

Q & A

The WRITER'S STUDIO with Linda Gordon

Edith Wharton preferred to write in bed. Ernest Hemingway liked to polish his sentences at a well-lighted café table. For Maya Angelou the most productive place was a hotel room with bare walls. Historians, too, have special ways of working that are worth sharing. In May 2017, Thomas Andrews and Brooke L. Blower asked the acclaimed author Linda Gordon to reflect on research, writing, and other elements of the historian's craft.

Linda Gordon has taught history at the University of Massachusetts, Boston; the University of Wisconsin, Madison; and New York University. She is the author or editor of numerous books and articles, including *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction* (Harvard University Press, 1999) and *Dorothea Lange: A Life beyond Limits* (W.W. Norton, 2009), both of which won the Bancroft Prize.

Tell us about how you usually write. Do you have any special techniques for getting words onto the page?

I read, write, and review research materials at home, always. Several reasons: first, the university offices I've had have been too small. They didn't have enough space to store my files, or to use my "filing" system while writing, which consists of piles of paper on the floor. Second, and possibly more influential in the long run, was my experience as a parent. For three years starting when our daughter was about three and a half, my partner commuted from our home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to Hampshire College. He was typically away from very early Monday morning to late Thursday night, and during that period I was a single parent. As a result I became accustomed to using any available scrap of time amidst domestic tasks and child care for preparing my classes and, occasionally, writing. So I didn't have the luxury of fixing on a favorite time of day for work.

My work time is also limited by the fact that I seem to need more sleep than many others—if I could, I'd probably sleep nine hours a night. For many years, I have rarely been able to work in the evening, or after supper, unless a deadline (like not being prepared for teaching the next day!) forces me to. In fact, if I'm not finished working in the afternoon, I'm likely to postpone supper until I am finished. Very occasionally, if I have the energy to write something in the evening, I will write while sipping a glass of wine or even, very occasionally, smoking a puff or two of a joint, so as to loosen up and get into a flow of words and sentences. But in the main I'm a morning person. My routine, when I have the time, is to sit with coffee and a small breakfast over *The New York Times*, then turn immediately to my computer. I do email first—it is a way of clearing my head of small tasks in order to get on to big tasks. Before the internet, I would often pay bills, write letters, or do small household tasks before beginning to do academic work.

A lot of my writing and teaching took place before the computer era. I remember well my first computer—a Kaypro, supposedly portable (!) though it must have weighed 50 lbs., acquired in 1984. And a dot-matrix printer that, fed serrated sheets of paper from a long roll, produced copy that would seem hard to read today. (I often point out to my students that commands like "cut" and "paste" were once literal descriptions of what we did. My dissertation drafts were full of inserts scotch-taped into place, or handwritten entries like "insert 1 here.")

I never wrote longhand. When I was in high school I was in the “business track” rather than the “college track,” and for girls this meant a typing course, so I became a fast and relatively accurate touch typist. (This tracking allowed me to graduate with fewer courses and to leave school a bit earlier for my daily ballet classes, rehearsals, and some teaching.) So I always composed on a typewriter, even in college. (The final college honors exams at Swarthmore occurred in a large room with many typing tables, all of us typing out answers on our portable typewriters at the same time.) This early composition-by-typing probably contributed to the fact that I prefer single-spaced print-outs when I write or read, because it allows me to see more of the text at a glance, to take in whole paragraphs and the overall organization of what I’m writing or reading.

Computers, therefore, were the greatest work-related gift I’ve ever received. They have allowed me to become a better writer. I can spew out ideas with no regard for quality, just to get them on paper, with the confidence that I can revise repeatedly.

I’ve learned, from conversations with others, that I revise more than is common among scholars, perhaps because my first drafts are terrible. As I write this I am finishing up a 1,500-word op-ed. It must have gone through four complete recastings of the key argument. I’m often not clear what I want to say when I start writing, and only clarify my argument or message by writing. In fact I *think* by writing. Some people may be able simply to sit and think—I can’t; my mind wanders if I try. I can only think by forming sentences. Besides, when an idea comes to me I need to write it down immediately or I’ll forget it. So I keep a pad of Post-it notes in my bedside table in order to jot down ideas.

Did you grow up with lots of books? When did you start writing?

I was raised in apartments and houses with many books—not many by academic standards but many by the standards of the lower middle class in which I grew up. My father was an immigrant, arriving in the United States from the shtetl, or Jewish village, of Shumsk, located about twenty kilometers south of Vilnius. As a teenager he lived with his brother, then with relatives in Cleveland. Then he attended the University of Wisconsin, due to the encouragement of a high school teacher. (Might she have noticed how quickly he became fluent in English?) There he got a gem of an education in the University of Wisconsin’s Experimental College, founded by Alexander Meiklejohn, a prominent and unconventional proponent of progressive education and civil liberties. It offered a great books/liberal arts curriculum within a self-governing community of 119 students (male only) and a dozen faculty. Organized around year-long integrated studies, for one year all its courses focused on Periclean Athens, for another on Victorian England. After graduating from Wisconsin, he worked first in a garment factory, then as a caseworker for a depression relief agency; later he got a social-work degree through night classes. He was also active in Chicago’s leftist politics, a lively cauldron of social and political ideas influenced by Marxism. This experience did as much as the university to turn him into an intellectual, and that in turn influenced me. As a teenager I would often return home from the ballet studio around 8 or 9 PM and would sit with him, drinking tea, and listening to him talk about books he was reading.

My mother was quite possibly brilliant but not much of a reader. She immigrated from Mogilev in Belarus to Chicago as a baby with her mother and five brothers (her father had come earlier to earn money to bring his family). All the brothers went to college but not the only girl. After high school she got a job in the children’s section of the Chicago Public Library, reading to children. This began a career as a child care worker. After many years of working in child care, she founded and directed a day care program in Portland’s Jewish Community Center, where my father worked, and then worked for the child care unit of Lyndon B. Johnson’s “War on Poverty” until she was invalidated by multiple sclerosis.

I was a bookish child and probably would have been a bookish teenager had it not been for my immersion in ballet. Before college I was devoting all my spare time to dance classes. I was not much of a writer either—never kept a diary nor tried to write stories. Luckily standards at Portland’s Cleveland High were very low in those days, and in my first year of college I nearly flunked out. I was entirely unprepared for the workload and high expectations at Swarthmore and was placed on probation after my first semester. It took me a while to grasp how hard one had to study there and to learn how to study hard. Luckily I figured it out.

I learned to write at Swarthmore. I entered the honors program in my junior year, which required two intensive seminars each semester. Writing a short paper for each of them every week, I learned not only to write clearly but also how to organize and integrate material from the week’s reading assignments. We typed our papers onto “ditto” stencils or carbon papers so as to distribute them to the professor and the other seminar members before we met. (Since then I have used this system, or at least the weekly papers, in all my graduate or upper level classes.) Seminar discussions were intense and the system seems, in retrospect, to have encouraged our cockiness. We nineteen- and twenty-year-olds felt entitled to explicate, criticize, or expand on the work of major historians. Still, this intellectual hothouse probably gave many of us the confidence to do original work later. This honors program has remained ever since my model of an ideal teaching and learning system.

Which historians do you most admire as writers and stylists, and why?

I had intended to major in English at Swarthmore. Two things changed that: first, in an English course on romanticism, I wrote a paper on ballet that was a bust and earned me a C; then I encountered a mesmerizing instructor, the French historian Paul Beik. At Cleveland High the teacher of my one required history course—he was also the baseball coach—had us spend most of the semester taking turns reading the textbook aloud. Beik lectured about political and social ideas, conflicts, and contradictions in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. I drank it in, actually developing *opinions* about Danton, Marat, Robespierre, about Jacobins and Girondins, and about the interpretations of the historians François Victor Alphonse Aulard, Albert Mathiez, and Georges Lefebvre. The single book that influenced me most was Isaac Deutscher’s *Stalin*, a scathing critique by a Trotskyist leaning historian. It sent me toward Russian history.

Compared to Swarthmore, graduate work at Yale was a disappointment. I certainly felt no intellectual thrill. There were exceptions. Hajo Holborn, a distinguished German historian; his *The Political Collapse of Europe* was a major revelation and led me to a prelim field in twentieth-century European diplomatic history. The other was the great René Wellek, whose course on Dostoevsky was absolutely brilliant; he was a challenging instructor, but in my memory it was not Wellek’s literary theory but his guidance in revealing the complex Dostoevskyan imagination and ethics that influenced me. It is even possible that my most pleasurable reading was in nineteenth-century European novels, especially the Russian.

At first I wasn’t admitted to Yale’s history department. Without asking me, the graduate admissions committee shunted my application to the Russian area studies MA program. Only later did I realize that sexism may have played a role in this. When I was accepted into history after one year, there was only one other woman graduate student in my cohort. I would no doubt have found grad school more stimulating had I been one of the male students who were favored with invitations to dinners with professors and visiting lecturers.

When I turned to women’s history later, a small field of virtually forgotten books provided sustenance. My favorite was Alice Clark’s 1919 *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*. I

found it in the Harvard library stacks. (I had a friend who registered me as a research assistant so that I could use this library; the experience convinced me that all libraries should be open to all who have need for them, because they contain part of a cultural heritage that belongs to everyone.) In those days you could see from the check-out record stuck onto the inside back cover that no one had checked out this book since the 1930s—an indication of how a small flowering of women's history in the early twentieth century had been forgotten, even erased from historiographical memory. Clark's book is simply brilliant and became for me a model of how to do history, and how to think about women's subordination: always by embedding women's conditions, and gender structures, in the political economy and culture of the time.

You have described loving “the detective quality of research” and the “pleasures of search and discovery.” When you begin a project, how do you tackle the research? When do you know when you’ve done enough?

I do love research. I've been told that historians often love reading murder mysteries, which offer much the same path. Sometimes I go into an archive or an interview looking for something specific, but often I rummage around without a specific goal. Doing that is hugely important to historians, I think, because accidental discoveries can lead to new questions and insights. There's a bigger thrill in finding something unexpected than in confirming one's hypotheses.

How do you know how much research is enough? From reading hundreds of the family violence case records, I learned a good marker: it's enough when there are no more surprises, when every new piece of evidence confirms what you have already concluded. But there are exceptions, because sometimes continued research will bring up vivid examples or wonderful phrases that can enrich the writing. It helps to keep in mind that no piece of historical work is definitive. There is always more evidence that could turn up that might require reinterpretation.

How do you keep track of all that research? Do you have a system for organizing your notes and files?

I am not good at keeping track of the materials I collect. By nature I am not neat, and I begrudge the time needed to organize material. In every workspace I have large piles of to-be-filed material that don't get filed. (I have one rationalization for this: I find that if you procrastinate long enough you end up realizing that you don't need all the material and can toss out a lot of it.) In the end my impatience is inefficient and writing takes me longer than it should. I've never used any of the formal systems of organizing—neither cards nor computer apps. All my notes and photocopies are on 8 1/2×11 paper, typed whenever possible, and filed in filing cabinets. Newer material is on my hard drive. My filing categories are often too general, so I waste time in searching for pieces that I remember. (“I know I read that somewhere ... but where?”) Luckily for me, computers can search for words or phrases.

As I've aged I've had to realize that my memory has gotten worse, so these days I try to take more detailed notes, or scan more material, than I had done previously.

Do you outline before you write?

I often make outlines only *after* I've written sections of an article, lecture, or chapter. But mainly I have evolved a different way of proceeding, which I call building a pyramid of ideas. First, I read through all my notes and create a list of findings, especially the generalizations, that have emerged in the research. What's important is that I write these down in no order whatsoever—that's basic to this method. I don't try to organize them yet, because I have found that doing so

blocks the flow of ideas. This beginning list may be many pages long, and sometimes includes a few sentences or even a paragraph spelling out larger generalizations. This list then constitutes the wide base of a pyramid. It may also include brief reminders to my forgetful self of where the evidence for these statements can be found. Second, I read through that list and identify the more important points I would like to make, and this second list then forms the slightly less wide next tier of the pyramid. I repeat this operation—going over lists, reducing them, distilling key points, generalizations, arguments. If all goes well, I eventually arrive at the peak of the pyramid, which should thereby consist of the overarching arguments of what I'm writing. At some stage in this process, of course, I begin to form a general outline, which I find much easier to do once I've identified key points and arguments.

All this was far more burdensome before computers. Now reorganizing is a cinch. Then I had to retype or, literally, cut and paste if I reordered a manuscript.

Do you share your drafts with anyone? What is your revision process?

I use a thesaurus constantly and often work over a single sentence many times. Unless I'm in a hurry, I ask others—typically other scholars—to read and criticize my drafts. But I'm lucky enough to live with someone who is an extremely rigorous and demanding reader, and to work with great editors.

I wish one could get more critique from presenting papers at conferences, but in the big ones, such as the AHA or OAH, interaction with an audience is usually quite limited, and commentators are usually too polite to be challenging. I prefer small conferences, where everyone can sit around a table and discuss actively. Possibly the best such event I've ever attended was an international small conference for graduate students from the United States and the Netherlands, organized by Tom Bender. Each student sent a paper in advance, and the whole group—about twenty graduate students and five faculty members—spent one to one and a half hours discussing each paper.

What do you do when you get stuck?

When I'm stuck I quit. Stepping away from a project for a few days or a week often does wonders. Or I quit trying to write that section and move on to others. But I also have two alternatives. Sometimes I force myself to put something down on paper, no matter how crude, because I can always revise or just start over! Or I get a glass of wine, which sometimes encourages a flow of sentences that had seemed locked up.

You've written about such a wide variety of people and scenarios. How do you come to your subjects? Do you think there are themes or threads that run through your body of work? How, if at all, has changing your subject required you to change how you write history?

My book topics fall into two periods (not counting my dissertation book). First I did three books on the history and politics of prominent social issues, each one in response to contemporary developments and debates swirling around me. I wrote about birth control, because the states were beginning to repeal their prohibitions on abortion and because I discovered that there were no histories of birth-control politics. I turned to family violence because the women's movement was campaigning against "wife beating," as it was then called, and constructing battered women's shelters. Once again, no historical scholarship on the topic. I turned to welfare and single mothers, the topic of my third book, when those issues became the subject of political conflict. That topic derived directly from the family violence book, because I had

learned from my work with case records that the most helpful development for abused women was neither social work nor prosecution of offenders, but the passage of Aid to Dependent Children as part of the Social Security Act of 1935. Without some way of supporting their children, women would not leave even the most abusive partners.

In the 1990s I grew restless and discontented with approaching these social policy histories at the national level. As a westerner, I wanted to write about the west, in part because its population was racially more complex than that in the east. And I decided I wanted to try my hand at a narrative. Before I decided to write about the Arizona orphan story, I considered several others that touched on my interests—a Hollywood crime, a dramatic episode in my hometown, Portland. But a brief search for sources on these came up dry. The Arizona story became a tune that I could not get out of my head. I began to see that it opened into the themes I was interested in—today it would be called a perfect illustration of intersectionality.

It was a difficult book to write, but I liked the challenge, so after that I did not want to return to my previous kind of work. I wanted another story, and then it occurred to me that a biography was a narrative, one with a narrative arc. When a friend suggested Dorothea Lange, I looked at a previous biography and it showed me two things: that I could do something much different and that her life passed through many major aspects of the twentieth century. So I was hooked.

There are continuous themes in my work, I think, and I associate them with Alice Clark, whose book I mentioned previously. In the abstract, the themes are the structures of gender, race, and class, that hackneyed triad. But changing the subject did, as you ask, change how I write. I became focused on how these large-scale structures affected people's personal lives. I wanted to look at the intersection of macroscopic and microscopic developments.

How have editors, agents, and others from the publishing world influenced your writing?

When I was near to completing my birth-control book, I was completely ignorant about how to get a publisher. This is because I never had a graduate-school mentor. My adviser treated me with benign neglect. Luckily, a women's historian that I much admired, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, referred me to her agent, Charlotte Sheedy. Charlotte agreed to take me on, because she welcomed the development of women's history. She became not only my life-long agent and a beloved friend. She's also a discerning reader of my work.

Later in my career I was able to work with two extraordinary editors, Joyce Seltzer and Bob Weil. They are extremely rare these days, editors who not only acquire but also edited books. By this I don't mean occasional suggestions for rewording or cutting. Instead they grasp the overall shape of a manuscript and help reshape it to make it stronger—editors who see the arguments in a manuscript and help you clarify them. They made me a better writer. I am somewhat fearful that the increasing economic pressures on publishers—such as the low prices negotiated by Amazon, the big publishing bully—is making superb editors like Seltzer and Weil harder to find.

Your work is remarkable for the manner in which it often balances rich biography with trenchant analysis. What strategies do you use to shift so adeptly between the messy realities of individual experiences and the broader historical meanings these individual lives can reveal?

I haven't found it difficult to situate an individual in history—and that is what I understand as analysis—than to do that with an episode, or a social movement, or a piece of legislation.

I've loved doing biography, and in addition to the book about Dorothea Lange I've now written another one, a brief biography of the photographer Inge Morath. (It will be published in 2018.) Regarding Lange, I had to interview descendants, and I didn't quite know how to go about it. Luckily, remarkably, every one of her children and grandchildren proved generous and judicious in helping me understand her, and never tried to constrain my interpretation. Lange was a visual genius, but she could also be personally difficult, so that my interviewees' ability to see her as a whole, flawed person helped me integrate her contradictions and improved my book.

Besides, biographical facts do not "speak for themselves" any more than political facts do. As Joan Scott has pointed out, there is no objective human experience; all experience is interpreted by everyone touched by it. History writing is always an interpretation. Even historians who try not to be opinionated express their interpretations through the topics they choose and the evidence they choose to present. I suppose my style is to write rather explicitly about my interpretations and to assume that readers may disagree.

As to my strategies in making these analyses, they have to vary with the content. In *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction*, I had originally intended to tell the story in an uninterrupted chronological order. But as the amount of context I needed in order to situate the events grew, that became impossible, hence the unusual structure of that book. In writing about Lange, by contrast, much of the context was better known—bohemianism, the 1930s depression, the Japanese internment—so I could manage with fewer digressions from the main story, her life.

Your work has managed to break new ground for academic historians, while reaching general readers, too. How has your desire to straddle these audiences shaped your writing?

My desire to reach general readers has never been fulfilled, unless you count college students among them. My sentences may be too long. More important, I am drawn to complexity and nuance rather than to simpler ideas. But one aspect of the history profession in which I have taken pride is that we don't use much jargon. I will grant that jargon is sometimes necessary, as a form of shorthand, but my test is: no jargon if it is possible to say precisely the same thing, with all its connotations, in the vernacular.

Would you change anything about the books you've already written if you rewrote them now?

OMG would I ever rewrite some of my earlier work. In some areas new scholarship reveals the inadequacies of what I'd written. For example, my birth-control book was often based on what birth-control advocates hoped or planned to do, as opposed to what they did. New studies, including scholarship about local clinics, raise doubts about some of the generalizations I made. There are also, no doubt, analytic aspects of my earlier work that I would now find too simple. For example, when I wrote my birth-control book I probably thought of gender as a binary, male-female. Feminist theoretical scholarship has challenged that effectively. I was probably less sympathetic to the compromises that birth-control campaigners made—such as their alliance with physicians—than I would be today. If I were to read my earlier work now I would almost certainly find clumsy writing; too much optimism about bottom-up social movements; too little interest in conservatism; a blind spot regarding religion as a factor in American history; too much confidence that the New Left, especially the civil rights and women's movements, had made lasting, even permanent changes. Since that loss of confidence about my interpretation of the *past* obviously reflects *current* political tendencies that I find

alarming, it is a reminder that all histories are influenced by the context of their writers.

These considerations, and the way I write, also explain why I don't like to read my own earlier work and haven't done so. If I did I know that I would want to revise and would be frustrated that I couldn't make changes.

How do you teach students—particularly graduate students and majors—to write?

I don't really know how to teach people to write. In fact, I probably do the wrong things—e.g., heavily editing papers in the hopes that the writers will learn from this editing; e.g., pointing out clichés and imprecise words. I am often frustrated when I can't get students to see how to *develop* ideas, to turn them around and look at them from different perspectives, to take risks, to accept contradictions and tensions without trying to resolve them neatly. I wish I knew better ways to teach those skills. The methods that I find most useful include urging students to use informal, vernacular language; asking students to comment on other students' papers; insisting that they write a lot; asking them to tell me out loud their key findings and arguments (because I often find that students are looser and more direct in speaking than in writing). The last may be the most important, because one-to-one discussions—of findings, arguments, analyses—often produce the kind of expansive thinking that underlies good writing. Still, I've concluded from my many years of teaching that some people have a greater gift for writing than others—a feel for the structure of grammar, and for finding the words and phrases that say precisely what they mean. I don't know how to teach that. I have evolved a system—the pyramid I mentioned before—for helping students organize material for large projects, such as research papers, theses, and dissertations. But I am quite aware that everyone may have unique ways of approaching writing, and I can't expect everyone to do it my way.

Do you ever consider giving up historical writing for other kinds of work or interests? If so, what keeps drawing you back?

Ah, dreams of a different career. When I was younger I often fantasized about developing a new kind of work after retirement, and these fantasies often involved radically different work. I longed to breed dogs. I imagined studying infant cognitive development. Sometimes I still imagine teaching movement and dance to very young kids. More often these days I often wish that I did work of greater immediate impact, perhaps as a women's-rights lawyer.

But mostly I'm content to be an historian. Nothing makes me happier and calmer than being in an archive, or sorting through research material. I particularly love the surprises, the findings that undercut my assumptions. I got the chance to do this work because of the luck of when I was born. The Cold War produced the funding for my education: a National Merit Scholarship for college, a travel grant from a Cold War/CIA front agency for my first trip to the USSR, and a National Defense Education Act fellowship for my dissertation work. I became an historian when there were plenty of jobs. I arrived in an assistant professor job just as the profession opened to new fields, primarily due to the pioneering historians of African Americans motivated by the civil rights movement. Just as I became an academic, the women's liberation movement offered me new topics. And my generation of historians of women and gender provided me with intellectual stimulation and challenges as well as encouragement. Above all, I have been privileged to earn a living through doing what I love to do—a privilege that I wish more people could share.