

Writing in the Rainforest

Lesson Two

John McPhee's Writing Process

In his book *Slow Productivity*, Cal Newport uses John McPhee, author, nature writer, professor, and master of long-form journalism, as an example. Newport has many great things to say about McPhee's writing process.

McPhee began composing creative nonfiction long before it was a *thing*. He's ninety-three years old now and has taught journalism at Princeton University since 1975. Due to severe glaucoma, he no longer teaches but is still a faculty member and continues to write books. His latest, *Tabula Rasa: Volume 1*, was released in July 2023, and he calls it a "reminiscent montage."

I love reading about writers' processes because there is always so much we can apply to our own. McPhee's involved method reminded me of how I wrote *Eating an Elephant* and the value of topic/scene cards in completing all projects. I share this with you in case some of it helps you as well. If nothing else, I'm sure you'll get a kick out of McPhee calling his personal computer a "five-thousand-dollar pair of scissors."

Excerpt from *Slow Productivity*, pages 213-214, ©2024 Calvin C. Newport

CONCLUSION

I opened this book with the story of a young John McPhee lying on a picnic table in his backyard, looking up at an ash tree, trying to make sense of a complicated article he was struggling to write. As McPhee's career advanced, he evolved, through trial and error, a more involved and repeatable process for producing his distinctive style of long-form journalism. As he explained in *Draft No. 4*, he would begin by copying all of his observations from his notebooks, and transcribing all of his tape-recorded interviews, onto fresh pages, pounded out on an Underwood 5 manual typewriter. "The note-typing could take many weeks," he explains, "but it collected everything in one legible place, and it ran all the raw material in some concentration through the mind."

Once he completed this step, McPhee would be confronted with a stack of neatly typed pages, many containing multiple unrelated scraps of thoughts or observations, separated by a few lines of white space. To make sense of this collection, he would code each section with a short description in the margin, indicating the relevant story component it covered. A standard long-form article might include notes on around thirty different components.

Encounters with the Archdruid, McPhee's epic two-part profile of the environmentalist David Brower, required thirty-six.

McPhee would photocopy these pages, and then use a pair of scissors to cut out each self-contained chunk of notes into its own "sliver" of paper. (When McPhee eventually bought a personal computer in the 1980s and began using an electronic system to organize his notes, he referred to the machine as a "five-thousand-dollar pair of scissors.") Each sliver was placed in a plain manila folder that corresponded to its story component. The result was a stack of folders, each dedicated to a single subject, filled with scraps of paper that collectively contained every relevant fact, quote, or observation.

Next, McPhee would label a three-by-five index card for each of these story components, and spread them on a sheet of plywood propped up between two sawhorses—"an essential part of my office furniture in those years"—so he could physically move them around in search of a workable structure for his story. Sometimes the right conceptual architecture would come to him in just a few hours. Sometimes he had to let the board sit there for days, returning to it occasionally. There was no rushing this stage of the process: he couldn't write until the order of cards made sense.

Once McPhee was finally pleased with his structure, he could turn, at long last, to putting words on the page. When writing, he would deal with one story component at a time, tackling them in the order in which they were arranged on the plywood sheet. When writing about a specific component, he would remove all the relevant slivers of notes from the corresponding folder and lay them out ladderlike on a card table set up next to his Underwood 5. "The procedure eliminated nearly all distraction and concentrated just the material I had to deal with in a given day or week," McPhee explains. "It painted me into a corner, yes, but in doing so it freed me to write."