

Sit
Write
Share

Learn to Stop Worrying and Love to Write

Kathryn Britton

“It is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something.”

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Oglethorpe University address, May 22, 1932

Sit, Write, Share

What is this book about?

Many people want to have written a book, blog, or article, but find writing itself unpleasant and discouraging. This book is a collection of ways to move from “I hate writing but I have to do it,” to “I find writing absorbing and satisfying.” Like playing a sport, riding a bicycle, or driving a car, nobody is born knowing how to write. All of these skills improve with deliberate practice and paying attention. With growing skill often comes heightened enjoyment.

Most of us can remember driving around a parking lot in the early morning hours to learn how to steer a car. After hours of practice, steering became muscle memory. Learning to write can also benefit from deliberate practice. By deliberate, I mean practice that leads to experiences of gradual improvement rather than continually recreating writers’ block and the harsh self-judgment that makes writing so unpleasant.

I learned this myself, almost by accident. I hated writing in school. Then I had a high school senior English teacher who insisted that we write two pieces a week, one in class and one as homework. She returned every piece within a day or two, often with sharp comments. But she also said “Whee!” just often enough that I really wanted to please her. With her help, I placed out of freshman English in college, but I still had to write papers, and I still found them difficult. I remember sitting in the graduate library suffering over a 5-page paper that just wouldn’t come out. In those days, I preferred cleaning toilets to writing papers. But many years of practice later, I suddenly realized that I had learned not just to get the writing done, but also to enjoy the process. When I’m writing something now, I feel like a child playing with clay. Who knows what shapes will emerge as I push with my thumbs into this plastic medium?

Everybody is different. You might find that rising early in the morning to write is just

what you need to do, but that would never work for me. I am an inveterate night owl. Therefore, I recommend that you enter the space of deliberate writing practice with an experimental mindset, open to trying different approaches in search of the ones that are most productive for you. To aid your search, this book describes a set of experiments for shaping practice. Each experiment might help you write productively. Each experiment has worked for at least some of the writers I've known, but none of them work for all writers.

Perhaps you could dip into the book to find one, two, or three experiments to try initially. Give them a good whirl, perhaps for a few weeks. Then assess how they are working. If they are making writing more enjoyable and productive, celebrate. Maybe add another experiment. Drop any that seem burdensome. By selecting your own experiments, you can move toward a writing practice that fits you.

Who is this book for?

Do you need to write to build your business or establish your expertise, but you'd rather do almost anything else?

Do you feel that you have a message to convey that could benefit a much wider circle than the people you meet personally or professionally?

Do you feel that you have been professionally typecast, and you'd like to show people that you have broader expertise?

Does the idea of writing fill you with dread?

Do you keep promising yourself to write, but never quite get around to it?

Do you find writing extremely time-consuming because you erase most of the words that emerge?

If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, perhaps this book can help.

Let me invite you to write without worrying about whether or not you are a writer. You make up new sentences out loud all day long without worrying about whether you are a speaker. Writing is a similar skill that you use daily when you produce emails or texts or grocery lists. Speaking eloquently is a wonderful skill to develop. The quest addressed by this book is the ability to write eloquently.

Who am I to write this book?

After earning an English major in college, I became a computer scientist and found to my amazement that I spent more time writing English prose than code. My products included specifications, design documents, proposals, and persuasive memos supporting various technical decisions. I became an IBM Master Inventor and helped many people write their first patent applications. It made me laugh that some of my colleagues had gotten into computer science primarily to avoid writing papers in college. Even a status update email to the boss needs writing skills. Now I shudder when I hear people say, “I’m just not any good at writing.” Nobody was born writing well. Most of us have had to work at it.

In 2006, I went back to school to get a Masters of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) degree at Penn. My studies helped me understand the ways people learn most effectively as well as the ingredients of creativity, persistence, and effective communication.

Over the last 14 years, I’ve racked up a lot experience writing and working with writers:

I edited more than 1500 articles submitted to Positive Psychology News (PPND), an online news source about positive psychology research and practice. I published more than 100 articles myself in PPND, Forbes, the Anita Borg Foundation, and other online publications.

I’ve edited several books and co-authored two books and two chapters. I added two journal papers about positive psychology to the papers I wrote as a computer scientist. One of

my computer science papers published in 1979 is still getting cited. I remember that when people express fear that their work won't be around long enough to justify the effort.

I have coached writing clients working on books, dissertations, blogs, academic papers, and articles for online magazines.

Finally, in the last seven years, I have facilitated more than 1000 writers' workshop sessions with more than 100 authors. In the process, I have participated in reviews of more than 2500 pieces of writing ranging from short poems to book chapters.

I've seen many ways that people get in their own way. But I have also seen a lot of writing come to be. This book is my chance to share what I've learned in the process.

How is the book organized? Sit. Write. Share.

One of my writing clients, Brian Branagan, gave me permission to tell this story. He just wasn't getting words onto the page. In a tone of slight exasperation, I said to him, "Just sit, write, share." Perhaps I was remembering writing papers in college when the only way I could get the first draft done was to make myself sit at a desk whether the words came or not. As Brian and I worked together on various ways to loosen up his voice, he suggested that I turn his new mantra into a book. He inspired more than one of the experiments.

At first, the words seemed like a catchy placeholder for a title meaning roughly, "Plant your butt in a chair until you get the job done, and then let me see it." But their meaning evolved, as lots of good writing evolves. I shared an early draft of two experiments with a writers' workshop. Participants were enchanted by the working title of the book and saw a much deeper meaning than my initial interpretation. With their help, I could see that each word represented a separate theme and that I could use the three themes to categorize the experiments.

Sit: Many people use Sit as shorthand for meditation and other mindfulness practices. Writing has a lot in common with mindfulness meditation. People experience the same restlessness, inability to focus, and conviction that they are doing it all wrong that afflict many meditators. Some of the same approaches that people use to build a meditation practice also work with building a writing practice. Most of the experiments in the Sit section address awareness and acceptance as well as setting up actions that signal to your mind and body that it's time to write and to let go of the nagging belief that you aren't any good at it.

Write: Many of these experiments involve ways to unlock, structure, and play with ideas and then turn ideas into words. Others are reminders that the first draft doesn't have to be either long or perfect. Writing is a multi-pass endeavor. A first draft is a major step forward, but not the end of the process. Then comes editing. Writing a first draft benefits from playfulness and tolerance of gaps. Editing benefits from attention to detail. These experiments help you have the right frame of mind for type of writing you need to do next.

Share: Most writing has a social purpose to convey ideas to other people. Even your personal journal conveys ideas to your future self. Yet, writing can seem like a very solitary activity. This category includes experiments that help you involve others in the writing process. Sharing drafts in a writers' workshop is one example. Other experiments help you write to a targeted audience, picturing the people you want to reach and how you want your words to change them. Still others help you set up accountability. People generally keep promises made to others more effectively than ones made to themselves.

When I workshopped the Sit-Write-Share organization as described above, one of the readers confessed that she finds meditation quite difficult. She did not find the comparison between writing and meditating helpful. If you feel the same way, just interpret **Sit** as keeping your butt in the chair. But if you have some ease with at least the ideas of meditation, perhaps the comparison will help you notice and allow the distractions without judging yourself harshly. Then you can bring your attention back to the work of capturing your words for others to see.

Sit Introduction

- Sit Experiment 1: Recall your successes.
- Sit Experiment 2: Set an intention.
- Sit Experiment 3: Face the “I’ll never be a writer” gremlin.
- Sit Experiment 4: Face the “Who cares what I say?” gremlin.
- Sit Experiment 5: Start a session with a reset ritual.
- Sit Experiment 6: Build habits.
- Sit Experiment 7: Use WOOP + Anchoring.
- Sit Experiment 8: Cultivate inspiration.
- Sit Experiment 9: Welcome constraints.
- Sit Experiment 10: Try procrastination aikido.

Write Introduction

- Imagine Experiment 1: Decide What Belongs
 - Imagine Experiment 2: Play with Ideas.
 - Imagine Experiment 3: Break Into Manageable Chunks
 - Imagine Experiment 4: Prime Intuition
 - Imagine Experiment 5: Collect story seeds.
 - Imagine Experiment 6: Mine stories for concepts.
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- Draft Experiment 1: Draft without Editing
 - Draft Experiment 2: Just Do It.
 - Draft Experiment 3: Write Daily and Keep Records
 - Draft Experiment 4: Write About Not Writing.
 - Draft Experiment 5: Work Out Structure of Repeating Units.
 - Draft Experiment 6: Capture Fleeting Moments.
 - Draft Experiment 7: Try Speech-to-Text
 - Draft Experiment 8: Plan the Next Session
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- Edit Experiment 1: Edit in Phases.
 - Edit Experiment 2: Edit Content
 - Edit Experiment 3: Keep a Parking Lot of Unused Ideas.
 - Edit Experiment 4: Edit Structure and Order
 - Edit Experiment 5: Edit Paragraphs and Sentences
 - Edit Experiment 6: Edit Words and Punctuation
 - Edit Experiment 7: Go Easy on Quotations.
 - Edit Experiment 8: Handle References Deftly

Share Introduction:

- Share Experiment 1: Picture your audience.
- Share Experiment 2: Write for your future self
- Share Experiment 3: Read your writing aloud.
- Share Experiment 4: Look at your own writing as if someone else had written it.
- Share Experiment 5: Check for cultural insensitivity
- Share Experiment 6: Try co-working.
- Share Experiment 7: Try co-authoring.
- Share Experiment 8: Join a writers’ workshop.
- Share Experiment 9: Explain your book (W Questions)
- Share Experiment 10: Explore publication options
- Share Experiment 11: Gain Endorsements

Experiment Structure

As you'll see in one of the Write experiments (#12), some books benefit from the author creating and sticking to a particular structure for each unit. It helps readers know what to expect and allows them to focus on the particular points rather than on navigating through them. It also helps readers find their ways back to information that they want to use later. Here's the repeatable structure I decided to use in each experiment.

Story. A demonstration of someone using the idea in a particular context. Stories make ideas sticky. I gave myself some leeway. Sometimes the story is in two parts with the first part setting up the problem and the second part showing the experiment in action right before the end. Sometimes the story is about the way I came up with the experiment.

Observation: Reflection on why this particular experiment works for some people. This section may include references to other resources where you can go to learn more.

Steps: A particular sequence of actions to conduct the experiment.

Moral: Many Aesop's Fables end with a statement such as, "We must make friends in prosperity if we would have their help in adversity." I thought a one-liner would be a cool way to end each experiment.

Who's in the Stories?

The stories are composites of real situations that I've observed and figments of my imagination. With imagination, it's possible to highlight the relevant points that may not have been obvious at the time. Because they are composites of real and imaginary, I did not want to use the names of real writers that I know except in a few cases when I asked permission. But it is hard to relate to a character named Person X. As I was mulling over that difficulty, I

remembered hearing as a child about a family with five members, John, Jane, Jan, Jack, and Judy. Many years later, these names are still in my mind, perhaps because of the musicality of the sequence. I decided to name my characters using names that start with J. If you go by any of these names, believe me that I'm not calling you out in particular.

Conclusion

Acknowledgements

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George Saunders

Introduction to Sit Experiments

How is a writing practice like a meditation practice? Let me tell you in the words of Brian Branagan, the man who urged me to write this book:

Insert 1: Brian Branagan's Essay, Writing and the Five Hindrances

I shared with Rob, my friend and meditation teacher, an essay in which I described the Itty-Bitty Committee in my mind that sounds alarms when I try to write.

“Oh, those are the Five Hindrances,” he said matter-of-factly.

“What are the Five Hindrances?” I asked Rob, wondering how he got into my head.

“The Five Hindrances are the mental habits that get in the way of making progress in our meditation practice. They are Restlessness, Sleepiness, Desire, Aversion, and Doubt.”

“Yep,” I replied. “That’s my Itty-Bitty Committee! How do I get rid of them? I can’t write when they are chattering in my head.”

“Well, Brian, you don’t get rid of them. They are always with us but experienced meditators have learned how to continue in their practice and not be stopped by them.”

“How do they do that, Rob?”

“You already know how to do it, Brian. You were doing it during our meditation sessions. Do you remember the four ways to handle distracting thoughts?”

It all came back to me. “Sure. Notice, Allow, Ease, Release,” I replied. “I notice that it exists. I don’t try to make it go away because that only makes it stay in my attention longer. I gently return my focus back to my breath and then, as if by magic, the distraction goes away.”

“That’s right. You were doing them in the writing you shared with me, too,” Rob said.

All those years on the meditation cushion helped me write my essay. I noticed the Hindrances of Doubt and Restlessness. I allowed them by writing about them rather than fighting them. This produced an ease that allowed me to continue (or at least NOT get stopped) with my writing. Finally, I was able to release the essay to others for review.

As Brian points out, struggling to suppress the doubts that crowd our minds when we write gives them even more power over us. Instead, we can develop a light touch, acknowledging they are there and then gently moving past them.

The experiments in this part of the book revolve around managing our mental and emotional relationships to writing. Here are some of the actions people can do to help themselves put in enough time to build skills:

- Prime themselves for good writing by recalling earlier writing successes, setting intentions, and conducting rituals that help them shift into writing.
- Face those powerful internal voices that pull people down. They are there. But it is possible to keep them from drowning out the more creative voices.
- Build and sustain writing habits
- Learn how to welcome and honor constraints. Sometimes constraints enable creativity.
- Manage the motivation to keep writing.

I suggest selecting at least one experiment in the Sit section to gather the energy to practice, practice, practice.

Sit Experiment 1: Recall Writing Successes

Story:

Jane was blocked trying to write a blog post about something very important to her. She kept starting and then erasing what she'd written. It felt really hard to get just the right words.

What got her unstuck was remembering a time when writing came to her easily and was actually fun. She was biking the Lewis and Clark Trail from St Louis Missouri to Astoria Oregon. Every time she found a library with computer terminals, she'd stop and write up her recent experiences to send in an email to family and friends. Her audience was hungry for her stories about sleeping on the floor of a post office in Montana and braving the scary stretch going downhill from Lemhi Pass. She could tell from their responses that they were thrilled to travel vicariously along with her.

She spent some time mulling over what made it so much easier. First, she never had much time so she just wrote what came to mind and figured she could edit it later if she decided to collect her experiences. Second, she had her cloud of friends in mind, so she wrote as if she were telling them her story.

Back to her blog post. She tried writing with her Lewis and Clark audience in mind, writing from beginning to end without stopping to worry about getting it just right.

Observations

Coaches often use the Stop-Start-Continue framework with clients to help them think about what they want to accomplish and then figure out what they need to stop doing, start doing, and continue doing to get there. Senia Maymin, an executive coach, uses what she calls the ninja version of this framework. She rearranged the order to start with Continue. She asks her clients what they want to continue doing because it is already going well. She reasons that

starting with continue causes them to remember what has already worked for them, where they are already strong, and where they already have habits or practices that have worked at least once. This helps them realize that they aren't starting from scratch.

Steps:

1. Remember a time when you wrote something that made you proud, whether it was a short email, a letter, or a longer document. Then reflect on the following questions:
 - a. What helped you get your ideas out?
 - b. Did you have people who were sounding boards for your ideas?
 - c. Did you write early in the morning or late at night?
 - d. Did you create an outline or just start writing?
 - e. Did you cut and paste from things you'd already written?
 - f. Did you feel particularly passionate about the topic, or were you a little bit removed from it?
 - g. What else should I have asked to get you to crystalize your memory of already being a strong writer?
2. Find a way to remind yourself of that experience. Jane posted a picture of herself on her bike at the top of Lemhi Pass above her computer. You might collect comments from readers about what they liked about your writing. Or you might create a mantra that captures what you did that worked so well for you.

Moral: Focus on extending what already works before you worry about fixing problems.

Sit Experiment 2: Set an Intention

Story

Before starting his book, John stopped to reflect on why he was writing and what he wanted to accomplish. He had been a software executive in three different large corporations. Initially he had been surprised that the same conflicts and issues showed up in all three companies, even though one was a cutting-edge leader and the other two were more mainstream. Then he realized that all were staffed by human beings, with all the communication hurdles and complicated motivations that implies.

John felt he had learned a great deal about what worked and what did not. Now two of his children had started in high tech companies. He realized that he wanted to give them and young people like them a head start, rather than leaving them to learn the hard way by making the same mistakes he had made. He imagined them learning from his book how to manage creativity, break down silos, and juggle competing priorities so that they could move up with less pain and confusion than he had suffered. With the intention of helping his children, he was able to get started and keep going even when the writing got snarled.

Observation:

Imagining what you might achieve with your writing is one way to draw yourself to the work. What do you want to achieve? Who will use it? What difference will it make? Particularly if your purpose is to affect other people beneficially – to entertain or help them – spelling the purpose out can help you turn attention away from your own self-doubts and towards the impact you might have if you completed your work.

Sometimes setting an intention means wading through multiple possibilities. Do you want to contribute to the body of research on a particular subject? Do you want to make research

more accessible to people outside academia? Do you want to create a memoir that inspires people or helps them learn from your mistakes? Do multiple topics appeal to you? It's okay to have more than one project open at a time, but sometimes hopping from topic to topic like grasshoppers keeps people from achieving any single intention.

Steps.

1. Take a few moments to consider what you want to achieve by writing. Here's a starting list to select from, but your intention will be much more specific to you. Most of these correspond to the intentions of at least one client or writers' workshop participant.
 - a. You want to spin words that make the world a better place by helping people live more flourishing lives.
 - b. You have ideas for solving some of our most pressing global problems. You want to find allies and affect the decisions of people in power.
 - c. You want to help people avoid mistakes you've made or seen made by sharing what you've learned.
 - d. You want to make sense of your own difficult experiences by putting your story into words and then sharing it with others. Perhaps hearing about your struggles will help others face hard times with greater courage and resilience.
 - e. You believe you could be a good role model for other people who will face the same challenges that you've already overcome.
 - f. You want to create stories for children that will help them build skills or understand social issues such as global warming.
 - g. You want to write the book that you couldn't find when you went through a particular challenge.

- h. You want to connect with clients who would benefit from your services.
 - i. You want to write fiction that makes people sit up straighter and act more nobly.
2. If you've selected one of the above, adapt it to express your particular goals.
 3. Have some fun imagining what your product might look like and who might use it.
 4. Review your intention frequently, perhaps each time you sit down to write.

Moral: Setting an intention can help you step out of your own doubts.

Sit Experiment 3: Face the gremlin that says, “You’ll never be a writer”

Story:

I asked Jerry to tell me about the voice in his head that keeps him from writing. After a brief pause, Jerry said, “It’s the voice of Mrs. MacGregor, my 10th grade English teacher. I still remember her sniffing when she handed me back an assignment. She said, “You’ll never write for beans. This paper was vacuity of thought wedded to illiteracy of expression.” Whenever I start to write, I look at what comes out and think she was exactly right.”

With Mrs. MacGregor looking over his shoulder, Jerry judged every word so harshly that he tended to end a writing session feeling he had been in a fight. He’d also have very few words.

I invited him to respond differently when he heard her scratchy voice in his head. He could say to himself, “Maybe not then, but I’m getting better all the time. I have work to do. Please leave me alone.” I also suggested that he replace her words with the words of Anne Lamott, someone who knows a lot about writing:

“... shitty first drafts. All good writers write them. This is how they end up with good second drafts and terrific third drafts.”

Observation

Writing papers in high school and college didn’t really help us learn how to get writing done. In his book on writing for the social sciences, Howard S. Becker explains it this way: we were more or less coerced to write short essays on topics we knew little about and didn’t find very interesting for an audience of one reader who didn’t find them very interesting either and only read them because he or she was being paid.

Now we face writing that we really want to do. But we may still be stuck with the feelings and attitudes we picked up writing school papers. The antidote is to remember how things are different:

- We choose our own topics.
- We're much more expert on what we have to say.
- We can write and then revise, so the first draft doesn't HAVE to be very good.
- Our writing might be read by a lot of people, so we need to keep a broad audience in mind. These are people that we can benefit if we can share our expertise.

Steps

1. When you find yourself feeling stuck, listen for the critical voice in your head. Can you identify it? Do any memories come to the surface? Notice them without judgment.
2. Reflect on the various skills that you use almost without thinking. Possible examples include riding a bicycle, sewing a seam, using a smartphone, and driving a car. Which one can you remember most clearly what it was like not to know how to do it? Think about the specific actions that helped you gain expertise. Remember missteps as well as triumphs.
3. Create your own personal mantra to remember that you are on the way to better writing and that your output does not have to be perfect to move you forward. An example might be, "Celebrate shitty first drafts."

Moral: Nobody was born knowing how to write, but people can learn, particularly by letting themselves write shitty first drafts that can later be polished.

Sit Experiment 4: Face the gremlin that says “Who cares what you say?”

Story:

After years as a personal trainer and exercise group leader, Jacinta decided to write a book about getting in shape. She wanted to describe what she found worked best among her clients. She had helped many people overcome long-time aversion to exercise to build lasting fitness habits. She believed in incorporating elements of fun, humor, music, dance, and social connection. She also believed that no approach works for everybody, so she watched for things that lit her clients up.

Every time Jacinta sat down to write, she heard voices in her head saying things like, “There are already thousands of books out there on exercise. Why would the world need another?”

“Who are you to write this book? There are surely people out there with more education, more experience, more knowledge than you have.”

The voices all came down to, “Who cares what you have to say?” They were so loud in her head that she felt completely stifled.

Observation

Humility is generally a good thing. It keeps us from assuming the world revolves around us. It is worth considering two real and important question before investing heavily in writing.

Question 1: Do I have something to contribute, or will I just be diluting what is already there?

It is highly unlikely that anybody’s message will be completely unique. There are lots of people writing now, and there are more pathways to publication than ever before. But that doesn’t mean that Jacinta’s writing is a waste of time. The world needs important messages to be reinforced with different stories. Jacinta’s approach may resonate with people who’ve been

uninspired by other books about fitness. Her style, her whacky sense of humor, her specific experiences, and the sequence of exercises she creates may be just what many people need to get up and move.

Question 2: Do I have the skill and knowledge to add to what’s already written?

Before answering this question, consider the Dunning-Kruger effect, a cognitive bias about self-evaluation. One study illustrating the bias in action involved undergraduates completing a test of their knowledge of standard written English. After the test, they rated their own grammar ability and test performance. The ones scoring the lowest tended to *overestimate* both their perceived grammar ability and their test results by a lot. In contrast, those who scored highest tended to *underestimate* their ability and test score. We may need to talk to others to get past self-doubts that come from a human inability to estimate our own abilities accurately. [ref]

Steps

4. When you find yourself saying, “Who cares what I say?” acknowledge that it is a good question that is worth consideration. Whenever you invest time or money, it’s worth taking some time to evaluate potential outcomes. What difference can your writing make to you and to others? Here are a few options to prime the pump as you think this through:
 - a. Demonstrate your expertise, thus opening new opportunities
 - b. Reach people that are left unmoved by other publications
 - c. Adjust a conventional message for a specific audience. For example, Jacinta’s audience is primarily inner-city mothers that have neither time to attend gyms nor access to good places to be outside.
 - d. Soften hearts that are normally hardened toward a particular topic. Remember that people don’t respond to generalities the way they respond to individual stories.

5. Write a paragraph about what makes you the right person to write on this topic. What experiences, expertise, training, beliefs, or values make you worth listening to? If you are writing a book, this paragraph may become an About the Author section. In the meantime, write it on a card to pull out when you hear this question in your mind again.
6. Get feedback from other people. Perhaps try writing an article or a book chapter about your chosen topic in the style you intend to use. Then find a way to get opinions from people who represent your intended audience as closely as possible. Don't just ask your friends, though their input may also be helpful. Ask people who would be willing to tell you whether they'd buy your book or not, whether they'd recommend it to their friends or not.
7. As we'll discuss in the Writers' Workshop experiment (Share #7), be sure to ask people about what they like as well as what they don't. If you plan to alter your approach based on what you hear, collect information about what NOT to change as well as what to change.
8. If feedback tells you that you're on the right track, capture some of the comments in places that you can return to when that voice in your head next starts chattering.
9. Consider the words of Anne Lamott, ““If you are writing the clearest, truest words you can find and doing the best you can to understand and communicate, this will shine on paper like its own little lighthouse. Lighthouses don't go running all over an island looking for boats to save; they just stand there shining.” Lighthouses don't compare themselves to other lighthouses either.

Moral: Once you've decided that the world needs your writing, put the question aside and focus on shining from your particular island.

Sit Experiment 5: Start a Session with a Reset Ritual.

Story:

Janice sat down to write a blog post that she really wanted to get done this week. But her head was spinning full of details about the meeting she just had at work. Had she said the right thing? Had the people in the meeting understood her? Would they pay attention to the suggestions she made? Had she asked for enough feedback? Was there anybody there that would sabotage her idea?

Then came the grocery list. Had she remembered everything she needed for the cake she intended to bake for her husband's birthday? Then came the gift she had bought him. Would he like it?

Observation:

What often works here is to have a personal ritual for acknowledging all the thoughts spinning through our heads, asking them to step aside for the moment, and creating space for our brains to focus on the task at hand. Having a *reset ritual* like this can be helpful for any transition from one activity to another. For writing, an activity that we don't always enjoy when we first start, it can make a huge difference.

I go through certain steps to get my grandson ready for a nap. I put on his sleep sack, read him a certain story, and then rock him while singing certain songs. All of these actions are signals to him that it is time to let go and sleep. Perhaps you too have a ritual for letting go of the day when you're ready to sleep.

Similar series of actions can signal to our whole bodies that it's time to write, once we've practiced it enough times.

Steps:

1. Pick actions to perform to signal to your body and mind that it's time to write. Your ritual might have one step or several. Here are some potential ingredients for your ritual:
 - A physical stretch
 - A bathroom break in which comb your hair and brush your teeth
 - A walk to the breakroom to fill your coffee cup
 - Closing your door and switching off your phone
 - Sitting in a particular place with supplies at hand
 - Lighting a candle
 - Putting on background music
 - Closing all the windows on your computer except the one open for writing
2. Carry out your ritual every time you sit down to write. You are building up an association between your actions and your intention.
3. View your ritual formation with an air of experimentation. If after a few days, your ritual seems too time-consuming or clunky to continue, streamline. If you go a week or two without feeling any sense of being prepared, try adding or deleting an ingredient.
4. Persist. It may take a number of times before the actions become a signal to your entire self to focus attention on allowing words to flow out of your fingers onto the page.

Example:

Here's a reset ritual to try. It's based on Character Strength Intervention (CSI) 65 in *Character Strengths Interventions: A Field Guide for Practitioners* by Ryan Niemiec. It also appears on Day 22 in Jane Anderson's book, *30 Days of Character Strengths*.

If you're not familiar with character strengths, not to worry. Use any positive quality that pops into your head during the last step. The character strength examples are capitalized in step 3 to make them easier to spot.

1. Pause and feel inbreath and outbreath for 8 breaths. Let everything go except for breathing. Give your breath your full attention.
2. Conclude with a question: Which of my character strengths might I bring forward right now?
3. What character strength came up for you? How might you use it to move your writing forward? Perhaps you find yourself thinking of Curiosity: What will come up when you focus? Perhaps you find that Leadership comes to mind: How can you define a direction so clearly that others will want to follow your lead? Perhaps it will be Hope that moves you to write about a future that is better than the present for individuals, groups, or societies.
4. Turn your attention and your character strength to the page. Let the words emerge.

Moral: Clear space in your brain for writing by putting away what went before.

Sit Experiment 6: Build a Writing Habit

Story:

Sharon Dantzger wanted to start a meditation practice. There were so many benefits. She had heard that she needed to sit still for 20 minutes doing nothing every day. Day after day, she found herself too busy to set aside 20 minutes. With a to-do list as long as both arms, how could she do nothing? When she tried, she found herself so antsy with thoughts of all she needed to be doing that she could not sit still.

Finally, she asked herself, “What can I commit to doing every day without fail, without thinking I don’t have time?”

The answer came back, “I can sit still for two minutes. That’s just twelve slow breaths. Then I can get up again and go.”

After she had done it for several days, she increased her time slightly. Then a little more. But never to the point that she felt overwhelmed. When she started hearing herself make excuses, she scaled back to what she felt she could do that day.

Observation:

In his book, *Tiny Habits*, BJ Fogg explains that it is hard to make new habits by relying on will power and motivation. This is particularly hard when ability is low, as it generally is when we start a new behavior. Whether that’s doing pushups, learning a new language, or writing, it takes a lot of motivation to get us moving, and that motivation is hard to sustain. Instead, he suggests celebrating changes in the right direction, no matter how tiny they are. Tiny changes don’t require lots of ability. Even somebody with a low level of ability could do one pushup, or at least a pushup against the wall. After tiny changes, it’s important to reward ourselves, thus

intentionally using our internal neurochemical reward system to wire in changes. Tiny steps can eventually make deliberate actions turn into automatic habits.

By tiny, he means tiny. In an experiment with people who wanted to form a habit of flossing their teeth daily, he found that the group that committed to flossing one tooth daily were more likely to build a regular flossing habit than people who committed to flossing all their teeth.

Steps:

1. Decide what constitutes the tiny behavior that you want to grow into a habit. Is it writing two sentences? Writing for five minutes? This is your personal equivalent to flossing one tooth.
2. Select an anchor moment. This could be something that you're already doing habitually, such as eating breakfast, filling your coffee cup, getting dressed, or walking the dog.
3. Every day, perform the tiny writing behavior immediately after the anchor moment.
4. Reward yourself for completing your tiny writing behavior. For example, smile at yourself in the mirror, tell yourself, "You did a good job," or do something fun for a few minutes.
5. If you are moved to go beyond your tiny writing behavior, for example writing for 10 minutes, that's great. But remember it is extra credit.

Another Story:

Reflecting on her own writing history, Jane Anderson concluded, "A better approach, for me at least, was to establish a habit of writing. Whether daily for an hour or several times a week. I started by carving out a little bit of time each day, literally starting with 5 minutes and gradually increasing the time. By writing regularly, I began to hear my voice, allow my thoughts to percolate, and create new content as well as edit old."

Moral: Borrowing words from BJ Fogg, "Simplicity changes behavior."

Sit Experiment 7: Use WOOP + Anchoring.

Story:

Jared had been working for years on various writing projects and kept getting sidetracked by other opportunities. One day, he made a resolution to finish one writing project. Sorting through his options, he laid aside writing blog posts to build his career because it felt unexciting. He decided against working on the memoir that his family had been urging him to complete. They wanted to have it more than he wanted to write it. Politics had completely absorbed him, and he had many things to say about the ups-and-downs of being so involved. Therefore, he settled on writing about his politic activism over the previous election cycle.

At the suggestion of a coach, Jared wrote a one-sentence intention statement (see Sit Experiment #2) that he posted by his computer. The coach also suggested that he think about the ways he'd get sidetracked and write out his planned responses. These statements acknowledged the obstacles he might face and helped him plan ways to dodge them.

Jared wrote down, "I will make a list of the stories that I want to tell. If I sit down to write and my mind is blank, then I will look on my list of stories yet to be written and pick one." He also wrote, "If I start writing and my words look dumb, I'll remind myself that first drafts are one step along the way to good writing."

Jared also had trouble remembering to write. His coach suggested that he pick an activity that he already did regularly out of habit and somehow attach his writing to it. Jared regularly called his mother twice a week. He started writing for an hour after each call.

Observation

This experiment is based on Gabrielle Oettingen's WOOP framework: Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, and Plan, an approach that has helped many people make progress building new habits and achieving important goals. Oettingen has found that it's not enough to picture the Outcome

thoroughly. We also need to be aware of the Obstacles that we are likely to encounter and to create Plans to face them in the form of “If A happens, then I’ll do B” statements. There are many resources online for using the WOOP framework. <https://woopmylife.org/>

I personally find one thing missing in the WOOP approach. “If A happens then I’ll do B” assumes that there is some event, A, that will trigger response B. That doesn’t work when you’re building a new habit. For example, I’ve been trying to build a meditation habit, but I forget to practice. What works for me is to anchor a new activity to an activity that is already a habit. Writers tell me the same story. Life is so full that writing fails to come to mind. But they have numerous activities, such as eating meals, exercising, and walking the dog that they never forget. Anchoring writing to an existing habit makes it more likely to get done. .

Steps

1. To accomplish the W-O steps of the WOOP approach, take some time to imagine what you want to achieve in as much detail as you can. You may find it useful to revisit Sit Experiment #2. Capture your wish and outcome in a form that you can see whenever you sit down to write.
2. To accomplish the O-P steps, imagine the obstacles that get in your way. You might observe yourself over a week or two. Do you spend all your time figuring out what to write? Do you erase your words as soon as you write them? Do you get distracted easily? Once you know your personal obstacles, plan the actions that will help you get past them.
3. If you tend to forget to write, pick an activity that you already do regularly. Resolve to write either before or after that activity. Then do it!

Moral: Awareness of the obstacles in your path helps you move around them successfully.

Sit Experiment 8: Cultivate Inspiration Intentionally

Story – No More Abracadabra:

Jasmine had a complicated ritual for starting a writing session. She thought of it as sending a request to the universe. There were many steps including completely clearing her desk, breathing deeply a certain number of times, lighting a candle, and putting on just the right music. Then she would sit waiting for inspiration. When it arrived, she scribbled furiously for fear it would leave her. When it didn't arrive, she'd think, "Well, I wasn't meant to write today."

After one of her good friends gave her a copy of *Dare to Inspire*, Jasmine stopped picturing inspiration as random flashes of brilliance that burn out swiftly. She started seeing her own ability to call up inspiration, direct it toward her writing, and keep it burning brightly while she worked. Jasmine developed an intentional practice that helped her spark, stoke, and direct inspiration.

Observation

This experiment is based on *Dare to Inspire* by Allison Holzer, Sandra Spataro, and Jen Grace Baron. It is only a quick taste of their approach.

Sparks of inspiration come from the intersection of possibility and invincibility. Think of possibility is an openness to seeing things in new ways. Invincibility is a confident energy that turns possibility into action. Intentional practices can keep the sparks of inspiration from flaming out.

Here are the five truths of inspiration described in the book, each accompanied by specific actions to put them into practice.

- Inspiration is highly personal and evolves over time.
- We have agency and choice about inspiration in our own lives.
- There are reliable engines that spark inspiration. (They describe 18 engines in the book.)
- Inspiration can be sustained over time.
- Inspiration is contagious.

Steps

Here are some ideas directly inspired by their book and the various resources that their company, InspireCorps, has posted online.

1. ***Possibility***: Think about your purpose for writing. Whom do you want to reach? How do you want your words to change them? Widen your aperture slightly. Imagine reaching a broader set of people. Picture having a more powerful impact. Write down your expanded purpose. Read it whenever you start writing. Whenever it feels stale, try widening your aperture even further.
2. ***Invincibility***: Draw on your own past successes. Bring a particular success to mind. What gave you the confidence to act? What gave you the courage to do things you'd never done before? What sustained your hope that you could have the impact you envisioned? Think about ways to apply your confidence, courage, and hope to this writing project.
3. ***Engines of Inspiration***: Use the InspireCorps worksheet shown on the next page to evaluate how much you use each of the eighteen inspiration engines described in the book. Decide on one or two engines to use more often.
 - a. ***Pick one that you already use relatively frequently***. Consider how you could use it even more often.
 - b. ***Pick one that you hardly ever use***. Consider how you could introduce it into your writing practice.
4. ***Contagion***: Do you have a writing partner that would be willing to explore inspiration with you? Perhaps you could find ways to help each other keep the fire burning.

Moral: You can find your muse inside yourself.



INSPIRATION CHALLENGE

Using this worksheet, review all eighteen engines across all three categories.

1. Rate each on a scale of 1-5 in terms of how much this engine is a current source of inspiration for you.

2. Circle your top three. These are your inspiration fingerprint - or your unique combination of go-to engines you rely on.

3. Now pick one engine you've never considered before:

- What would it look like to intentionally activate this engine of inspiration this week?

- What could you do or think about differently to try out this engine?

Engines of Inspiration **How much do you use it?**
(SCALE OF 1-5)

	Connecting to & Voicing Values and Purpose	<input type="text"/>
	Using your Strengths	<input type="text"/>
	Progressing Toward & Achieving Success	<input type="text"/>
	Using Your Whole Brain with Unstructured Time	<input type="text"/>
	Developing New Perspectives	<input type="text"/>
	Activating Body Movement and Presence	<input type="text"/>
	Belonging	<input type="text"/>
	Admiring Our Mentors and Heroes	<input type="text"/>
	Getting a Lift	<input type="text"/>
	Serving Others	<input type="text"/>
	Sharing a Group Mission	<input type="text"/>
	Being Vulnerable & Transparent	<input type="text"/>
	Seeking Environments that Move Us	<input type="text"/>
	Overcoming Constraints	<input type="text"/>
	Witnessing Excellence	<input type="text"/>
	Using Your Unique Passions to Make a Difference	<input type="text"/>
	Sharing Experiences with Large Groups of People	<input type="text"/>
	Experiencing Grief, Loss, or Failure	<input type="text"/>

Sit Experiment 9: Welcome Constraints

Story:

I can't think of a better illustration for this experiment than the TEDx talk by artist Phil Hansen (<https://youtu.be/BgoAFS3xu74>). I highly recommend spending 11 minutes with him. He tells a great story, and the pictures are amazing.

He makes two points that are relevant for this experiment:

1. The neurologist who told him that the damage to the nerves in his hands was permanent suggested, “Embrace the shake.” Those words could be a rallying cry for all of us when we encounter constraints that seem to block the way forward.
2. When he had all the supplies that he thought an artist could possibly need, he was creatively blank. When he imposed constraints on himself, his creativity blossomed.

Observations:

I'm really tired of “Think outside the box.” It is often used as a recipe for creativity, but maybe that's backwards. What if instead ideas are like molecules of a gas. If they are kept in a box, they exert pressure against the sides of the box, pressure that is creativity. If they are let loose, they disperse, and the pressure drops.

Constraints reduce the need to think about irrelevancies that drain creativity without moving you forward. For example, many poets over the centuries have found writing sonnets with their highly constrained structure a great opportunity for creativity. They didn't waste their time thinking, “How many lines? What rhyme scheme?” Scientific research papers all tend to have the same basic structure but can vary widely in terms of clarity and importance. The scientist did not have to invent a new structure to present results.

As Phil Hansen suggests, you can even be creative in the design of your constraints. As an experiment, try out various sorts of boxes to see which ones spark your own creativity.

Steps:

1. Look for the constraints that already exist for the writing you want to do. Instead of resenting the constraints, remember to “Embrace the shake.” Examples include:
 - a. Word limit
 - b. Assigned outline
 - c. Required structure
2. Figure out constraints you could impose on yourself. Examples include
 - a. An upper bound on the proportion of your sentences that can be complex or compound.
 - b. No more than 3 items in any list.
 - c. Telling a story entirely restricting yourself to one person’s point of view without any all-knowing narration
 - d. No words with more than 2 syllables, a particularly useful constraint when writing children’s books.
 - e. Writing for a 7th grade level using one of the online readability tools
3. Experiment with a particular constraint for a period of time that is your choice. Just don’t give up on it too quickly. It may take time to get past the initial discomfort.

Moral: Embrace the limits that frame your creative space. Constraints can be advantages in disguise¹”

¹ <https://www.infoq.com/news/2010/10/constraints-feed-creativity/>

Sit Experiment 10: Try Procrastination Aikido

Story:

This a story about me and something I noticed when I was in college. When I got a reading assignment that I didn't find interesting, such as numerous pages of Emmanuel Kant. I'd find ingenious ways to avoid reading. I dreaded the effort to keep myself sitting in a chair with the book open in front of me. That continued until I had a paper assigned. Then it became much easier to focus on Kant, because writing papers was even less appealing. Papers became easier to write when exams were scheduled. Perhaps I worried too much about whether I'd review the right things, and I dreaded the anticipated time crunch of the final exam. In fact, when exams were scheduled, I preferred cleaning the oven and scrubbing the toilet to rereading all my notes.

Observation:

Notice what's going on here: It is possible to use differences in motivation to unlock energy for difficult tasks. I used to call this my procrastination hierarchy, but now I think of it as Procrastination Aikido because it involves redirecting energy away from avoiding a less desirable task toward getting writing done. I learned to manipulate this energy deliberately. If I found myself stalling on something I really needed to get done, I'd make myself think of something I wanted to do even less. That almost always got me going.

I know I'm not alone operating this way. The wife of one of my friends said that she can always tell when he needs to write something because the items on his honey-do list start getting done. Look at your to-do list as a whole, not one item at a time.

Steps:

1. Make a list of the things you need to get done.
2. Rank them from least appealing to most appealing

3. Notice where writing appears in the list
4. Focus on something less appealing than writing. Use that avoidance energy to motivate yourself to write by saying to yourself, “If I don’t write, then I need to go [fill in the blank]. Work on taxes? Ream out the basement pipe? Take stuff to the dump? Whatever it is that you least want to do.
5. If you have some really appealing on your list, tell yourself, “I’m going to write for an hour and then I’ll let myself [fill in the blank with appealing activity].
6. If your entire to-do list is more appealing than writing, imagine facing the consequences of not writing as if it were a task. Who will you have to tell? How will they respond to you?
7. If even that task is more appealing than writing, perhaps this is not the experiment for you. Perhaps you also need to look at whether writing belongs on your list at all, unless avoiding it really helps you get something else important done.

Story Continued:

I can almost always find something I want to do even less than writing, but sometimes avoidance of writing helps me get something else done.

Moral: When looking for motivation, look at all your tasks together rather one at a time.

Sit Experiment 10: Try Procrastination Aikido

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This a story about me and something I noticed when I was in college. When I got a reading assignment that I didn't find interesting, such as numerous pages of Emmanuel Kant. I'd find ingenious ways to avoid reading. I dreaded the effort to keep myself sitting in a chair with the book open in front of me. That continued until I had a paper assigned. Then it became much easier to focus on Kant, because writing papers was even less appealing. Papers became easier to write when exams were scheduled. Perhaps I worried too much about whether I'd review the right things, and I dreaded the anticipated time crunch of the final exam. In fact, when exams were scheduled, I preferred cleaning the oven and scrubbing the toilet to rereading all my notes.

Observation:

Notice what's going on here: It is possible to use differences in motivation to unlock energy for difficult tasks. I used to call this my procrastination hierarchy, but now I think of it as Procrastination Aikido because it involves redirecting energy away from avoiding a less desirable task toward getting writing done. I learned to manipulate this energy deliberately. If I found myself stalling on something I really needed to get done, I'd make myself think of something I wanted to do even less. That almost always got me going.

I know I'm not alone operating this way. The wife of one of my friends said that she can always tell when he needs to write something because the items on his honey-do list start getting done. Look at your to-do list as a whole, not one item at a time.

Steps:

8. Make a list of the things you need to get done.
9. Rank them from least appealing to most appealing

10. Notice where writing appears in the list
11. Focus on something less appealing than writing. Use that avoidance energy to motivate yourself to write by saying to yourself, “If I don’t write, then I need to go [fill in the blank].
Work on taxes? Ream out the basement pipe? Take stuff to the dump? Whatever it is that you least want to do.
12. If you have some really appealing on your list, tell yourself, “I’m going to write for an hour and then I’ll let myself [fill in the blank with appealing activity].
13. If your entire to-do list is more appealing than writing, imagine facing the consequences of not writing as if it were a task. Who will you have to tell? How will they respond to you?
14. If even that task is more appealing than writing, perhaps this is not the experiment for you.
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Story Continued:

I can almost always find something I want to do even less than writing, but sometimes avoidance of writing helps me get something else done.

Moral: When looking for motivation, look at all your tasks together rather one at a time.

Introduction to Write Experiments: Imagine, Draft, Edit

Back when I was a software engineer for IBM, I noticed that people had different strengths and attitudes when it came to product development. Some had the big ideas that set direction but then lost interest in the details. Others were really good at the finishing touches, making sure everything was polished and complete. Others were good at the various stages in between, doing all the design, coding, and testing that brought the product to life.

I came to understand about myself that I was good at all the steps except for the very first. I could lead a team to turn a rough idea into a reality. But I really didn't feel up to creating the very first concept. My ability to read the tea-leaves about the market place were minimal.

That ability to execute someone else's initial vision down to the last detail has shown up in the books I've co-authored. I helped Marie-Josée Shaar turn her wellness philosophy into the book, *Smarts and Stamina*. I helped Shannon Polly turn her vision of *acting as if* into a key ingredient of the book *Character Strengths Matter*.

Writing is also a multi-step activity.

When I first planned this book, I had just three themes: Sit, Write, and Share. As I proceeded, experiments kept accumulating in the Write section. When it included more than twice as many experiments as either of the two others, I wondered if it needed to be further broken down. I had already written what is now Draft Experiment 1 about separating drafting from editing. But was that the only breakdown needed?

Remembering the rule of three, I looked for a third activity. I realized that I do a lot of the work of writing without a writing implement. I walk around thinking about ideas. I have conversations with myself about ideas while I wash dishes. I discuss ideas with friends. I called the third type of activity Imagine. To write, you need to Imagine, draft, and edit.

The **rule of three** is a writing principle that suggests that a trio of events or characters is more humorous, satisfying, or effective than other numbers. The audience of this form of text is also thereby more likely to remember the information conveyed because having three entities combines both brevity and rhythm with having the smallest amount of information to create a pattern.

Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rule_of_three_\(writing\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rule_of_three_(writing))

Thinking of writing as a multi-step activity is a professional approach to writing. If you are aware of your own strengths and preferences, then you can make informed choices about how to handle the steps that come less naturally to you. You can use this book to get better at them. If you have the means, you might be able to get help by hiring a ghostwriter or an editor. Even if you do outsource them, if you know how they work, you'll be better at supervising your ghost writer or editor.

Table 1 is my personal summary of the steps involved in writing, at least the kind of writing I encounter most often. Use Table Stages in a Writing Process¹ to identify your strengths and areas of development. Use the left-hand column to capture your personal sense of the difficulty of each step. Put E for Easy beside the steps that you find fun and rewarding to perform. Continue to enjoy them. Put H for Hard beside the ones that are your greatest challenges. Experiments in this section of the book may help you make them easier. Mark the rest with M for middling.

The order in the table may imply that you finish all the ideating before you start drafting and likewise that you finish all the drafting before you start editing. Usually, people cycle through the activities multiple times before a piece is complete. While drafting, you may run out of ideas before the piece is complete, or you may feel more like editing on a particular day. Just

don't spend too much time drafting ideas that don't belong in your book or editing paragraphs you'll later delete.

Table 1: Stages in a Writing Process

How hard?	Step Description	Activity Type
	1. Imagining the intended audience, capture the big picture idea.	Imagine → Exit when you have enough ideas to start drafting
	2. Decide on the overall form. Will it be a book, blog post, magazine article, podcast?	
	3. Determine the concepts to be covered and the stories needed to illustrate them.	
	4. Determine the structure. How should concepts be ordered so that they build on each other and so you don't rely on a concept before you have introduced it?	
	5. Write the first draft. You may end up writing the first drafts of different chapters independently.	Draft → Exit when draft seems complete
	6. Set what you've written aside at least overnight. Write a second draft, responding to high-level feedback from yourself or others.	
	7. Edit at the conceptual and structural levels. Pay attention to the ending and the beginning. Make sure you don't bury the lede, unless that creates effective dramatic tension.	Edit → Exit when ready to publish
	8. Seek feedback at a more detailed level. How does the argument flow? Do the transitions work? In this step, take out paragraphs that no longer belong for whatever reason.	
	9. Edit at the paragraph level. Do you start new paragraphs when you start new thoughts? Do paragraphs have topic sentences and transitions? Are you repeating yourself unnecessarily?	
	10. Edit at the diction and punctuation level. This is another chance to look at redundancy.	
	11. Get someone else to copy edit. It's hard to see your own mistakes.	
	12. Read the piece out loud to catch the final errors.	

Imagine Experiment 1: Decide What Goes In

Story:

John had been a high school teacher, a sports coach, a university professor, and a business consultant over the course of a long career. Feeling a passion to share what his years of experience had taught him, he decided to write a book. After a few months of writing, he started feeling overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the job.

Being a methodical person, he decided to create a spreadsheet of the topics he had taught students, athletes, fellow coaches, and business clients. When we looked at his list together, I was reminded of these lines from W. B. Yeats:

Hands, do what you're bid
Bring the balloon of the mind
That bellies and drags in the wind
Into its narrow shed.

What could he do to bring this balloon of his mind into a narrow shed? I passed on to him the advice I had gotten from a coaching mentor about business development: “If you yell ‘Hey you!’ to a busy crowd, nobody pays any attention. If you yell, ‘Hey Ben!’ all the Bens in the crowd will turn to look at you.” It’s important to figure out the audience you can best serve. It won’t be everybody.

John figured that the first step was to pick a particular audience and a particular purpose for his book. Looking at all the roles he had played, he believed he could make the most difference writing about soft skills for sports coaches. Many coaches had said things to him like, “If it weren’t for the athletes, I’d feel totally on top of my job,” or “How can I get this year’s team to show the same level of energy and passion that last year’s team did,” or “I’ve got a roster of wannabe stars, but I want to have a team.” He thought he could help.

Observation:

Most people could fill many books with what they have learned, experienced, and created in their lives. Not only do they have many memories, opinions, and facts in their minds, but these elements are interconnected in ways that that create extremely complex mental landscapes.

One of the hard lessons of writing is to realize that other people don't need our entire mental landscapes. Their minds are full of their own memories, opinions, and facts. What they may welcome from us are insights and information that help them organize their own mental states.

Steps:

While you are writing a particular piece do the following at least once. For books, it may be helpful to do it multiple times, either periodically or whenever you feel overwhelmed.

1. Write a sketch of the audience you want to reach and the way you want to change them. For more about how to do this, see Share Experiment 1.
2. Make a list of topics you want to cover in your book.
3. For each item in the list, ask yourself:
 - Do the people in my audience need to know this?
 - Will they be interested?
 - Will this help me achieve my purpose with them?
 - If I have already discussed this topic elsewhere, am I saying it from a sufficiently different point of view that it will add rather than dilute?
4. Unless you can say a resounding “Yes!” to all four questions, set the item aside. See Write Experiment 17 about setting up an idea jar or parking lot.

Moral: Your audience wants only a small fraction of everything you know.

Imagine Experiment 2: Play with Ideas

Story:

In 1987, Dr. John B. Smith, a professor at the University of North Carolina, helped our team of software engineers get started writing the specifications for a brand-new networking protocol. It was very unusual for us to work on a *green field* project, that is, get to start from scratch rather than make changes to an existing base. Our team leader was worried that we might be stymied by a blank page. We followed John's directions carefully. As you read the steps below, imagine 6 software engineers sitting around a table doing absolutely nothing for ten minutes, then scribbling madly on yellow stickies, and then gathering at the whiteboard to arrange the ideas. When we started writing, we each knew exactly what to do.

The steps below assume this being done by one person, but it could also be done by a group.

Steps:

1. Decide on a general writing topic. It could be the theme of your book, chapter, or blog.
2. Gather supplies: a timer, a stack of yellow-stickies, and a fat-tipped marker. You will also need a wall, whiteboard, or a large piece of butcher paper to mount yellow stickies later.
3. Set the timer for 10 minutes. Close your eyes and let your thoughts wander. Don't particularly try to think about the writing theme.

4. When the timer dings, start writing ideas on yellow stickies, just one or two words per idea.

Write big enough that you could read your words from a distance. Work fast. Don't dwell on any particular idea longer than writing it down. The ideas can be concepts, stories, activities, special details, whatever bubbles up.

5. When your ideas slow down, attach the yellow stickies to your working surface. Spread them out so that you can read each yellow-stickie. Step back to look at them all together.
6. Start moving the yellow stickies around to gather ideas into clumps. Put similar ideas together or put contrasting ideas together. Try out different approaches.
7. Transform the clumps into an outline that you can use to start work on your product. What is each clump's header? What are the parts?
8. In subsequent writing sessions, you can pick one yellow-stickie to use as your writing prompt. Put it back on the board with a big checkmark when you finish the first draft.
9. Whenever you feel stuck, look at the whole picture again. Are there any stickies that need to be moved? Do other orders emerge? Do other ideas need to be captured? Your stickie pad is still there, and the stickies can be moved around. Repeat the whole process as needed.

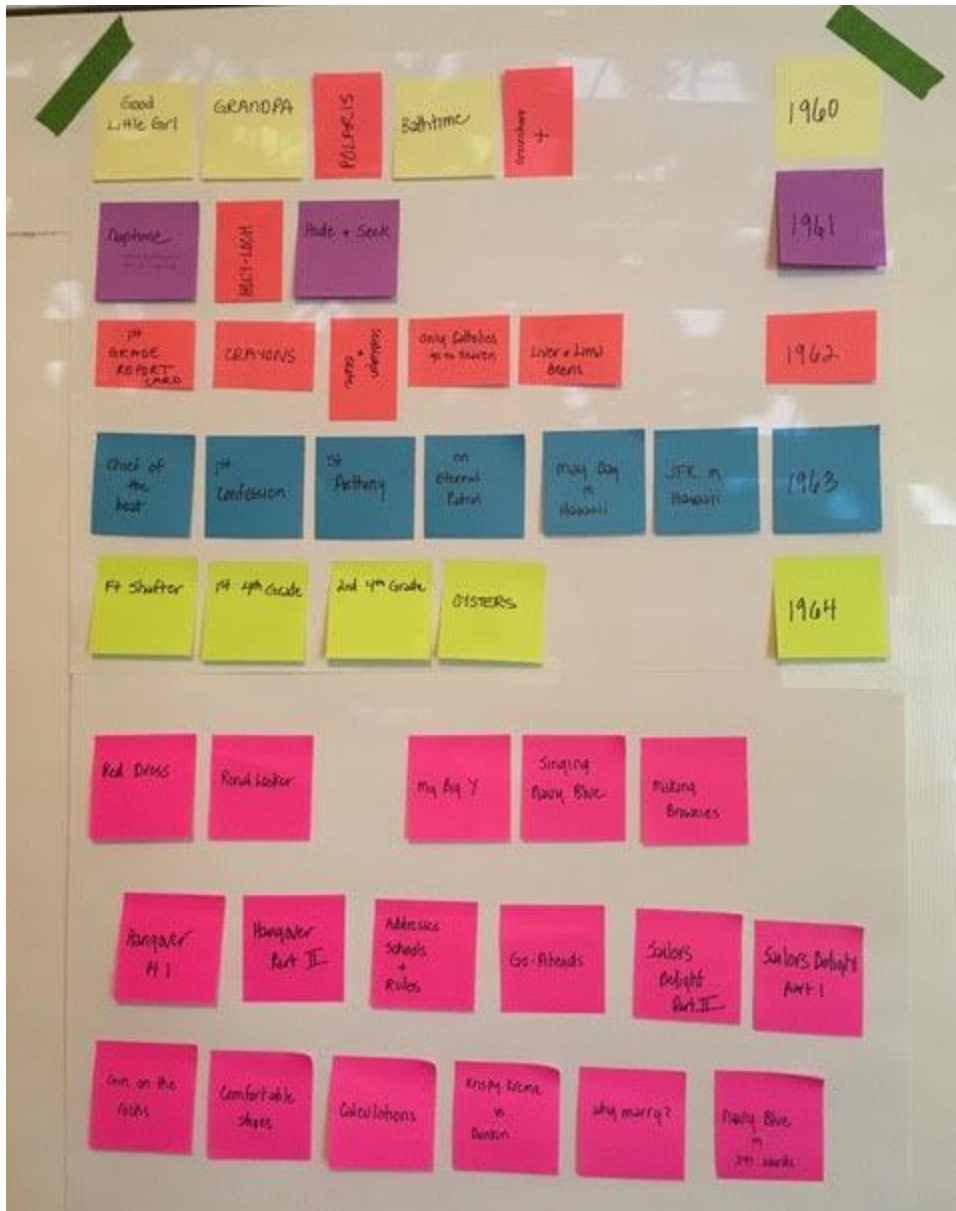
Observation:

I have used this approach with several stuck writers. There are two aspects to it that can be used separately or together to make progress.

Somehow the period of quiet as the timer ticks down loosens up the stranglehold that the conscious mind puts on creative thinking. Writing down the ideas fast lets them flow. The design firm, Ideo, has formulated 7 rules of good brainstorming. This approach directly invokes at least 4 of them: Defer judgment. Encourage wild ideas. Be visual. Go for quantity.

Rearranging the yellow stickies on the wall is one way to play physically and visually with the structure of your piece. Look for balance: Are there too many ideas in one clump and too few in another? You might want to introduce color as another visual clue, for example copying key concepts on to green stickies and story topics onto pink ones.

I've seen several people put entire books in order with multi-colored stickies on a wall.



Brainstorming, writing ideas on yellow stickies, and then arranging them on a surface can be done as a group or pair activity.

Moral: A playful spirit welcomes new ideas and sees new shapes for arranging them.

Imagine Experiment 3: Figure Out Manageable Chunks

Story:

Even though Josie had a clear mental picture of the book she wanted to write for elementary teachers about enhancing creativity in the classroom, she had trouble getting anything written. She found herself sitting down to write and mentally hop-skipping over all the ideas she wanted to get across.

Working with a writing coach, Josie figured out that her book needed three forms of content: concepts, stories to illustrate them, and exercises to practice them. Once she decided these were the right units for her writing, she made a spreadsheet with all the concepts in one column, all the story ideas in another, and all the exercises in a third. She labeled stories and exercises with matching concepts. Whenever she had a new idea, she came back to her spreadsheet to add it in.

The spreadsheet became her writing to-do list. If she felt like writing a story, she picked one and got to work. If she felt ready to explain a concept, that's where she spent her time. Exercises were generally the easiest for her to create, so she did them in her less energetic writing sessions.

Observation:

Any big project needs to be broken down into manageable pieces so that it isn't overwhelming.

I once heard someone explain that it is inefficient to cover both strategy and tactics in the same business meeting because they involve different kinds of thinking. It takes people time to switch between big picture ideas and detailed execution. The speaker made the recommendation that leaders cover these topics in completely different meetings.

Creating the list of concepts, stories, and exercise was big picture thinking, with Josie keeping the entire book in mind as she figured out what elements she needed to get the entire idea across. When she wrote a story, she could focus on the details needed to make it come alive without worrying about where the story fit in the overall picture.

Josie's units may be useful to you if you are working on a self-help or how-to book. If you are working on a memoir, you might choose periods of time. Sometimes it makes sense to separate a major activity into phases and use the phases as units.

When Marie-Josée Shaar and I wrote *Smarts and Stamina*, our writing accelerated dramatically when we decided to have 10 short chapters each for sleep, food, mood, and exercise. Once we created a structure for each unit (see Write Experiment 11), we flew through the writing.

Steps:

1. Figure out the units that make the most sense for you. Does the concept-story-exercise approach work? If not, try reading books that you find easy to follow. What do their units seem to be? Would they work for you?
2. Once you've settled on a tentative structure, start your lists. Be aware that you don't have to finish your lists before you start. You can always revisit them to add or prune.
3. Consult your list whenever you need to figure out what to write next.
4. Optionally label the items in your list Easy or Hard. That way whether you have small or large window of time to write, you can quickly select something that fits.
5. Check off the items you've drafted. It's very satisfying to see progress. I have a spreadsheet that I'm checking off for this book. My units are the experiments.

Moral: Break a big problem down into manageable steps.

Imagine Experiment 4: Prime Intuition

Story:

I originally thought of this experiment as *Let Writing Go On In Your Head*. I do so much of my own writing work while I'm cleaning up the kitchen or weeding the garden. As ideas flow through my mind, I try them on for size and play with different ways to express them. Other people tell me they do similar mental exploration while they are walking the dog. I don't worry about capturing the ideas as they flow. I have faith that any really good ideas will stay close enough to the surface of my mind that I can reach them when I'm back at my keyboard.

Observation:

Like Imagine Experiment 2, this experiment is an intentional way to broaden access to the creativity of the unconscious mind. There is so much more stored in your mind than the thoughts that bubble around on the conscious surface. There is a data bank of experiences and observations that go back as far as your memory stretches. You absorbed some without even being aware of doing so. Under the surface, intuition searches and connects them in novel ways all the time. Many people have experienced having an idea pop to the conscious surface fully formed, often when they are doing something relatively relaxing such as taking a shower.

The technique in this experiment comes from Nil Demircubuk, a consultant who teaches clients to use intuition and intellect in tandem. First, she helps them listen to their intuitions. Then she reminds them to evaluate what emerges. Not all intuitions are right or even useful. Using intuition and intellect together augments creativity.

The critical ingredient is what Nil calls priming for intuition. She bases it partly on research by Dr Kenneth Gilhooly about creative problem-solving. He found that people who loaded the problem into their minds and then immediately did something else for a short period

tended to be more productive creatively than people who immediately jumped into problem solving. He called this the immediate incubation period.

Nil's approach alternates incubation periods that open the mind to the sub conscious with direct work periods where the ideas are used in conscious problem solving.

Steps

1. Load your mind with the task you want to accomplish in your writing. Do you want to tell a story, explain a concept, or capture a scene? Perhaps it's one yellow-stickie from Write Experiment 6. Remember the goal in detail, and review any obstacles. You are loading a problem to be solved into your sub conscious.
2. Set the task aside. To prime for intuition, go do something else, preferably something that relaxes you and lifts your mood. Go for a walk, play a video game, listen to pleasant music. The important point is that you incubate before you start the conscious work.
3. Work on the task consciously. Have a good go at putting the idea into words.
4. When you feel stuck, return to step 2 for further incubation. Alternate between steps 2 and 3 until you are out of time for this writing session.
5. If you haven't finished the piece by the end of this session, use the same sequence in the next session. Start by loading the task into your mind, then alternate incubating and working starting with incubating.

Possible Addition

Nil has combined this approach with the Pomodoro™ Technique to create what she calls the Menemen Technique. Pomodoro is Italian for tomato, and Menemen is a Turkish breakfast dish of scrambled eggs with tomatoes. Nil figures that eggs represent incubation.

The Pomodoro Technique involves alternating 25-minute work periods with 5-minute play periods. The originator of the technique, Francesco Cirillo, named the approach after his tomato-shaped timer.



The Menemen Technique alternates work and play, but starts with play once the problem has been loaded into the brain.

Looking at the steps above, just add setting the timer as you move from step to step: 5 minutes for the incubation periods, 25 minutes for the work periods.

Moral: Reach down into the well of experiences you've accumulated over your entire life.

Imagine Experiment 5: Collect Story Seeds.

Story:

One of my favorite psychologists, Albert Bandura, once said that psychologists are terrible at the social diffusion of ideas. They do their research, learn interesting things about humans, and yet collectively have little influence on human behavior. Toward the end of his career, he decided to put his energies into creating serial dramas to address behavior changes needed in particular places. His topics included enrollment in adult literacy programs in Mexico, delaying age of marriage for girls in India, and safe sex practices to reduce the prevalence of AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. He worked with local governments and local media experts to produce long-running soap operas that addressed the chosen topics

According to Dr. Bandura, a serial drama needs three types of substories to change behavior:

1. Stories showing the desired behavior and how it affects people
2. Stories of the undesired behavior
3. Stories of people in transition from the undesired behavior to the desired behavior.

Around the world, people gathered to watch or listen to these stories the same way many of us watched Downton Abbey. One article about the Mexican series indicated that enrollment in adult literacy programs increased by a factor of 9 among serial drama viewers.

Observation:

Stories are sticky. We are much more likely to remember them than the concepts they illustrate. They also help us see how particular concepts change shape when they are applied in particular contexts. Stories of good behavior give us every day heroes to emulate. Stories of bad

behavior help us see consequences to avoid. Stories of transitions help us believe that change is possible.

We live lives of constant story. We have an exchange in the grocery store that annoys or delights us. We experience a kindness or a meanness. We get an email that perplexes us. Having an alertness for the stories as they arise is like gathering seeds to plant next year. They may be dormant until a particular need arises to write a story to make a particular point. If we collect story seeds as we go along, we're more likely to write stories that move others.

My husband used to have phone calls with his mother every other day. He kept a note card in his pocket to jot down notes of things that happened that might interest her. They had some lively and engaging conversations because he collected story seeds for her.

Steps

1. Believe that your life is full of stories that may be useful to your writing.
2. Keep a note card or a phone app like Evernote to jot down words to remind you of things you observe that might make good stories. Using the story seed metaphor, these would need to be planted, watered, and put in the light to sprout. They need never be shared with others in this form.
3. For a particular writing project, consult your list of story seeds. Pick ones that fit. Make a list so that you could write them up in even small fragments of time.
4. When you finish writing a piece, especially if you are calling for behavior change, check the balance of good behavior, bad behavior, and transition stories. That's not to say that every piece needs an equal number of all three. But the balance is worth considering.

Moral: Collecting stories as you go along is easier than making them up from scratch.

Imagine Experiment 6: Mine Stories for Concepts

Story:

Joellen was very good at leading workshops on becoming more resilient at work. She had an extensive collection of funny, touching, and believable stories that helped people grasp and remember her messages. The previous experiment was about collecting story seeds. Joellen was a masterful collector. As she taught and went about her life, she was always alert to new challenges, always looking for the people that came through better than others, and always curious about what made the difference.

When Joellen took stock getting ready to write a book, she realized that she was strong on stories and weak on concepts. She knew how to show rather than tell to a fault. Now she needed to put the concepts in so that people could grasp more than one story at a time.

To get unstuck, Joellen wrote down a list of all her stories. She looked at the list for common themes. At first, not much came up. Then she decided to express the key takeaway for each story in 3 to 5 words. Here are some examples that she discovered: *Importance of friends. Resilience can be built. First calm down. Take inventory of assets.*

When she finished, she had a list of concepts that she could start shaping into the skeleton of her book. She pictured some as part of the spine that held other ideas up, some as limbs that moved the structure forward, and some as the digits that served as finishing touches.

Observation:

Stories are really important. They make ideas come alive in people's minds. Once that happens, ideas are more likely to stick.

But concepts are also important. They capture ideas in general terms, unmuddled by personality quirks. They are ready for application in completely different contexts. In the

complex moments of their lives, people find it easier to sort through concepts for ones that might show the way forward than to retell stories internally looking for ones that might help. Just as a photograph is easier to carry around than a real baby, readers find it easier to sort through concepts than stories for ones that are relevant. Once a concept is found, it might serve as the keyword to bring relevant stories back to mind.

Steps:

1. Write down a list of your stories. Assign them numbers or other identifiers.
2. Get a yellow sticky pad and a marking pen.
3. Go through your stories. For each, figure out the key takeaway (or takeaways). Figure out how to say it in 3 to 5 words.
4. If you haven't seen this takeaway before, write it on a yellow sticky along with the story identifier.
5. If you have seen this takeaway before, add the story identifier to an existing yellow sticky.
6. When you are finished, create a list of key concepts cross-referenced to stories. This might be a spreadsheet or an arrangement of yellow stickies on a whiteboard.
7. Use a white board or wall to play around with arranging the takeaways into clumps that belong together. This might give you a head start on the structure of your piece.

Moral: Concepts are easier to carry around in the brain than stories.

Draft Experiment 1: Draft Without Editing

Story:

When I was in college, I typed my papers on a manual typewriter. I also made some money by typing other people's papers. When I typed the wrong character, I had to roll the paper up, erase or white out the mistake, and then roll the paper back very carefully, hoping it hadn't gotten out of alignment.

As a result, I have always loved writing on a computer. It's so flexible. I can write, rearrange, leave gaps, and come back later. No more white out. I'm not committed to what comes out of my fingers initially.

However, to become productive, I had to learn to keep my finger off the delete key when writing first drafts. In the early days, I might write a sentence, think, "That's not right," and erase it. Sometimes when a session ended, it seemed that I had written 1000 words and erased 990 of them.

What really helps me is to think of two writers in my brain. Drafter gets to write whatever she wants. The order doesn't matter. The word choice doesn't matter. The quality of the ending and beginning doesn't matter. Her job is to get the basic ideas on the page. Then Editor takes over. Editor may sniff at what Drafter left her to work with, but actually she's relieved to be able to do what she does best: pick effective words, make sure sentences can be parsed by other people, make sure the sequence makes sense, and so on. Drafter captures the big picture. Editor makes the writing flow.

Observation:

Drafting and editing are very different activities. They draw on different mental faculties. Drafting is a big picture, imaginative activity, making something out of nothing. Editing is

careful, particular work. Drafting requires turning judgment off or at least down. Editing needs judgment to be turned up high. The question for drafting is “Have I captured the idea?” The questions for editing are various but include, “Will other people be able to understand it?” and “Do I like the way it sounds?”

Drafter and Editor don’t do well working at the same time. One has a heavy foot on the accelerator, while the other is pressing on the brake. When they are both active at the same time, a writer spends a great deal of energy without moving very far forward.

Steps

1. As you start writing, decide whether you are going to be drafting a new piece or editing an existing piece. You can do both in the same session. For example, you could spend the first half of the session drafting and the second half editing what you drafted. Just avoid doing them simultaneously. Mentally note when you flip into the other activity.
2. If you are drafting, push any judgmental voices in your head aside. Tell the Editor it will have its turn, just not yet. Mentally put a cover over the Delete key.
3. If you are editing, start with mental gratitude to your drafting self for giving you something to form and polish.

Moral: Don’t write with your foot on the accelerator and the brake at the same time.

Draft Experiment 2: Just Do It

Story: Everybody is afraid.

I have been running writers' workshops for years, and occasionally we'll have a writer who is so badly blocked that nothing comes out. We sometimes help out by having a brainstorming session to offer suggestions. Blocked writers see that they are not alone. Usually, the suggestions end up with some form of "Just do it."

One of the driving purposes of my workshops is to help people acknowledge their fears and then turn their attention to the work. Everybody fears putting words down for others to read. Writing often involves vulnerability to other people's judging eyes. The fear can be paralyzing unless people figure out how to acknowledge it and move past it.

Observation:

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy revolves around the idea that people heal by accepting what cannot be changed and committing themselves to change what can be changed. That doesn't mean it's simple, as we learn from the Serenity Prayer:

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
courage to change the things I can,
and wisdom to know the difference. Reinhold Niebuhr*

Let us assume that the fear of writing is something that can be changed if you have the will to do so. The ideas below are gifts from other writers that may help you just do it.

Steps:

These are really individual suggestions from different writers. Read through them and select the ones that resonate for you.

1. Breon Michel says, “What's helped me the most has more to do with learning how to work with fear and less to do with specific writing tactics. It takes a lot of courage to be authentic, but in doing this inner work, I've noticed a direct effect on my writing. I have found it helpful to focus on caring less about how to say something so it will appease others and more about speaking from my heart, regardless of how it's received.”²
2. Natalie Griffin: Natalie: “I make a deal with myself that I'll just write for 10 minutes. 10 minutes only, that's not so long, right? And once I start writing, initially it's hard, but after 10 minutes have passed, the largest challenge of just getting started has been beaten, and I find that I have the strength/inspiration to continue on. What I produce might not be great when I'm feeling blocked and uninspired, but it's a place to jump off from, and then I have something to show for my efforts at the end of the day.
3. Manu Chatterjee says, “When I get stuck, I force myself to write two sentences. Sometimes funny things happen.” He has written an [article about this that approach you can find in Medium](#).
4. Many people recommend writing morning pages, an idea from Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*. For morning pages, sit down every morning and write 3 pages longhand without editing. In Cameron's words, “Nothing is too petty, too silly, too stupid, or too weird to be included.” It is a way to practice getting past the internal censor that keeps us from being creative.

Moral: Fear of writing is common. Find a way to turn attention from the fear to the work.

² I got permission initially to use this words in another context. I'll need to get permission to use them here.

Draft Experiment 3: Write about Not Being Able to Write

Story:

Jacob was writing a combination memoir and how-to book about something that really mattered to him. Things were humming along until one day, he found himself blocked. He'd sit down to write, and no words came out. After several days of feeling blocked, he decided to write about not being able to write. He described what it felt like in his body. He recorded the thoughts that were spinning through his head just as he heard them. He wrote about where he was in his narrative. As he did so, he realized that he had reached perhaps the crux of his story. He didn't even want to think about the event that came next in his narrative. By writing about his resistance, he was able to move around the difficult subject indirectly at first. That indirectness helped him see clearly what he needed to do next.

Jen Cory shares, "Regarding writer's block, a dear friend and professional writer once shared this advice: 'Write the log jam.' We all have things need to be voiced before we can get to the stuff we want to be sharing with the world. To free up the mind sometimes we must first write about those things we never wanted to write about and get them out of the way."

Observation:

I have seen this experiment work several times, and it always seems like magic. How does focusing on the actual experience of being blocked help us get unblocked? I speculate that it works in the same paradoxical way that noticing wandering thoughts works in meditation. Some meditation teachers say to name the thoughts because that loosens their hold. By writing about the experience, we take down the barriers of self-judgment. When we write about exactly what we are experiencing in the blocked moments, we are practicing with the most accessible content at that moment.

Sometimes the resulting record of being blocked gets put aside. Sometimes we find it useful to go back to it and extend it when we feel blocked again. Sometimes it produces a story that may be an important element of our larger products. At the very least, we're practicing the art of writing, of capturing emotions and thoughts in words.

Steps

1. To get in the right mood for looking inside and not fighting what you find, read this poem:

The Guest House by Jalaluddin Rumi³

*This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
As an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.
Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.*

2. Put your feelings about writing into words. The following questions may help:

³ Translation by Coleman Barks ([The Essential Rumi](#))

- a. What does this reluctance to write feel like in my body?
 - b. When have I felt this way before? How have I gotten past blocks in other domains?
 - c. If there is a thought on the doorstep that I am afraid to let in, what is it? What does the fear feel like?
2. Consider what you might tell a friend or colleague experiencing a similar block.
 3. When you finish thoroughly describing your experience of being blocked, save your writing in a place you can find the next time you feel blocked. You might be able to take up the story again when that happens, or you might find it interesting to see how your feelings of being blocked have changed.
 4. Optionally share your piece with a friend or mentor who might help you see even further.
 5. Consider whether there is a story in your writing that might be useful to you in some public context.

Moral: Even being blocked can be a launchpad for writing.

Draft Experiment 4: Write Daily and Keep Records

Story:

My daughter is a post-doc in nursing. In addition to conducting new research, her job right now is to get papers published. Some are offshoots of her dissertation. Some are growing out of side projects that she couldn't resist, including contributing to a qualitative study of family planning in Africa. Some are emerging from the interviews and data collection of her current study. A postdoc is a funny interval between doctoral work and an academic job. It gives people time to get a good start on publishing so that they don't perish when they start the hard work of teaching classes.

I keep my ears open for things that might help her manage her over-full days. My grandson keeps her on the run. I was very excited to see an article from Stanford University titled *Writing Scholarly Manuscripts—Briskly and Well*. Just the ticket. When I reviewed it, I concluded the advice was general and simple enough to work for all writers.

Observation:

At Stanford, the simple steps were tested with more than 90 faculty and graduate students. 95% of the participants agreed that they got more done at a higher quality. Writing every day for as little as 30 minutes, participants found their annual rate of finishing manuscripts went up by a factor of at least two. Some experienced a six-fold increase. This experiment is based on two simple suggestions made by the author of the article, Richard Reis: Write daily for at least 15 to 30 minutes. Record minutes spent writing. My guess is that writing every day means you spend less time loading your brain before the writing can begin.

The article also suggests sharing writing records with a peer or coach. We say more about external accountability in the Share Experiments later in the book.

Steps:

1. Decide on a minimum amount of time that you are going to spend writing every day. Perhaps start with 15 minutes and later increase it to 30 minutes.
2. Pick a time of day that you can commit to writing. For some, that's first thing in the morning, even before checking email. I've known people get up 30 minutes earlier for their regular writing time. Other possibilities include right after lunch or in the evening after supper but before starting the relax-for-bed routine.
3. When you start writing, remember you're not responsible for completing the whole manuscript in this session, just moving the ball forward. You will write again tomorrow.
4. Reis also suggests doing what we describe in Experiment 2 because it speeds up getting started each day. That is, end each session by planning what you'll work on tomorrow.
5. Keep track of the time you spend. That could be as simple as sending a coach or accountability partner a note with the number of minutes in the subject line, nothing inside unless you need to make an excuse for 0 minutes. As you try to write even when you are tired, a little sick, or really busy, it helps to know that someone else is watching and can either challenge or applaud what you're doing.
6. Optionally, once you have an outline of what you want to achieve, start checking off the parts completed. I do that with a spreadsheet where I put Y's in columns for first drafts, second drafts, and polished drafts. I also keep track of the dates when each component is reviewed by somebody else. The presence of filled in columns is very encouraging.

Moral: A little bit of writing every day is a proven way to get a lot done.

Draft Experiment 6: Capture Fleeting Moments

Story: Cherries on the Western Front

My grandfather was an artillery officer on the Western Front in France in 1918. I suspect that his life conformed to the line published in the New York Times in 1915: "Months of boredom punctuated by moments of terror." Fortunately for me, he alleviated his boredom by writing home to his wife. She left the collection to me. I have his description of the day that news of the armistice traveled along the line. I also have his description of an afternoon of leave when he rode his horse along a country road looking for a place to get his first bath in two weeks. Along the way, he noticed some cherry trees full of fruit. Being alone and therefore not needing to be careful of his dignity, he stopped to climb a tree to eat his fill. Later he found a pond where he could wash and then ate cherries again on his way back to camp. This picture of an ordinary Oklahoma farmer in France would have disappeared at his death without his letters.

Many people have observed that history does little to record the lives of ordinary people living through the extraordinary events that make it into the history books. Writing in 2020 and 2021, we are making history collectively as we endure the COVID-19 pandemic and address the calls for social justice encapsulated in the Black Lives Matter movement. What we experience individually adds up to our collective history.

Even within our own lives, capturing specific moments can help. My sister had major surgery in March. As I helped care for her, I kept notes. What did the doctors say? What was she able to eat? What drains and tubes were taken out when? What walks was she able to take? On about day 40 of her recovery, she was feeling very, very low spirited, "I'm never going to feel myself again." One of her friends sent her the notes we had posted on day 20, half way to where she was then, to remind her how much she had advanced. If we hadn't created the records as we

went along, she would have lacked comparison points. Downward comparison from the present to the past can be very helpful in difficult times.

Observation

Imagine jumping forward 20 years. What you remember will be different from what you're actually experiencing right now. There's a lot of research about the way memories change over time. What we remember most are the peak moments and the final moments of a particular event. The lower intensity middle moments tend to fade.

As we face the pandemic, I know that my ancestors made it through the 1918-1919 flu because I'm here. But what did they do? How did they manage the infection? How did they care for the people that were ill? What did they learn that might be useful to us? Can we collect information like that for our descendants?

Steps

1. Set aside a few minutes to take notes about what's happening in your life. Here are some questions that might stimulate your thinking.
 - What's hard about what's happening today?
 - What have we figured out?
 - Where have I advanced?
 - What is working better for me than it did when I started along this path?
2. Perhaps you are thinking, "Ugh, I am so busy. I can barely breathe. How could I possibly write things down?" Don't worry about grammar or spelling or proper diction or fluency. Just write. If that's still too hard, start the camera app on your phone and tell yourself the story. Or call a friend on zoom and record the conversation.

3. Capture the events of right now with other people. Perhaps you could put the phone down in the middle of the table to record your dinner conversation. Here are some questions that might make sense during the pandemic. Some may still work later.
 - How do we divide up the chores? Who's doing what?
 - How have we gotten the children and the rest of family involved in working out the solutions to our daily problems? What part of the responsibility are they picking up?
 - Who are we reaching out to? Why did we choose those particular people?
 - What makes us laugh?
 - What aspects of the old life do we miss the most? How are we compensating?
 - What is new that we actually like and want to continue into the future?
 - What is it that we want to remember about this particular day?
4. Send an email around to people in some group asking them to write a few sentences about a topic of mutual interest. I did this recently sending my cousins and siblings an email on my grandfather's birthday with some quick memories of him. Seven people responded and then commented on each other's responses. It felt lovely to bring him top of mind. Of course, we all remembered different things about him.

Moral: Writing about daily routines may seem dull, but it is actually capturing history in the making.

Draft Experiment 7: Work Out Structure of Repeating Units

Story: Partnership with MJ

When Marie-Josée Shaar (MJ) worked with people wanting to lose weight and/or become more fit, she found that many had no confidence in their ability to change for the better. There were just too many diet and exercise failures in their pasts.

MJ had studied the intricate connections among sleep, food, mood, and exercise. Making a change in one affects the other three. Thus, getting enough sleep tends to make it easier to resist tempting food. Feeling upbeat makes it easier to exercise. Her big idea was to suggest that people start with an area in which they had not had multiple failures in the past. For example, a client with a history of many failed diets may find that getting enough sleep makes it easier to eat smaller portions and exercise vigorously.

When I started working with MJ, she was bubbling with ideas to help people with sleep, food, mood, and exercise goals. Together we came up with the 50 activities that are described in our book, *Smarts and Stamina*. There are 10 activities each for sleep, food, mood, and exercise plus 10 activities to set oneself up for success. There, you see the first structure decision: to have 50 short chapters plus introductory materials for each of the five parts. Our writing really took off when we settled on a repeatable structure for each activity.

Catchy Title

Science Says: 2 or 3 bullet points in everyday language

Story: Sketch of someone trying out the idea

Build the Skills

Mindfulness: Observing self before changing anything. Often getting a baseline

Plan and Execute: The actual activity, generally actions and questions.

Onward and Upward: Reflecting on what worked well about the idea and how it could be incorporated in daily habits

Observation:

Having the structure was immensely helpful, leading to an even-handed treatment of all 50 activities. We never felt stuck because there was always an outline with holes still to be filled in. When we had time to write, we could pick an unfinished activity and fill it out further. If one of us didn't feel like writing a story, we could leave it for the other to complete.

While not appropriate for every book, a repeatable structure can make a book easier to write. As described in Sit Experiment 9, constraints often lead to greater creativity, perhaps because they lead to focus. A repeated structure makes writing the whole book less daunting to the authors and makes reading it easier for the audience. It also makes it easier for readers to navigate back to a specific idea that resonated the first time through the book.

The repeatable structure could just be a section at the end of each chapter, such as The Whirlwind Review at the end of each major section of Chip and Dan Heath's book, *The Power of Moments*. Each whirlwind review lists the 8 to 10 key ideas that they want people to take from that section. The authors had to follow the discipline to identify and list the key ideas.

Steps:

1. Look first at how you divide your work into units. Do you want to have 10 to 12 longer chapters or a large number of short chapters? Can the chapters be organized into parts, such that each part has one overall theme? For example, John Yeager's book, *The Coaching Zone*, contains 12 chapters organized according to three themes: effectively managing self, individual athletes, and entire teams.
2. Look through the books on your shelf to identify the repeatable structures they use. Are the chapters constructed the same way? Are there periodic summaries? Do you see repeated

headers? Does each chapter start in a particular way? End in a particular way? As a reader, which structures did you find most helpful?

3. Based on your awareness of the ways other people structured books, come up with a first draft of your own structure. It can be as simple as listing your chapter titles and then always starting a chapter with a statement describing its intended purpose. It might involve deciding how many stories you plan to tell and where to place them. Do you start with a story, follow it with an explanation, and then get into more detail? It might be using the same headers in each chapter. It might mean ending with an exercise or a summary.
4. Try it out for two or three units. Does it liberate you to get the job done, or do you feel constrained to write things that do not seem useful?
5. Share the pieces written in the candidate structure with one or more friends, writing partners, or mentors. Do they find the structure helpful or obtrusive?
6. Based on answers to questions in steps 4 and 5, make adjustments to the structure, and then proceed to use it in your writing.
7. Whenever the structure feels unnatural or too formal, consider making adjustments.

Moral: A well-chosen structure makes both writing and reading easier.

Draft Experiment 7: Try Speech-to-Text

Story:

Jaclyn had a clear idea of the book she wanted to write, but she wasn't getting it done. She finally admitted to me that she was really good at writing once she had a first draft, but a blank piece of paper made her mind go blank.

I asked, "Could you explain your ideas to a friend?"

"Sure. That would be easy."

"What if you imagined a friend in front of you and explained your ideas into a speech-to-text program like DragonSpeak?"

"It's worth a try."

It was more than worth a try. Jaclyn wrote the first draft of most of her book in imaginary speeches to her good friends. She found an online transcription service that she could invoke from her smart phone. She'd go for walks, flip on the program, and start talking. Once she got the files back, she was off to the races.

She decided to include points of view from several experts in her field. She invited each to have coffee with her, put the phone in the middle of the table with the transcription program running, and started asking questions. For remote experts, she recorded zoom conversations. She got some wonderful raw material, including moments of sparkling eloquence to quote in her book. She could also interact more dynamically because she wasn't trying to take notes.

Observation:

Jaclyn's first step toward a solution was recognizing what she found hard and what she found easy. The problem was half solved when she admitted to herself that she was fine once

she had a first draft. That freed her to think of other ways to get a first draft than continuing to stare at a blank piece of paper in frustration.

When she tried transcription, Jaclyn found that she really enjoyed explaining concepts and telling stories out loud. Donald O. Clifton and James K. Harter hypothesize that, “Individuals gain more when they build on their talents, than when they make comparable efforts to improve their areas of weakness.”⁴ Jaclyn knew that she really liked to talk, and she decided it wasn’t worth her time to overcome her resistance to blank paper.

Steps

1. Decide on the transcription approach you can afford and that will be good enough for your purposes. It does not have to be perfect.
2. You might use a program that you train to recognize your speech, such as Dragon Naturally Speaking. Google Docs and Word Online include dictation features that might be good enough. There are several online services with different prices and quality levels that are particularly good for interviews. Services seem to be getting better and cheaper over time.
3. Particularly if you are paying by the minute, prepare notes about what you want to accomplish during your speech-writing session. This will save you from wasting minutes fumbling around.
4. Launch the program, and start talking. Don’t worry about repeating yourself or searching for the right word. You can always edit out the inevitable fluff later.
5. Read through the transcript soon after you receive it in order to make corrections while the topic is still top of mind. No transcription service is perfect.

Moral: Talking can become writing.

⁴ Positive Organizational Scholarship, p. 112

Draft Experiment 8: End a Session by Planning the Next Session

Story: What should I write today?

When Janet sits down to write, she often wonders, “What should I write today?” What she hears in her head may be a complete blank. By the time she has figured out what she needs and wants to write, most of her available time is gone.

As she runs out of time, she hears her inner voice saying, “I’m just not a writer. Otherwise, I’d know what to write when I get a chance.”

Observation:

Here’s another way to think of it. When Janet sits down to write, she is essentially starting cold. Having to think up what to write is one of the more difficult parts of writing. Athletes don’t start practicing their most difficult skills without warming up with some easier moves. Why should writers?

Steps:

1. At the end of a session when you are fully warmed up, don’t stop before you have picked at least one idea to use as a jumping off point for your writing in the next session. It could be a concept you want to explain. It could be a story you want to tell. It could be a piece of writing that you want to edit. Make a note of your idea in a place that you will see the next time you sit down to write.
2. If nothing comes immediately to mind, looking in your idea parking lot, white board, story seed collection, or partially finished items. We’ll explore each of those ideas in later experiments.
3. It doesn’t have to be just one idea. Perhaps you don’t know whether you’ll be in the mood to tell a story or explain a concept. You could pick one story idea and one concept.

Picking between two possibilities is much easier than finding an idea from scratch.

Maybe you won't feel like writing anything new. It might be a good time to edit, polishing a rough draft.

4. Next time you sit down to write, warm up by writing a draft of the idea that you left yourself from the session before. If you have multiple ideas teed up, check your mood and do something that fits the moment.

Example:

Janet is writing a book about baking bread. Today before finishing, she tees up explaining why you have to let the loaf finish baking before you cut into it as her concept. In case she feels like writing a story, she jots down a reminder of the last cinnamon raisin loaf she baked.

Moral: Look today for a way to warm up gently tomorrow.

Revision is a form of active love, an act of love in progress

George Saunders in On Story

Edit Experiment 1: Edit in Phases

Story: Teaching our children to write

I have been reading books out loud to my husband for many years. He and I enjoy learning together. I often read about topics that are unfamiliar to me. A short list over the last year includes the history of India, particle physics, Neanderthal archaeology, and statistics.

The very best books are a pleasure to read on multiple levels. The information is enlightening, the stories illuminate the main points, and the sentences are clear and musical. I believe I have learned a lot about what makes an unfamiliar topic accessible to the curious.

My husband occasionally shakes his head and suggests that the author needed to hire me as an editor. Sometimes we feel like we are wading through irrelevancies. With a recent book, we found the notes more interesting and informative than the book itself. Sometimes I get almost to the end of a sentence before I realize that I've read a noun as a verb or put the emphasis on the wrong words. There just weren't enough early parsing clues to get it right from the start.

Observation

Honor the editor in you. After finishing a first draft, invite the editor back to reshape and polish the raw material on the page.

I mentioned earlier that my husband taught our children to edit in phases. First drafts are a necessary first step. Editing starts with judgments about the content, moves on to balancing the structure, and only then looks for the little distractors.

Steps

1. Read through your whole draft without making any changes. Try to get a general sense of it as a whole. Does it feel complete and balanced? Make a few notes for later.

2. Then do the rest of the editing (Write Experiments 16, 18, 19, and 20) in order. They represent looking at the piece with a smaller and smaller aperture, from the whole to sections to paragraphs to sentences to words.
3. You may choose to merge certain steps so that you don't have to make quite so many passes through your work. Write Experiment 19 already combines paragraph and sentence levels. Be aware that you may be opening and closing the aperture as you go along.

Moral: There's no point finding the perfect word or correcting the punctuation for a block of writing that ends up on the cutting floor.

Edit Experiment 2: Edit for Content

Story: What Belongs?

I read books aloud to my husband. He sometimes says that a book would have made a good essay. In his opinion, there isn't enough content to justify reading all those words. There are a small number of ideas, but they seem to be repeated without much variation over and over.

Other times, there seems to be so much loosely related content that we feel we are getting a complete mind dump from the author. When this happens, we feel a little bit at sea concerning what we're supposed to retain.

Somewhere in between is the sweet spot, where everything belongs and is expressed with just enough words to interest and illuminate.

Observation:

The goal of this phase of editing is to end up with just enough content, no more. The book or article has a central idea, and everything in the piece sheds light on it one way or another.

As previously mentioned in Write Experiment 1, writers generally know much, much more than they can fit into one book or article. Save some content for your next work. Many publishers prefer authors who know what their next book will be.

Steps:

Looking at your outline, book, or article, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Does everything belong? If you did Write Experiment 1, pull out the notes you made about audience and purpose. Otherwise, it can be helpful to define criteria for inclusion and then evaluate each major idea against the criteria. Who are you writing for? What do they already know? What do you want them to know when they finish your book?

2. Is there anything missing that is needed to make your piece complete?
3. Should the piece be split into multiple pieces? I often find when I'm reviewing blog posts that there are multiple ideas that include separate models or action lists. Why not publish each idea separately, perhaps creating a series and linking them together?
4. Do all of the stories shed light on the main points you are trying to make?
5. Are the stories told with enough detail to make them interesting without bringing in factors that are only relevant to you, not to your readers?
6. Do you let your stories show your points without then telling readers what you meant? Showing is stronger than telling. If the story is well crafted, the conclusion will be clear without you telling your readers what they should have gotten out of it.
7. If your writing is aimed at behavior change, look at your balance of stories. Do you have a relatively even balance of stories about desirable behaviors, undesirable behaviors, and transitions? See Write Experiment 9 for more about story types.
8. If you are including humor to make your points, is it respectful and inclusive?
9. Does it make sense to summarize the primary points of a chapter at the end? Sometimes that makes a book easier to use as a reference. Some of my favorite self-help books end each chapter the same way, perhaps with a list of key takeaways or a set of reflection questions.
10. Particularly in a blog post, do you have a call to action at the end? This can be a single action that you recommend the reader take. It can also be a place to remind people that your expertise is available to help.

Moral: Including just enough content honors your reader's time.

Edit Experiment 3: Cut Mercilessly but Save Your Outtakes

Story: Idea Jar

James had a wise advisor in graduate school. When the professor saw that he was flitting from topic to topic because he had an over-abundance of ideas, she called him into her office.

“James, this is just a dissertation. Its purpose is to show that you can do original research and that you deserve your doctorate. It is not your life’s work. You’ll have many opportunities later to write papers on the topics that pop to the surface of your mind right now. What can you do to keep from being distracted every time a shiny new object emerges from your active brain?”

James’s preschool son had brought home Adam Lehrhaupt’s picture book, *The Idea Jar* about children putting ideas for stories in a jar on the teacher’s desk. That inspired him to find a large jar to put on the corner of his own desk. Whenever he had a new idea bubble up, he’d ask himself, “Does my dissertation really need me to develop this idea?” When he wasn’t sure, he’d ask his advisor, who usually told him to put it in the idea jar. After he had written a short description of the idea and put it in the jar, he found he could let go of it. He knew he had captured it for a later time when he needed new ideas.

After he finished his degree, James used his idea jar over and over, not just when trimming a particular article or book down to size, but also whenever he needed to start something new. His slips of paper often inspired new projects.

Observation:

Part of editing is trimming content down to the essentials. But many people find it hard to delete sections that were hard work to write. To make it easier to cut what needs to be cut, plan to save your outtakes.

The writing that you remove does not have to be thrown away. The content that makes your blog post too long might turn into a separate blog post. The story or concept that you took out of your book might fit in a blog post that helps market your book. It might fit perfectly in your next book. In fact, it might suggest the theme around which your next book takes shape.

Steps:

1. Decide how to store the stories and concepts that you remove from your writing as you edit at the content level. An actual idea jar may not work for long, since the pieces of paper are in random order. Perhaps you could set up a section of your filing cabinet or a master directory on your computer. Then you can set up folders for particular topics and/or one folder for stories and one for concepts. Some people think of this as creating a parking lot for ideas.
2. As you edit, remind yourself that writing the pieces you cut was not wasted time. Even if you never use it again, a story or explanation that you remove may have led to the clarity of thought that remains in your piece.
3. As you cut, store any potentially reusable ideas in your parking lot. If paper files, attach a yellow stickie identifying the topic. If computer files, give them file names that will help you find them again later.
4. When you are at an impasse wondering what to write next, remember to consult your parking lot to see if you can find the seeds of your next piece.

Moral: Writing can be like patchwork quilting, assembling scraps from previous projects into something fresh and new.

Edit Experiment 4: Edit for Structure and Order

Story: You lost me at the start.

Back when I worked at IBM, a VP came to speak to a women’s networking event. The only thing I can remember from her talk is her approach to emails: If she couldn’t tell after reading the first sentence why she needed to read the email, she deleted it without reading any more. I imagined many people wondered why they never got responses from her.

That’s why journalists learn the maxim, “Don’t bury the lede.” As people read the first paragraph of a newspaper article, they are asking themselves the question, “Do I want to read this article or not?” In case you’re thinking I misspelled a word, the lede is the most newsworthy part of the story. Sometimes the maxim is stated, “Lead with the lede.”

Observation:

I’ve heard similar stories told about blog posts. People read the first paragraph to decide whether it is worth reading the whole post. One estimate I found online was that people spend on average 90 seconds on a particular blog post. To average at 90 seconds, there were a lot of blog posts where people spent less than 20 seconds before deciding, “Not for me.”

A good start is important, but so is creating a structure that helps people understand your main points them as you develop them. You might use the “Tell ‘em what you’re going to tell ‘em. Tell ‘em. Tell ‘em what you told ‘em,” approach. You might start with a startling story and then tease it apart. While there’s no single recipe, it makes sense to spend more time with your start and finish than you do with anything in between.

Steps:

Looking first at the whole piece and then at individual chapters if a book, consider the following questions:

1. Have you buried the lede and need to bring it forward? My own preference is to learn very quickly why I'm reading a particular piece of writing. Some people prefer a dramatic opening that creates an emotional springboard. That can work if the lede isn't too far behind.
2. Are your points in a logical order?
3. Does your conclusion follow naturally?
4. Is your opening strong enough that people will want to read on?
5. Are your units – chapters or sections – about the same weight?
6. Could you explain the main point of each one in a single sentence? If not, you may be jumbling minimally related concepts together.
7. If you have several chapters in a book, do they clump together under major subtopics? If so, would it be helpful to have Part 1, Part 2, and so on?
8. Within chapter or blog posts, do you have section headers that help people see the structure?
9. Does your presentation make models or other structures clear and memorable? Sometimes a table is the clearest and most compact way to show the similarities and differences among different elements.
10. Remember the magical number 7, plus or minus 2. This is a rough estimate of how many items people can keep in short-term memory at once. If you have more items than that in a particular model, can you merge any? There's also some evidence that odd numbers of items are easier for people to remember. Can you make your model or list of actions consist of 3, 5, 7, or 9 items?

Moral: The structure you create can make your ideas easier for other people to remember.

Edit Experiment 5: Edit Paragraphs and Sentences

Story: Read Strunk and White

When I was in computer science graduate school, Dr. Fredrick P. Brooks held a class on writing for students who were working on dissertations and journal papers. He had a one-page list of instructions. The first item in the list was, “Read *Elements of Style* by Strunk and White.” The 10th item was “Read Strunk and White.” The last item on the page was “Read Strunk and White.” That was good advice then, and it is still good advice.

Observation:

Clearly my list below cannot begin to cover all the elements of style. Even the very short Strunk and White is 85 pages long. To give you a flavor of style considerations, I am going to include a few items that come up frequently when I’m reviewing and editing.

Steps:

As you read through your piece page by page, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Do all the ideas in each paragraph belong together? Many long paragraphs have two or more main ideas jumbled together.
2. Does each paragraph have a good introductory sentence and a good concluding sentence?
3. Are the paragraphs all a good length? Paragraphs that fill a page can intimidate readers.

Very short paragraphs indicate emphasis. Use them sparingly. When writing for web articles, it’s usually a good idea to have shorter paragraphs, since white space makes an online article seem more readable.

4. Is your main point easily visible in either the beginning or the ending sentence? My colleague Bess Keller reminds us that the first and last sentences in a paragraph are the prime

real estate. You don't put your garden shed on the street where it will be the first thing other people see. Is your first sentence like a garden shed?

5. If you have dialogue, do you put each speaker's words in a separate paragraph? Do you take advantage of the speaker alternation? That means you don't have to label each speech item with "He said," or "She said." Labeling every third or fourth speech item helps people keep track of who's speaking without having to go back and count alternations. Include a speech label when there's information that won't be apparent from the speech item itself:

Maxine muttered almost inaudibly, "You can't be serious."

6. Are your sentences easy to parse? Try reading a long sentence out loud. Do you have to back and start over because you couldn't figure out where to put the emphasis?
7. Do you have any strings of words that aren't sentences? If so, did you write them that way on purpose, perhaps for emphasis, or would it be better to make them into full sentences?
8. Is there a pleasing variety of sentence structure and length? If all the sentences are short, the piece may seem monotonous. Longer sentences, particularly those that have a mix of dependent and independent clauses, require mental work to read. Are you considerate of the reader's time, making the value of the idea worth the work of deciphering your words?
9. Do you embed complicated side ideas in the middle of sentences? When readers have to put aside a partially completed thought temporarily because you've inserted a different thought in the middle of a sentence, they don't always reload the partially completed thought correctly.
10. If you use words that can serve as nouns or verbs, do you provide clues so that the reader knows their functions without having to go back and reread the sentence?

Moral: Give your readers the gift of a smooth, clear, flowing style.

Edit Experiment 6: Edit Words and Punctuation

Story: Too many Ands, exclamation points, and air quotes

As a writers' workshop facilitator, I found myself reading sentences that start with *And* with aversion. "And then I went into the building. And then I stopped at the counter." When I learned grammar, it was always incorrect to start a sentence that way. Had the rules changed without anybody telling me?

I tried to be slightly more open-minded, asking myself questions such as: Is *And* adding anything to the sentence that isn't already there? Does it make the meaning clearer? Does it make the text flow more smoothly? In my observation, it rarely contributes anything.

There were other foibles that jarred me. People capitalize words that have no reason to be capitalized. They put words in quotation marks that aren't dialogue. Their prose is awash with exclamation points, parentheses, and dashes.

Observation:

I got over my aversion when I remembered that I was reading early drafts. Starting sentences with *And* or *But* or *So* (my personal habit) is very common in early drafts, as are connecting clauses with dashes and sticking side comments in parentheses or dashes. That's the way first drafts come out. When people are primarily focused on capturing ideas on paper, these habits of expression serve as lubricant, helping the ideas flow.

They don't belong in a final version. They're like dancers wearing leg warmers in a public performance.

This final editing phase is about taking off any scaffolding that is no longer needed. It's about finding just the right word that can do the work of multiple words. It's about getting

pronouns right. It's about subject verb agreement. It's about spelling and punctuation. It's the right time to remember Strunk and White's command, "Omit needless words."

Steps to edit for diction and punctuation.

Wording:

1. Do you have precise clear words? Are all of them needed?
2. Do you have multiple adjectives connected with *and* that mean almost the same thing? Pick the better or the two, or find a word that encompasses the meaning of both.
3. If you are using words in special ways, have you defined them before you used them?
4. Have you checked words that have multiple spellings with different meanings to make sure you have the right one? Spellcheck may not find these errors: Examples include:
to/too/two; there/their/they're; its/it's; peek/ peak/ pique; whether/weather/wether;
complimentary/complementary; principle/principal.

Grammar including Agreement

1. In every sentence, do the subject and verb agree in all the ways they are supposed to do?
2. Is the antecedent of every pronoun clear?
3. Have you decided what you're going to do about 3rd person singular pronouns (he/she, they, one, it) and are you consistent?
4. Particularly in books or articles about behavior change, have you decided how you are going to address the audience? You can include yourself by using we/our, or you can use address them as you/your. Be consistent. It can be very confusing to have some sentences written in we-language and others in you-language. Sometimes people use we in the general discussion, but then use you in instructions. That's okay, as long as you are consistent.

5. Do you have split infinitives? I usually try to avoid them: *to clearly state* sounds clunky and would be better said as *to state clearly*. Sometimes, though, a split infinitive can add emphasis. Is that helpful to the reader?

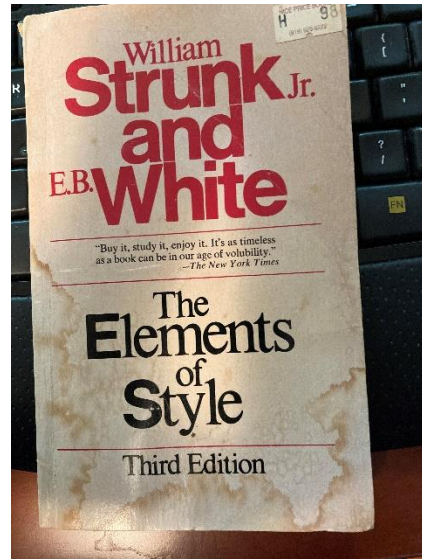
Punctuation: Most first drafts need a pass to remove quotation marks, parentheses, and exclamation marks.

1. Are you sparing with quotation marks around words? My preference is to use quotation marks only for quotations. If you are giving a word a special meaning, italicize it when you define it, and then use it normally. Do not use quotation marks to add emphasis.
2. When you do have dialogue, do you create separate paragraphs whenever the speaker changes? I've seen entire dialogues take place in one paragraph. When you do this, you make the reader's job much harder. Use the skills they've learned reading novels.
3. Do you absolutely need any of the dashes that you've included? Would a period, semi-colon, or colon work better? Remember that colons serve as verbal equal signs: they signify that what comes before the colon is the same as what comes after.
4. Can parenthetical remarks be either omitted or raised in status to their own sentences?
5. Do you use exclamation points too often? Like hot pepper, a little goes a long way. Writer Elmore Leonard suggests no more than 2 or 3 per 100,000 words of prose.
6. Do you want to use the Oxford comma: the comma that comes right before the *and* in a series? Whatever your answer, be consistent. Proponents believe it leads to clarity. Without it, the reader has to work a little harder to decide between two ways of parsing the words, as illustrated here: "This book is dedicated to my parents, Ayn Rand and God." Other people believe the Oxford comma is a waste of space.

This is just the start of polishing your text. I recommend rereading Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*. It contains, "Seven rules of usage, eleven principles of composition, a few matters of form, and a list of words and expressions commonly misused." May your copy be as well-thumbed as my own.

The White of Strunk and White is E.B. White, author of the classic children's novel, *Charlotte's Web*. I figure I can take advice from a man whose book has been enjoyed by so many children.

Moral: Awareness of the elements of style helps make writing vigorous and memorable.



Edit Experiment 7: Go Easy on Quotations.

Story: Two ditches that quotations can get you into

Jason’s book was copy-edited and ready to go to the book designer. Then his publisher dropped what felt like a bombshell: “You *have* acquired permission for all the quotations, haven’t you?” Jason had a quotation at the beginning of each chapter and several more scattered through the text. It had not occurred to him that he might need permission to quote other people’s work. He even had one exercise that used an adaptation of somebody else’s questionnaire. His publisher suggested that he contact an intellectual property lawyer to make sure he was safe from legal action. Jason ended up paraphrasing most of his quotations and providing attribution. For three quotations, he contacted the publishers to obtain permission to use the exact words and paid the prices they stipulated. His book needed more copy editing to make sure he had not introduced errors replacing quotations with paraphrases.

Janet’s story is different. She submitted a piece to a writers’ workshop with this quotation attributing it to Maya Angelou. “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but they will never forget how you made them feel.” One of the reviewers challenged her to identify where Maya Angelou said or wrote this statement. Consulting a quote investigator, she found that a version of this statement can probably be attributed to Carl W. Buehner, a high-level official in the Mormon church. Janet had seen this quotation on placards all over the Internet. But none specified where it was published. The problem of misattribution caused BBC to run an article in 2017 titled *Let’s Save Maya Angelou from Fake Quotes*.

Observation:

Copyright law protects authors from having others use their words without attribution or recompense. As an author, appreciate that before becoming frustrated that it may stand in your

way. Popular wisdom suggests that an author can include quotations up to a certain word limit, but that's not always so, especially with song lyrics and poems. Anything published before a certain date is in the public domain. Fair Use Doctrines specify some criteria against which a copyright infringement case will be considered in court. A copyright covers the expression of the idea, not the idea itself, which is why Jason's approach of paraphrasing was safer for him. He included attribution out of respect to the people whose work inspired his work. Where his work was a direct extension of somebody else's work, he played it safe, acquiring permission, which sometimes cost some money.

Janet now takes anything she sees in quotation collections or placards on the Internet with a large grain of salt. The very freedom that makes it easy to publish online leads to some fast-and-loose misquoting, with no publisher to ask about permissions.

When I read pieces heavily laden with quotations, I feel that the authors are giving away their power. Why not make their own statements, instead of relying on somebody else's words?

Steps

Whenever you feel the urge to include a quotation, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Could I say this in my own words as a reflection of my own expertise without calling on someone else's words?
2. If I need to quote someone either to inspire or illuminate, do I know where the quotation originated? Can I find the source, perhaps by consulting a quotation investigator?
3. If a quotation is really important, do I need to ask for permission or purchase rights to use it?

Moral: When in doubt about a quotation, leave it out or restate it in your own words.

Edit Experiment 8: Include References Deftly

Story:

Jackie wanted to turn her master's thesis into a popular book. That took some doing. A thesis is very formal. It is structured for academic readers who want to know where everything came from. They expect a serious review of the literature and that every point should be backed up thoroughly. They know how to read text that is littered with citations.

Jackie was lucky enough to have honest friends. One told her, "When you have all those citations, it looks like you have nothing to say for yourself. Why would I read your book?"

Another said, "All those citations make it feel too much like being back in school."

Still another said, "Yeah, but if you're going to be saying, 'Research says this...' I want to know whose research. All research isn't created equal. Some of it is crap."

Observation:

Here are the beliefs that shape my reference preferences in writing for the general public:

- Some don't care at all about the background research. They should not be distracted or burdened with in-text citations or footnotes.
- Some are meticulous about checking up on my thinking, or just plain curious about the research. They should be able to follow my references relatively easily.
- I strive to have enough confidence to own my own opinions. Thus, including source information is a service to the reader, not a chance to drop names. Unless the source adds something to the discussion, I may choose not to use it.

Online articles are an interesting case because people know that they can turn *any text* into a link to something else. As a reader, I particularly dislike this approach because it takes me away from reading the article while I'm still in the middle of it and because I don't know where the

words will take me. I’m a suspicious person. I want to know before I click that I’m being taken to an article or book.

Table 2 My Preferred Reference Approach for Online Publications

Approach	Mention the author in the text in a natural way and then include a reference list at the bottom of the article alphabetized by author’s name.
Example	<p>... As Hammer and colleagues demonstrate, we unconsciously adapt to tacit workplace norms...</p> <p>Reference included for Hammer article at the end.</p>

Table 3: My Preferred Approach for Books

Approach	Include an Endnotes section that refers back to chapter and page and gives additional information that the user might want. These end notes can also include discussion that would otherwise break the train of thought in the chapter itself. Think of it as a gift to the especially curious.
Example	<p>Chapter 1</p> <p>p. 27 The VIA character strengths inventory was developed by Martin Seligman and the late Chris Peterson. Character strengths are measured by an online assessment at https://viame.org. For a list of many research articles about character strengths in various settings, see https://www.viacharacter.org/research/findings For a list of books about VIA strengths, see https://www.viacharacter.org/resources/books</p>

Finally, a reminder that we all need periodically: When you use a source, capture the information about it right then, even if you’re not sure you are going to include it in your references. Otherwise, you may have a hard time tracking it down later.

Steps:

1. Consider your likely readers. Are they likely to be curious about your sources or prefer to take your word for it? Keep this in mind as you decide what sources to include and how to reference them.
2. You could follow my preferences, or you could look through other books or articles to find an approach that feels natural to you. Sometimes particular publishers have standards that you will need to follow.
3. Capture your sources as you go. My recommendation is to use a tool where you fill in data fields, such as author, title, publisher, journal, and year. These tools generally produce reference lists in multiple formats, taking care of details such as punctuation and italicizing that can be very tedious to get right. Examples include the Microsoft Word source management tool and various online tools. A Wikipedia article on reference management lists more than 30 tools (will include in references).
4. As you write, keep asking yourself, “Will any of my readers want to know how I know what I’m saying?” For example, you need to include a reference whenever you find yourself writing, “Research shows” or “A study indicates.”
5. Remember that a big shot’s opinion is worth no more than yours, though sometimes it may be more convincing.

Story Continued: Jackie decided to include endnotes with discussion of sources followed by a reference list in APA format. At last minute, her publisher told her the references needed to be in AMA format. She was very glad that she had them in a tool that supported both formats.

Moral: Making your sources easy to find but unobtrusive is a way to honor a range of readers.

Introduction to Share Experiments

Writing is a communication activity, but it's often performed in solitude. People think of writing time as lonely time. Sounds contradictory, doesn't it! This section of the book contains experiments to help writers make the writing process more social. These experiments fill the following purposes:

- Tailor writing to the audience they want to attract as readers.
- See their own writing as other people see it.
- Set up accountability structures
- Get feedback that improves both a specific writing piece and the general writing skill.
- Work in partnership with others
- Publish their work to the desired audience

Working with over 100 authors has taught me a lot about writers. See if any of my observations below fit you.

People are better at keeping promises to others than they are to themselves. Having an external deadline is crucial for people who don't (yet) love writing for its own sake. Otherwise, writing is often considered important but not urgent, and thus stays on the back burner. Sometimes with practice, people get over the dread of writing and grow to look forward to the time spent writing. Until then, deadlines such as commitments to reviewers keep them practicing.

People do not necessarily see what is strong in their own writing until other people point it out. One writer recently was nonplused to hear that the short draft that she disparagingly called "a last-minute bit of something," prompted a reviewer to say she was a great writer. Reviewers can help a writer see what should be retained, whatever else is changed.

People may give lip service to the idea that they should seek brutal reviews, but most people don't really want them, and they don't know how to use brutal comments. In order to absorb feedback, people need to feel that they are safe. Creating a safe and honest place to share reviews is the point of the writers' workshops described Share Experiment #6.

Being honest does not have to mean diminishing the writer. In really good reviews, readers can help writers see where their audiences are likely to misunderstand the intended message, where they bury the lead, where their argument misses a step, where their words lead astray. They humbly submit suggestions for making pieces even stronger while acknowledging that the piece belongs to the writer, who is free to take or leave their suggestions. Sometimes two reviewers disagree about a suggestion, a great reminder that readers are not all the same.

People often think the first draft should be good to go, so they are nervous about asking for reviews on early drafts. However, seeking feedback early helps writers invest their writing effort more effectively. Why not test the overall shape and effectiveness of a piece before investing hours polishing the surface? One of the advantages of collaborating with others is that people see other people's writing in the making. As they see the value of the feedback, they give others on early drafts, they become more relaxed about offering their own drafts for review.

Writing is a skill that gets better with practice and paying attention. What is surprising is that paying attention to somebody else's writing builds the reviewers' skills as much as paying attention to their own writing. Reading a piece multiple times to prepare to summarize the key takeaway, point out the strengths, and make suggestions, people see things that otherwise might go past them: new ways to organize, new ways to use vibrant language, new ways to hook the reader, new ways to cite research to make people curious, new ways to end on a strong note.

Let other people help you become the writer you want to be.

Share Experiment 1: Picture Ideal Audience

Story:

Observation:

Steps:

1. Accept the fact that your book is unlikely to appeal to
- 2.

Moral:

Share Experiment 3: Check for Cultural Sensitivity