

PROFESSOR CHRISTOPHER GANE (2): MY COMPOSING PROCESS

What is the process that you go through to produce your best work?

I start with an idea. Something has caught my attention and I want to think a little bit more about that. And that's the first stage: what is it about this idea that's caught my attention? Is it an idea that's worth pursuing, or is it just one of these ephemeral things that you think about for a bit and then you move on? So the first stage is clearly thinking about what it is you want to write about. The next stage is mapping that out in very general terms: what are the elements of this idea that you want to explore? What are the bits you want to discard? What's the key issue that you're trying to get across? Obviously, you have to do your research. And I'm not sure that the phase of thinking about something and the researching are easily separated. They interact with each other. You start with an idea, you explore it a little bit, you check it out, you see by what you read that this may or may not be an idea that's worth exploring, but that's the first phase of it.

Then you try to put some of it down on paper and everybody has their own particular way of approaching this. I tend to use a mixture of keyboard and a pen. And the keyboard comes first these days because I think we're all getting used to writing pretty well with a keyboard. I use the keyboard, I print it out, and then I start scribbling in the margin, and I start circling the bits that I think are worthwhile keeping, and then I put my pen through the rest. And this process can go on for quite a long time till eventually you've fleshed out something that fits into a structure of a kind that helps to communicate the ideas you're trying to get across.

And then what do I do? Well, for many years now, have taken it and read it to my wife. And I'm fortunate because my wife is pretty patient, but she also has a legal background. And the key point is that if you're trying to communicate, then it's better to try and communicate orally what you're trying to write down on paper because when you read it out to someone, you hear the bits that sound tinny, that sound false, the bits that are repetitious, the bits that simply don't work. And if they don't work when you're reading them out to someone, then they won't work when they're down on paper. In fact, sometimes, the weaknesses will become even more apparent once they're down on paper. So read it out loud to somebody, somebody who knows a little bit about the subject, but doesn't know it in detail.

What advice do you have for students about adopting a productive process?

I think the best way to be productive as a writer is to write, to do it, to keep on doing it. It's a bit like any form of language: if you don't use it, you lose your command of it. Writing is a habit. Some people are more disciplined than others. I had a friend and colleague who wrote his PhD thesis in a year by sitting down and writing a thousand words a day. Now, I don't have that kind of self-discipline and I don't think very many people do, but it is a strategy and you've got to find your own strategy, but I think the key to this is frequency, regularity, and trying to make sure that somehow you get into the habit of writing.