

# What it is to write

Remarks at the [first Canadian Jewish News Prize for Young Writers awards ceremony](#) at York University, Feb. 10, 2015, delivered by Sara Horowitz, professor of literature at the Israel and Golda Koschitzky Centre for Jewish Studies.

**M**any writers have referred to the act of writing literature as a “pleasant agony.” Pleasant – because writers deeply want to write. Agony – because they struggle with language, against, language, and beyond language. Sometimes nothing comes, or what comes seems clunky, or off the mark, or not what you mean to say at all. And sometimes when you write, you are “in the zone,” where words and images and patterns flow from someplace deep in the self.

Elie Wiesel, acknowledging this, once explained: “It’s a pleasant agony. I am myself only when I write.”

For real writers, writing is an act of discovery. It’s not simply a matter of thinking something, and looking for the best way to communicate it. You learn what you think, what you feel, what you hope, what you fear, what you desire, through the act of making stories, images, poems. Cynthia Ozick once explained how she sees the difference between writing essays and writing fiction. She said, “In an essay you have the outcome in your pocket before you set out on your journey, and very rarely do you make an intellectual or psychological discovery. But when you write fiction you don’t know where you are going – sometimes down to the last paragraph – and that is the pleasure of it.” In other words, when she knows her position on an issue, she argues it forcefully in an essay. When things are less clear – or, to put it differently, when she wants to deal with messy issues, messy the way that lived life is messy – that’s when she writes fiction.

Other writers would disagree – or agree only partly. For some writers, writing non-fiction, too, is an act of discovery. You think you know your argument when you begin, but as you craft it, and take full account of your material, your argument develops a mind of its own, a personality of its own – reshaping and refining itself in the act of writing.

Writing is risky business. Not only because it is unpredictable, but because it involves exposure, to others, of things that come from inside your mind, your heart, your imagination. A writer bushwhacks a path into uncharted territory, and sometimes ends up in unanticipated places. And then the writer retraces that journey with others. Singers will tell you that unlike musicians, who play an instrument that is external to them, for singers, the instrument is one’s own self. Similarly for writers, no matter what the topic, the writing is also the self.

Second, let’s ask: What is Jewish writing? What does it do, and why is it important?

Jewish writing tells us stories about ourselves, and tells our stories to others. Like any good writing, it holds up a mirror to a community, and asks that we

recognize in it parts of ourselves that we might not ordinarily notice or focus on. Jewish writing maps the individual story onto the Jewish continuum, onto what we in universities would call a “metanarrative” – a big, overarching story. Jewish writing has the ability to provoke us, to challenge us, to instruct us, to persuade us, to comfort us. It offers us prisms through which to interpret the world around us, and to consider our place in that world.

And because Canadian Jewish writing is not only particular, but also engages with important global and universal issues, it participates in a broader Canadian conversation about all the important human questions: about society, politics, meaning, and other things that direct and shape our shared lives in this great country and this planet.