
S KILLS OF DISCOVERY

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If you think about what distinguishes the great physicians from the merely competent and ordinary, it is the ability to listen astutely and think creatively. These great doctors pay very close attention to what the patient says and does; they examine the patient carefully. These doctors think broadly, and are comfortable challenging accepted wisdom. These are skills that we can gain from the humanities in general and writing in particular.

Writing is a much slower process than the practice of medicine. So often, the daily work of medicine is rapid-fire, with hardly any time to think and reflect. This is a set up for medical error, as well as burnout and disillusionment. Writing, and especially revising—I happen to love revising!—forces us to revisit the situation, to go back several times and rethink our approach. It teaches us that our first thoughts may not necessarily be correct. Writing affords a luxury of discussion not measured in time or feeling. In our typical day, we work fast, we talk fast, we eat fast, we walk fast—often all at the same time. Writing is an almost sacred experience because when you think “on the page,” you are forced to slow down and engage in discovery.

I am not sure if writing makes me a better physician, but experience with writing and humanities makes me realize that there is always more to consider about a given situation. Most of the medical facts we learn now will become quickly out of date. (Thank goodness for computerized databases like UpToDate!) But the ability to think across disciplines, the ability to listen wisely, the ability to tolerate ambiguity, the ability to question and revise our first drafts – these are skills that stay with us for life.