

The Sea of Experience and The Mountain of Perception

What is the “Sea of Experience?”

All writing begins in the “sea of experience.” That is to say, we can write only *what we know*. Sometimes, we investigate a topic in order to learn about it, but often we draw either directly or indirectly from our immediate experiences. Our memories swim around with disconnected but vivid sights and sounds and smells. These are the tiny details—the sensory details—upon which our life is constructed, and is the foundation upon which good writing often is built.

What is the “Mountain of Perception?”

After gathering all those details, we start writing. Eventually, we leave the “sea of experience” and begin to climb the mountain of perception.” As we climb higher—if we pay close attention—we should begin to notice the patterns beneath the water, to recognize that our specific story may have universal applications; we start to make connections between those tiny details and larger issues; we begin to make sense of our lives within the context of the world around us. And we revise what we write in order to understand and explain these connections.

So that’s it, right?

That’s just the beginning. To make everything come together toward a common end we must continually move back and forth between the sea and the mountain. The danger for the writer is that he or she might get stuck at the top of mountain or at the bottom of the sea. A writer bogged down in the sea fills up pages with meaningless detail. Likewise, climbing the mountain is not without its own hazards. You could get stuck up there in the clouds of general and Godlike truth, sharing your “profound” thoughts on “big” issues . . . without the details that make reading so enjoyable for the reader. Good writers move back and forth between the “sea of experience” and the “mountain of perception.”