

The Virginia Woolf Writers' Workshop

by Danell Jones

Discussion Questions

Woolf's provocative thoughts about writing can inspire rich discussion about the nature of creativity, the writing process, and the practical realities of a writing life. Writing groups and classroom teachers can use the questions below to generate discussion about the ideas Woolf raises in each section of the Virginia Woolf Writers' Workshop. There are no "right" answers to these open-ended questions. They are meant to get aspiring writers thinking more deeply about their practice and about the art of writing.

PRACTICING

1. What do you think are the conditions necessary to produce a work of art today? What kind of social or economic conditions prevent someone from being a writer?
2. Woolf suggests that one needs to sink into his or her unconscious to write. What do you think is the relationship between the unconscious mind and creativity?
3. Does it make a difference whether one writes at a computer, a standing desk, or snuggled in a comfy chair? Does it matter if one uses a pencil, a crayon, or a fountain pen with purple ink? It is important to be comfortable? Or should one be slightly uncomfortable to write?
4. Do you place as much emphasis as Woolf does on a regular writing practice? What do you think is the role of inspiration in writing? It is more or less important than regularity?
5. Is the Angel in the House still a problem for writers today? If so, why do you think it is so hard to kill her off?
6. Do you keep a journal or diary? Why or why not? How is writing in a journal different from writing a short story or a poem? What are some useful things that one can do in a journal?
7. Sometimes writing goes well and sometimes it doesn't. How can keeping a journal help writers cope with the ups and downs of the writing process?

WORKING

1. Why do you think Woolf says, "I prefer, where truth is important, to write fiction"? Do you think fiction offers a different kind of truth than fact? What kind of truth? What can fiction do that fact cannot?

2. Why does Woolf want writers to be able to earn their own money? What does money provide that is important to writers?
3. Although she often struggled to balance her creative writing with her journalism, Woolf came to realize that writing articles and reviews was good training for her fiction. Do you think there are skills one can learn through journalism that could be helpful for other forms of writing?
4. Have you ever tried to write an article for a magazine? A book or movie review? Do you think writing journalism could detract from or even harm your creative writing? Do you think it is of lesser value than fiction or poetry?
5. Woolf says that the five hundred pounds and the room of one's own is really about the freedom to think for oneself and the time to contemplate. Why is the ability to think for oneself important to the creative act? If a writer cannot think for him or herself, what is the result? What kind of books do you think reveal freedom of mind?
6. Do you have your own writing space? Do you think it influences how often you work or the quality of your work? How can a writing space work for or against the writing process?
7. If you were to visit Virginia Woolf's home, what do you imagine it would be like? What other writers do you admire? What do you think you could learn from visiting their homes?

CREATING

1. Woolf advises writers to write what they wish. How do you think writers get trapped in writing things they don't really want to write? If you were free to write whatever you wished, what would it be?
2. How would you describe your sensibility as a writer? What are the topics or themes that intrigue you?
3. What kinds of things do you think you can learn about writing from books? What things would be impossible to learn from a book?
4. Do you agree with Woolf that "nobody knows anything about the laws of fiction"? Are there any laws of fiction that you've found useful? Are there any rules you've learned that you think have hampered your creativity?
5. Woolf says we can only trust our instincts when it comes to writing. How do writers develop instincts? Do you think trusting one's instincts is an exciting or scary way to write?
6. How often do you experiment wildly with your writing? What do you think happens when one experiments wildly?
7. Do you find it easy to convey yourself—your character, your temperament—in your writing? What kinds of things would you like to be able to express?
8. Woolf talks about the importance of learning from other writers. What writers have influenced you the most? Why?
9. What do you think about Woolf's proposal that writers should consult with other writers about their work? What is the value of an experienced writer's opinion? What might be the drawbacks of getting an experienced writer's opinion?

WALKING

1. Do you think walking is valuable for a writer?
2. Can you think of memorable stories that involved a journey of some kind? Why do you think stories about journeys can be so rich for writers?
3. Do you have any memorable journeys that would make a good story?

READING

1. How would you describe your reading appetite? Is it always the same? Does it vary? How do you feed it?
2. What kind of reading do you think is important for a writer?
3. What classic works (like Dante or Shakespeare, for example) have you read? Do you think writers need to read classic books?
4. Woolf says that a love of literature sometimes comes from reading bad books. What would you consider rubbish reading? Do you think it can nourish a love of literature?
5. Why do people read memoirs? What qualities do you think create a good memoir? Do you have any favorites?
6. Woolf claims that telling the truth about oneself is essential in a memoir or autobiography. How difficult do you think this would be to do? Why is it so important to reveal yourself and not just the world around you?
7. If you wanted to read a little to warm your brain up for writing, what book or writer would you choose?
8. Do you agree with Woolf that anyone who wants to be a writer must also be a reader?

PUBLISHING

1. Are you eager to get published? What would getting published mean to you?
2. What do you think of Woolf's advice not to publish until you are thirty?
3. What advantages are there to having a long apprenticeship as a writer? Why wait to publish your work?
4. Woolf and her husband started their own press. What are the advantages of self-publishing today? What are the disadvantages?
5. How do you think poets and fiction writers differ? What draws some people to poetry and others to fiction?
6. Do you read contemporary poetry? Do you have a favorite poet?
7. What is your favorite poem? Why do you like it? Have you ever tried to memorize it?
8. Woolf suggests that poetry would be better if it were less about oneself and more about the world and the people in it. Do you agree?
9. What do you think of Woolf's advice to poets? Is it relevant today?

DOUBTING

1. Would you say you are a highly observant person who closely watches the world around you?
2. Are there particular kinds of detail that are effective in stories? How do you determine which details to include and which to leave out?
3. If you've ever tried writing a novel, how did you deal with the uncertainty of beginning?
4. Do you revise? Could you imagine revising something six or seven times?
5. Do you think it is useful to read your work out loud as you revise?
6. Why do you like reading novels? What keeps you interested?
7. Who is your favorite literary character? Why?
8. Do you find it easy or difficult to write dialogue? How do you know if your dialogue works well?
9. Do you get pleasure from the mere act of writing? Do you love being immersed in an idea and trying to communicate it in words? Would you be happy living a writing life—observing the world and recording what you see—even if you never published or never become a famous writer?