

Extracting Words



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I sit at my desk in what used to be my now-grown daughter's bedroom. I'm facing a window that looks out onto a majestic Japanese maple that turns crimson in autumn. I stare into its branches as I think about my next sentence.

I am a journalist who writes about the arts. I am led by curators through extraordinary museum exhibitions, looking closely, looking again, asking whatever questions I want. I am given checklists and label copy and exquisite catalogues that I read cover-to-cover, yellow highlighter in hand. I see masterpieces by artists like Rembrandt and Caravaggio; I see monumental installations—hundreds of glimmering spheres floating on a pond; a towering dress shirt on a sprawling lawn.

Back home I digest and distill. I sit at my desk, fingers on my keyboard, eyes on the maple, and I think. I think hard. Then, through a mysterious combination of probing, coaxing, and stepping aside, I extract sentences that convey precisely what I want to say. I exchange one word for a better one, move the first line to the end; I make notes to myself in uppercase about points I don't want to miss.

When everything is written, I read and revise, read and revise, read and revise, over and over until there are no more changes, no more tweaks. Only then am I finished.

Later, when the article is published, I read it and barely remember how I found all those words.

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