait for you. That is what it is for.