

JUMP START YOUR BOOK

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR HARNESSING
CUTTING-EDGE BRAIN SCIENCE TO
BEAT YOUR WRITING BLOCKS AND
UNLEASH YOUR CREATIVITY

A woman with long blonde hair in a ponytail, wearing a black top, is sitting at a white desk. She is writing in a notebook with a yellow pencil. On the desk, there is a pair of glasses, a glass of coffee, and a small potted plant. In the background, there is a framed abstract artwork with two circles on a white wall.

WRITTEN BY
KELLY HAYES-RAITT

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.
We ask ourselves, *Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?*
Actually, who are you not to be?
Playing small does not serve the world.”

Marianne Williamson
Author, *A Return to Love*

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“It’s not about building a better mousetrap. It’s about catching the mouse.”
Kelly Hayes-Raitt, Author, Writer’s Coach

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Introduction



Writers are a self-flagellating lot, aren't we? We're never writing enough, writing well enough, writing often enough...

It's time to retire the whip, people!

Scientific studies have shown that SELF-COMPASSION decreases stress, boosts motivation, and increases curiosity. In fact, neuroscience has explained the evolutionary and/or biological reasons for many of the “blocks” to our creativity.

This book is meant to support you, to help you understand how our brains actually work. Your blocks are not your fault! (In fact, they may be inherited; see chapter one.)

My hope is this book will explain your blocks so you can say, “Well, that’s just my brain doing its evolutionary protective thing. I rise above this!” ...And then employ some of the practical tips offered that will propel you forward. My goal is to help you regain control.

Some of the tips in this book may seem contradictory. Just find what works for you right now and do that one thing. At another time, a different thing might work for you. Don't let doing everything in this book derail you from writing and fulfilling your dream!

You'll hear a lot about the amygdala, the part of the limbic brain that is meant to keep us safe. It gets demonized a lot, but it really has an important job – to keep us safe. (It's ah-MIG-dah-lah. Please don't skim over it; it's critical!)

Hang on that thought for a minute. *I'm arguing that your blocks to writing are merely your brain's way of protecting you.*

Our brains have two basic roles: To keep us safe and to solve problems. Often, these two functions cancel each other out. Or, more accurately, the "keep us safe" part overrides the higher, creative neocortex that likes to solve problems.

When you introduce a change (like writing your book), the amygdala starts squawking. Change = danger. This book outlines the specific neurochemical sequences that get triggered by the amygdala's response to threat. I hope that by understanding this knee-jerk brain response, you'll transcend it.

In this book, I collect several ways to override our amygdala and engage our higher thinking, creative neocortex. You may have heard of some of these techniques used in other contexts. I admit: I offer no secret sauce. One of the things that initially blocked me from writing this book was my limiting belief that I had nothing "new" to say.

But, I'm not about building a better mousetrap; I just want to catch the mouse...

I work with writers who are stuck. We look at specific projects and what's keeping them from getting started – or getting finished. Often, I help with developmental editing and that unsticks writers and inspires them to finish.

If I can help you, my in-box is always open at Kelly@JumpStartMyBook.org.

“To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Author and Poet

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But I’m Not a “Real” Writer!

One of my clients wrote me, “Sadly I have come to the conclusion I am not a *real* writer, as I just can’t make myself devote the daily time.”

What *is* a “real writer”?

Someone who makes a living exclusively from putting words on paper? Or someone who dabbles with a blog and has another “real job”? Someone who writes daily? Or the sprinter who writes in spurts?

Honestly, I don’t think it’s my business to define this. If you feel you are a writer, and you actually write, by all means call yourself a “writer.” *Mazel tov.*

But, if you are like me, you may cringe a little bit every time you introduce yourself as a “writer” – as if there were a little kid around the corner who’s about to announce the obvious: *The emperor has no clothes...*

Seriously, I’ve had my work published in seven anthologies, one of which was published by Random House – whoo hoo! I’ve won nearly two dozen writing awards and have been published in several literary chapbooks. That’s worth some ego props, right?

OK, let’s go one step further: For a few years, I was a columnist for a newspaper in Southern California. My editor, as a surprise to me, submitted my columns for awards recognition, and my column was named Second-Best by the Southern California Journalists’ Association.

I mean, that’s kinda huge!

And, yet, I *still* have that “oh god, don’t anyone notice that I’m naked” feeling when I smile and produce my self-published housesitting book at networking parties.

Where do these limiting beliefs come from? Well, they might not be all about me.

New genetic research suggests they might be hereditary. A study in Atlanta found that mice who associated an electric shock with the scent of cherry blossoms became so sensitive to the smell, they passed their fear along to the next generation. Baby mice who *never experienced* the electric shock feared the cherry blossom scent!

I work hard to identify my limiting beliefs and bust them or bottle them so they don't run the show. It takes some diligence and attention. I invite you to try some of these techniques...and let me know if I can help.

By the way, my client who wrote that she's not a "real writer" has completed three books and several short stories. It bugs me when writers are under the impression that they aren't "real" because they don't {pick one} write daily, send out their work, write at a desk, have a publishing credit, or any host of other self-imposed criteria. If you run, you are a runner. If you write, you are a writer!

“Be yourself; everyone else is already taken.”
Oscar Wilde, Playwright/Poet

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Invite Your Brain to Tea



The biggest challenge I’ve had as a writer -- and the one I hear often from my clients -- is the thought “I’m no expert, who would listen to me?” That thought never ceases to freeze my writing. This kind of thinking is so common, it has a name: *Imposter Syndrome*. And it prevents people in all disciplines from reaching their highest potential.

And I see it in writers all the time.

Imposter Syndrome stopped me from writing about my experiences in the Middle East, which included reporting from war-torn Iraq and working with refugees. I was in Iraq during the first weeks after the US-led invasion and I reported live via sat phone to mainstream radio and TV news programs in Los Angeles.

Accomplished, right? But, “You’re no Middle Eastern expert,” my brain said. “Who’ll listen to you?”

“You’re not a real reporter,” my brain continued. “Who’ll listen to you?”

Every time my brain piped up, I tried to shut it down, but it just wouldn't shut up! I not only felt like an imposter, but a failure, too. Brains generate 4,000 words/minute, and I just couldn't keep up.

Finally, I decided to invite my brain to a conversation. I shut my eyes, got quiet and imagined my know-it-all brain sitting with me at a table, sipping tea (my brain is a closet Brit).

"You know," I said to my brain. "You're right: I'm not an expert or a reporter, and your advice that I shouldn't try to come off as one is spot on." I could see my brain puffing up with importance. My brain loves to be right.

I continued, "There are a lot of experts and reporters out there. But, there's only one Kelly Hayes-Raitt. Only one. And she's the only person who can tell what she experienced. *That's* what readers want."

This gave my brain pause.

"I need your help," I leaned in. "You are so smart, and I need you to help me remember that I am unique and what I have to offer is important." (My brain *loves* flattery.)

With that, my brain sat back and nodded.

OK, I know this sounds weird! I'm not suggesting you become a split personality. But "dialoguing" with aspects of our mind has proven to be an effective tool to help "rewire" our thoughts. In her TED Talk about overcoming Imposter Syndrome, Dr. Valerie Young makes it simple:

"The only way to stop feeling like an Imposter is to stop thinking like an Imposter."

Read more of her tips here:

<https://impostorsyndrome.com/10-steps-overcome-impostor/>

“The only difference between a rut and a grave are the dimensions.”
Ellen Glasgow, Author

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Who'd'a'thunk I'm like Truman Capote?

I get a lot of questions from writers asking how they should set up their writing “spaces.” Frankly, I scratch my head about this.

I write in bed. Like Truman Capote did.

Yeah, I have a “writing space,” but it moves all the time. I housesit, and I’m constantly living in other people’s homes. My writing space is a pile of folders and to-do lists on an end table, or on the dining room table, or on an actual desk.

But where I write best is propped up in bed.

I think the optimum writing space is wherever you actually WRITE! It could be under a tree in the backyard, at a desk, in the tub (think Dalton Trumbo)...or on the bus. (I’m editing this while riding the Tube in London.) Writing is a *process*, not a *place*, and getting bogged down in creating the perfect “space” is an opportunity to let procrastination win.

But here’s one tip I offer: If you are stuck, get out of your routine. Research has shown that we humans are more likely to stick with what is familiar – even if it is not in our best long-term interest. When we are willing to shake up our routines, we’re improving our brains’ neuroplasticity, which improves its ability to connect the dots between different thoughts. This increases creativity.

One way I create my own writing retreats is through *housesitting*, where I live rent-free in others’ homes while caring for their pets while they go on holiday. You can housesit in a rural farmhouse in France, a quiet flat in Chicago, or a lakeside home in Mexico...anywhere, really, where you will be away from your daily chores and routines and get yourself re-inspired.

How to do this? First of all, take my quiz to see if housesitting is right for you. (Housesitting’s not meant for everybody.) The quiz is in my book *How to Become a Housesitter: Insider Tips from the HouseSit Diva*, available as an ebook on my [web site](#) or a [soft-cover or Kindle](#).

I've been housesitting full-time for 10 years in dozens of countries from Mozambique to Vietnam to the Netherlands, and I've learned a few tips to discover which homes will provide *me* with the perfect writing retreat. I hope to help you discover how housesitting can reignite your muse.

I love to talk about housesitting: Ask me anything! Kelly@JumpStartMyBook.org

And the coolest thing for me? *Every* housesit has a bed where I can prop myself up and write!

“Commitment is healthiest when it is not *without* doubt but *in spite of* doubt.”
Rollo May, Existential Psychotherapist

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Have You Ever Been Stood Up?



Recently an acquaintance’s husband of 30 years dumped her while they were traveling in Europe. They had mutual work commitments to complete together, but he just left her high and dry.

How do people do this? How do they ignore the impact of renegeing on a promise and then act like nothing happened?

I’ve been thinking a lot about commitment, as you can tell. Commitment is a choice to move forward without giving yourself a way out. It’s getting off the fence and moving through any fear, trusting that you will be supported. It’s taking a huge breath and jumping away from energy-sapping indecision, lethargy, excuses, resistance or apathy. Commitment is frigging huge!

I have another friend who regularly breaks our scheduled dates to get together with no forewarning, no apology, not even an acknowledgement. And, yet, I reschedule with her all the time. In fact, now that I think about it, she ignores our commitments more often than she honors them. What’s up with that?

More importantly, *why do I keep making plans with her?*

In case you haven't guessed, the "friend" is me and the commitment is to sit my butt in the chair and write. More often than not, I break this agreement with myself – with no acknowledgement.

I've been thinking: What impact does this constant commitment-breaking have on me? Huge, science says.

First of all, my brain knows the moment I make the commitment that I might not keep it and registers an emotional conflict, which suppresses the production of feel-good dopamine.

Next, my brain registers the stress I feel when contemplating breaking my commitment to myself.

Finally, when I fail to keep my promise, my brain reacts as if I'd lied or been deceitful, triggering guilt and fear. To combat these feelings, my brain reinforces the reasons for breaking my commitment and activates reward areas. In other words, to combat the negative feelings, my brain *rewards* itself for the unproductive behavior!

So, consistently making and breaking promises to myself has a cumulative effect that spirals downward.

Furthermore, not keeping promises – to myself or to anyone – can have a major impact on my self-esteem. When I break promises to myself, sometimes I berate myself: *Why can't I keep a simple commitment?* Sometimes, I feel that my writing isn't important enough. Silly, right? Why would I make a date with a "friend" I didn't feel was worthy of my time and energy?

Mostly, though, I just ignore the fact that I don't want to write. If I had a friend I kept standing up, eventually she'd ask me what's up. So, now when I break commitments to myself, I ask, "Hey, Kelly, what's up?" Instead of putting my energy into trying to keep a promise that I really don't want to keep, and then beating myself up for not performing, I put my energy into recognizing and removing the blocks.

As the blocks dissolve, one-by-one, and I become more self-aware of my own fears, I find that keeping my writing commitments becomes like brushing my teeth – just something I do every day to keep myself healthy.

Here's my five-step process after I break a promise to myself:

1. Acknowledge that I broke a commitment to myself and forgive myself for it. If I just brush it off, then my brain merely reinforces the idea that I am not writing.
2. Contemplate the impact that letting myself down has on me. Acknowledge that my confidence plummets and that I fear that I might continue to break my promises.
3. Acknowledge the impact my dropping the ball has on others. Did I let down my writing group by not having a piece to share? Was I late for an editor? Did I disappoint my accountability partner? Forgive myself.
4. Be more mindful when creating a new promise. Scale back the old one, or make a different promise. Instead of recommitting to writing for an hour each day, I'll commit to write for 20 minutes. Or commit to doing an hour of editing. Anything that shifts my brain away from preparing to fail again and into a mode of preparing for success helps.
5. Remove any blocks to fulfilling this commitment to myself – physical and emotional blocks. If I promise myself I'll write for 20 minutes every day, but never set aside the specific time, I'm setting myself up for failure. If I have some deeper emotional reasons that keep me from writing, those need to be banished.

As a writing coach, I can help you uncover your hidden fears and fulfill your dreams. Let me know: My in-box is always open at Kelly@JumpStartMyBook.org!

“Any man could, if he were so inclined, be the sculptor of his own brain.”
Santiago Ramon y Cajal, Author, *Advice for a Young Investigator* (1897)

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Tap Your Way to a Bestseller!

One of my favorite ways to break open my creativity is EFT Tapping. Emotional Freedom Technique was developed in the 1970s and initially used to treat psychological disorders – especially post-traumatic stress syndrome. Now EFT is used more widely to relieve pain, lose weight or release blocks to financial or relationship success.

It is deceptively simple, fast and non-invasive, so the technique has its share of skeptics. But during the last two decades, several peer-reviewed scientific studies have shown its effectiveness. ([This article in the National Library of Medicine at the National Institutes of Health](#) outlines some of those studies.)

So, what is this magical practice?

“Emotional Freedom Technique is based on the combined principles of ancient Chinese acupuncture and modern psychology,” according to [The Tapping Solution](#). “It is a powerful holistic healing technique that has been proven to effectively resolve a range of issues, including stress, anxiety, phobias, emotional disorders, chronic pain, addiction, weight control, and limiting beliefs.”

Sounds cool, eh? I use it to dispel my brain’s crazy-talk about my writing.

It’s really easy and painless to do. You focus on a negative belief you hold about your writing, your creativity, your productivity, whatever. (E.g., “I’m not disciplined enough to write.”) Using your fingertips, you then tap on certain meridian points on your head and upper chest.

By connecting the mind and body, the technique releases old, blocked energy and helps rewire the brain.

OK, OK, I know this sounds really weird. I *am* from California, after all!

But studies at Harvard Medical School conclude that stimulating your meridian points (the same points that acupuncturists stimulate) reduces activity in a part of

the brain called the amygdala and reduces cortisol, the “fight or flight” stress hormone.

The amygdala is part of your body’s limbic system, which influences motivation, emotion, survival instincts, learning and memory. Anxiety, depression, PTSD and phobias are thought to be linked to abnormal functioning of the amygdala – disorders that challenge our survival instincts or are triggered by buried emotions.

“[EFT] Tapping has been shown to literally ‘turn off’ the amygdala, disrupting the stress response and allowing the brain synapses to be rewired for a more appropriate emotional response to a given situation,” writes Nick Ortner on TheTappingSolution.com. “The body is equipped with an energy system that travels along pathways known as meridians. Tapping on these meridian endpoints helps to stimulate this system, and when verbally or mentally addressing the root causes of distress, the areas of blocked energy are able to release and flow naturally.”

I coach my clients (and myself!) using tapping as a means to release negative beliefs and replace them with more empowering, inspiring thoughts.

Here’s how it works:

Focus on your negative belief, really feel it. Feel the fear. Feel the shame. Feel the guilt. Whatever your thought is, find the corresponding emotion and let that feeling flood your body.

While tapping with the fingers of your right hand on the side of your left hand (the “karate chop” point), say out loud: “Although I’m angry with myself for not being disciplined enough to write, I deeply and completely love and accept myself.” Say this out loud three times while continuing to tap on the side of your hand.

Then, move through the meridian points outlined in the diagram on the next page. At each point, shift what you say. “I’m so angry with myself...” “Why can’t I discipline myself?” “I’ll never get my book done.”

Gradually shift to language that forgives yourself and releases these emotions. “I know I’m doing the best I can.” “I release my anger now.” “I am no longer angry with myself for not writing.” “I release my anger now.” Keep tapping around the points.

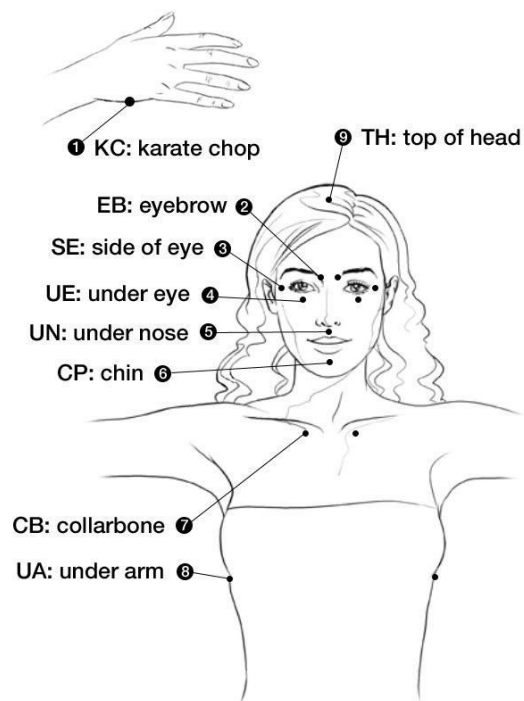
Shift to language that reinforces the type of thinking and behavior you want: “I am disciplined.” “I am excited to write my book.” “Writing my book is easy for me.” Use present-tense, positive phrases. Move through all the points two or three times repeating these positive phrases.

Finish at the top of your head and take a deep breath. Check in with your initial negative emotion and see if it still feels as strong or true. Sometimes, a new negative belief will emerge. You can tap that out, too!

You might yawn as you tap, or get a little weepy. That’s OK, it’s just the energy shifting. There are free videos at www.TheTappingSolution.com to illustrate how to tap.

I also like this [article from *Psychology Today*](#) that explains how tapping works.

Try tapping away those nasty beliefs that sabotage your writing and you might just find yourself dancing around with your new book!



Eyebrow Point (EB)

Where the eyebrows begin, closest to the bridge of the nose.

Side of Eye (SE)

On the bone directly along the outside of either eye.

Under Eye (UE)

On the bone directly under either eye.

Under Nose (UN)

The area directly beneath the nose and above the upper lip.

Chin Point (CP)

This is the area just below your bottom lip and above the chin, right in the crease.

Collarbone Point (CB)

Starting from where your collar bones meet in the center, go down an inch and out an inch on either side.

Under Arm (UA)

On your side, about four inches beneath the armpit.

Top of Head (TH)

Directly on the crown of your head.

Source: <http://www.thetappingsolution.com/tapping-101/>

“Look up at the stars and not down at your feet. Be curious.”
Stephen Hawking, Theoretical Physicist

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Curiosity Killed the Cat



Have you ever been just a teensy bit late to an appointment because you couldn't put your book down? Or clicked on just one more episode of *Breaking Bad*, even though you needed to get up early the next morning?

Why is it that we behave like that – when we know it's against our best interest?

We were curious.

Curious? Just how is *curiosity* tied to busting writer's block?

I'm confident your curiosity will keep you reading this chapter to find out!

Curiosity stimulates the striatum, the same area in the brain that regulates physical hunger and is associated with motivation and reward. Researchers have found that satiating these powerful drives creates a physiological disregard for dangerous or painful consequences. Curiosity may indeed have killed the cat!

Are you curious about how you can corral this knowledge to keep you writing?

Answer: Keep your brain in curious-mode! Sometimes, when I'm on a writing roll, I will deliberately stop in the middle of a scene – or even a sentence – so that my brain will be excited to pick up again tomorrow to see how it all turns out. (I always write tidbit notes about where I'm going, though, so I don't lose the flow.)

This way, my brain percolates on the uncertainty, it stays curious, and – as brains are wont – will be relentless about returning to solve or complete the “problem” (in this case, my scene)....And I will be *compelled* to put butt in chair the next day!

In my writers' workshops and retreats, I share my seven favorite ways for keeping your *readers* on edge by piquing their curiosity. Hollywood has this down; we writers should, too!

“If you had started doing anything two weeks ago,
by today you would have been two weeks better at it.”
John Mayer, Singer/Songwriter

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“How Do I Start?”

I often hear that question. Or, “I can’t decide which project to write.”

Don’t think about writing a book! That’s a daunting prospect, and it may not be the final “product.” (You might be writing a series of short stories or essays instead.)

Shrink your thinking. Just write scenes, any scenes that come to mind. Eventually, a theme will emerge.

But for now, don’t fret over structure. Don’t worry how the scenes “fit.” The only consistency you are going for is fulfilling your promise to yourself to write. You want to build momentum. And to train your brain to be confident about your commitment.

It helps to remember that starting a new project is *change*, and our brains fear change. They crave certainty, as they have for thousands of years. Even the *thought* of change puts our brains on alert. Often, we aren’t even conscious that our brains are in this “threat-mode,” so we just feel uneasy on some deep level about the lack of certainty – about starting our writing project.

And there is a lot of uncertainty in writing: *Will I be able to finish? Will people like my writing? Can I market effectively? What if I fail?* These underlying thoughts are also perceived as threats.

To make matters worse, our brains in this threat-mode use a lot of oxygen and glucose, so it’s more difficult for us to access our more sophisticated areas of the brain that regulate creativity, problem-solving and analytical thinking.

Get out of this threat-mode (first) by recognizing that it exists and (second) by switching to a “what’s in it for me” mode. Research has shown that by focusing on the personal benefits of the impending change, our brains actually ease off the

threat-mode. Imagine how you will feel when you've begun your story and are immersed in writing it!

Remember, there will *always* be an excuse to not do the things that scare you. Don't let fear win.

“Follow your inner moonlight; don't hide the madness.”

Allen Ginsberg, Poet

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How I Wrote a Whole Book, Two Minutes at a Time

Creating a strong writing habit is a creative art in and of itself! Here's my trick: When I'm procrastinating on a writing project, I commit to writing for two minutes – and only two minutes – every morning after I brush and floss my teeth.

Huh? Two minutes? And what does brushing my teeth have to do with writing?

There are two parts to this behavioral science:

Part One: Research has shown that the best way to create a new habit is to “chain” it to an existing routine. That way, the brain doesn't see the new habit as a new activity to keep track of, but as an “add-on” to something already on file.

For example, when you are getting in your car, you probably think about finding your keys, but you probably don't think about putting your key in the lock, or getting into your car, or putting the key in the ignition, or buckling your seat belt. Your brain doesn't spend much energy on these individual tasks because it sees them all as one conjoined task.

So, if you want to develop a successful writing habit, “chain” your writing to something you already do routinely. If, for example, you have a cup of coffee every morning, put your notebook or laptop by the coffee pot and sit and write while sipping your joe.

Part Two: I really like the writing by Stephen Guise, author of *Mini-Habits: Smaller Habits, Bigger Results*. He had trouble getting in shape, so he decided to do one push-up every day. If he got into bed at night without doing his push-up, he got up and did it. It was only one push-up, after all!

Of course, that led to two, then ten, then twenty, and voilà! A new habit was born.

Here's how I combine those two behavioral tips: One thing I do unfailingly every morning is brush and floss my teeth. When I'm done, I sit and write for *only* two

minutes, then I go about my day. It's not a lot, but it's a promise I can keep. No matter how busy I am, I realize the world isn't going to stop if Kelly Hayes-Raitt is 120 seconds late. After all, no matter how late I might be running, I wouldn't go out without brushing my teeth!

At the very least, I have 14 minutes of writing at the end of the week I wouldn't have had. More significantly, I often return after my morning chores and write more. After all, I've stimulated my curiosity and created momentum.

Most importantly, my two minutes of writing keep my book on my mind all day long. So I'm "writing" while I'm driving or walking the dog or doing the dishes. No more feeling like a failure because I'm not writing.

This is how I completed *How to Become a Housesitter: Insider Tips from the HouseSit Diva*.

A final tip: I set up what I will write the night before. When brushing my teeth at night, I jot a note to prompt myself for the next morning's two minutes. This way, my brain can mull over the new writing while I sleep!

“Only put off until tomorrow what you are willing to die having left undone.”
Pablo Picasso, Artist

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“I’m a Master Procrastinator!”



Procrastination isn’t some deep character flaw, or an inability to organize your time. It’s a way to cope with challenging emotions triggered by writing – emotions such as self-doubt or insecurity.

“Procrastination is an emotion regulation problem, not a time management problem,” said Dr. Tim Pychyl, professor of psychology and member of the Procrastination Research Group at Carleton University in Ottawa.

So, let’s examine the emotions. When you think about writing, what thoughts come up? *I’m not smart enough? I don’t write well enough? I’m not disciplined enough? Who wants to face those self-judgments? No wonder we procrastinate!*

We compound the emotional sticky wicket by piling on top of those thoughts our judgments *about* procrastinating, creating a huge pile of negative associations with writing that won’t go away on their own. Every time we think about writing,

we'll trigger both the original fears *and* the low self-esteem and increased stress exacerbated by our thoughts about procrastination itself.

It helps to put procrastination in an evolutionary context: We are hard-wired to prioritize short-term needs ahead of long-term ones. Thousands of years ago, "We needed to focus on providing for ourselves in the here and now," said U.C.L.A. psychologist Dr. Hal Hershfield. Our brains didn't perceive a "future self."

Hershfield's research has shown that when we put off tasks that evoke negative feelings, our brains perceive that not as "procrastinating," but as shunting the tasks off to a stranger – our unknown "future self."

We've already learned that when the brain feels stress or insecurity, it activates the amygdala whose purpose is to remove the threat. Even if we intellectually understand that putting off the task will cause harm in the future, the amygdala goes into over-drive to remove the present stressor.

"Our brains are always looking for relative rewards. If we have a habit loop around procrastination but we haven't found a better reward, our brain is just going to keep [procrastinating] over and over until we give it something better to do," said psychiatrist and neuroscientist Dr. Judson Brewer, Director of Research and Innovation at Brown University's Mindfulness Center.

To change this procrastination pattern, we have to give our brains a better reward than avoidance does – a reward that alleviates the initial feelings generated by procrastination and puts our butts in the chair.

We start by forgiving ourselves for procrastinating in the past. Research shows that when we are able to let go of our judgments about past procrastinating, we are more likely to focus on the task at hand.

Next, we identify the underlying fears associated with writing and work those out using some of the techniques outlined in this book (EFT tapping, guided meditations, working with a coach or accountability partner).

Finally, we can disempower procrastination by recognizing it for what it is – an evolutionary biological response to stress – and accept it, but not be ruled by it. Invite it to tea and politely put it in its place. Then get writing!

“Accountability breeds response-ability.”
Stephen R. Covey, Author, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*

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I’ll Scratch Your Back, You Scratch Mine

Deadlines are a great motivator. But when we have projects – like our writing – that have no deadlines, it can be tough to get moving.

That’s where an accountability partner can make a difference. According to a study by the American Society of Training and Development, you have a 65% chance of completing a goal if you commit to someone. But that percentage of success leaps to 95% if you have a specific accountability appointment with that person.

Wow!

Why is that accountability appointment with another person such a strong motivator? Most of us value the time and energy another person puts into our projects and our brains want to please them.

Furthermore, reciprocity is a strong universal motivator. We want to give back, so that means we need to show up, and, as long as we are showing up, we might as well not show up empty-handed.

Good accountability partners will:

- Respect your time as you respect theirs: You both keep your scheduled appointments.
- Not judge or shame you when you don’t meet your goal, but will use that as an opportunity to help you figure out how you got derailed.
- Be someone you don’t want to let down.
- Allow you to be fully candid and honest with your struggles, and will be open about theirs.
- Be someone who reminds you of your future.

- Support you when you hit a snag.
- Show up for you, as you show up for them. Helping others meet their goals is a great motivator to meet your own!

At the beginning, schedule a specific time and method of checking in. Tuesday coffee dates? Morning emails? And clarify the type of support you each need if a stated goal isn't met. Gentle pushing? More in-depth probes?

Accountability partners can be friends, peers, virtual acquaintances, or professional coaches. A friend and I partnered when I was working on a series of tough articles and she was struggling to edit a documentary. We scheduled a specific two-hour period each day and emailed each other before each session with our goals for the next two hours. At the end, we emailed each other again with our results. Although we rarely spoke, the mere act of checking in with someone who was expecting to hear from me kept me writing.

Professional coaches go a few steps further: We help keep goals achievable, keep the momentum going and will probe a bit when goals are consistently not met. We're more interested in the *progress* of your project than in the "process" of being accountable. We help you make achievable changes (remember how our brains *hate* change?) that move you closer to your writing goals. That's why I often combine developmental editing with my coaching.

I *love* coaching writers. I've faced so many struggles with my own writing and I know how lonely it is – and how invaluable a great developmental editor who can steer me through a difficult piece can be. If I can help you, I'm here!

“Imagination is everything. It is the preview of life’s coming attractions.”
Albert Einstein, Physicist

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Ta-Da!

One of my favorite methods for moving my writing forward is my Ta-Da List. Don’t get me wrong, I have To-Do Lists as long as my arm. But my Ta-Da List makes me smile.

In my bedroom, I hang a piece of butcher block paper where I can see it first thing in the morning. It’s labelled with a bright, happy *Ta-Da!* at the top. Throughout the day, I jot in bright colored markers what I’ve accomplished. It might be responding to an email that’s been languishing, finally getting to the laundry, researching a new essay, or outlining my book’s next chapter. It’s *anything* that I feel good about accomplishing.

This is the Law of Attraction in operation. What I focus my attention on is what I create. By focusing on what is *done*, rather than what is still *undone* (my To-Do List), my brain seeks to attract more “done.” And as I accomplish more, my brain releases more dopamine (the feel-good hormone) creating an upward cycle.

Here’s how it works: Our brains are energy fields (everything is an energy field!). Wherever I put my attention, my brain creates a connection. By focusing on the same thing over time, I keep that brain circuitry active. This has scientifically been proven to change the brain’s structure and chemistry. Essentially, once my brain takes action and gains momentum, it’s tough to shut it down. So, my goal is to focus that momentum toward my goals, not away from them.

Furthermore, when I focus on my writing goals, my mind automatically starts problem-solving. (Brains live to problem-solve!) **How will I get my writing goals accomplished?** This creates new connections and energetic vibrations...and a sense of *fait accompli*. My brain doesn’t ask *when* I will accomplish my goals, or *where* or *why*. My brain simply takes its marching orders from my focus and starts the “let’s solve this problem” reaction.

Although the neurological understanding of this phenomenon is new, the concept isn’t: Way back in 391 B.C., Plato noted that “like tends toward like”!

I like my Ta-Da List to be one of the first things I see when I open my eyes each morning. It wakes my brain up in a positive, inspiring way that has me excited to jump out of bed and add to it!

“Focus is a matter of deciding what things you’re not going to do.”
John Carmack, Engineer

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“I Can’t Stay Focused...”



Researchers have found that once focus is broken, it takes an average of 25 *minutes* to return to our project! No wonder so many books stay unwritten!

It’s important to realize that “breaking focus” is our brain’s evolutionary way of keeping us safe. When we are in the “zone,” we’re not paying attention to potential dangers around us. So, the lower brain periodically – and involuntarily – nudges us to come out of our hole and scan the savanna for predators.

Everyone has different focus-breaking triggers and thresholds, but bright colors and loud noises top the list. Colors, lights, noises all signal either danger or pleasure, stuff the lower brain is compelled to check it out.

Each time our focus is broken, our brains must restart the focus process, which uses a lot of neural energy. Distractions are actually physically exhausting – as is the attempt to ignore them.

We can avoid distractions by wearing earplugs or unplugging from the internet. But the best way to curb that wandering mind is to discipline ourselves to stay “in the moment.”

Like physical muscles, mind muscles need resistance and challenges to get stronger. Think about your brain the way you’d think about a physical workout.

Here are tips for developing focus:

1. Start gradually. Just as you wouldn’t go from couch potato to running a marathon the first week, train your brain’s focus gradually. The Pomodoro Method suggests setting a timer and writing steadily for 25 focused minutes, then take a short break before going back to another 25-minute stint. If 25 minutes sounds daunting, shorten it and gradually work up to that. Your goal is to reward your brain with a “win,” so set times that work for you.
2. Create a distraction list. During your writing time, if you suddenly have the urge to email your Aunt Sally, or look up the weather in Dubai, or get the latest celebrity gossip, note that down on a nearby piece of paper and check it out later. Remember, once you break your 25-minute writing session, it might take you another 25 minutes to get back on track!
3. Think of your brain as a car on a highway: Too many detours down side roads, and it’ll take several times longer to reach your destination.
4. Meditate. Study after study has shown that spending as little as 20 minutes/day on focusing your mind on your breathing relaxes your brain and that overactive amygdala stress center. This can significantly boost your powers of concentration.
5. Pay attention to your thoughts. If your mind starts to wander and distract you from your writing, stop fighting the urge to force yourself to keep writing or to do something else. Instead, become aware of your breath. Focus on your breath and nothing else. This is very effective way to calm the amygdala, and you’ll be able to quickly resume writing.

6. Get some physical exercise. Studies have shown a correlation between moderate exercise and improved concentration and focus.
7. Cultivate curiosity. As we've read, curiosity is one of the brain's deepest and strongest impulses. Curiosity can also stimulate concentration. Ever notice how focused you are when tracking down an answer to a question?

Check this out for a [fun set of exercises to improve focus and concentration](#) – from 1918!

“Done is better than perfect.”

Sheryl Sandberg, Author, *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*

* * * * *

“But It’s Not Perfect!”

Perfection is nothing more than giving yourself permission to fail.

That may seem harsh, but perfectionism takes a tough toll on your brain and energy – and, over time, on your physical health. Your brain literally processes perfectionism as a threat and releases cortisol, as well as the fight/flight/freeze response.

Here’s why: “Perfect” is an impossible goal. And your brain knows that! Because it never gets the satisfaction of completion, it can’t solve the problem (i.e., finish the task). (Remember how brains *love* to solve problems?) So it sends a message to the amygdala, which goes into stress-mode.

Thus, perfectionists’ brains freeze and shut down...and the book is never started or finished. Feelings of shame and low self-worth are buried under “but I’m a perfectionist!” Buried feelings keep the brain in a spiral of stress.

What is then created is a harmful tension between the lower and higher brains. The limbic cortex (of which the amygdala is part) becomes anxious by the unattainable goal, while the neocortex, which does the heavy thinking, becomes frustrated. Anxiety + frustration = freezing. Freezing creates more frustration and anxiety. It’s an endless loop that can take a dangerous physical toll, as well.

Like most “blocks,” perfectionism stems from a fear of failing to meet your highest dreams. For perfectionists, perfectionism is a protection from disappointing some part of themselves. The good news is it’s a developed protection. We weren’t born that way: Babies don’t worry about whether they are turning over “perfectly.” This means that perfectionist thinking can be changed.

Here's how to recognize and banish this underlying fear:

1. Recognize that “perfect” is in the eye of the beholder – another reason why it doesn't exist. Your writing will *never* be perfect to all people at all times. It's just not measurable.
2. Stop calling yourself a “perfectionist”! You can disempower perfectionism by not identifying with it. Instead of saying “I'm a perfectionist,” you might say, “I have a tendency toward perfectionist behavior.” This gives your mind more freedom to alter the behavior.
3. Strip perfectionism of its positive image; it has devastating consequences. Find another label that is both positive and healthy. View yourself as an inspiring writer, not a “perfectionist.”
4. Admit that perfectionism impedes your success. Making one thing perfect usually has a detrimental impact on other areas of your life.
5. Stick to a deadline and enlist help. Your time is too valuable to achieve (unattainable) perfection. Write your book, then enlist someone else to edit it! In the meantime, you can move on to your next writing project.
6. Focus on what is right, not what isn't perfect. Perfectionists lean toward “all or nothing” thinking, so allow yourself to see the grays as good.
7. Seek progress rather than perfection. After all, “done” is not over. Hopefully, you will always be stretching your writing and developing your craft.

Finally, it's your journey and growth that allow others to fall in love with your writing. Don't make them wait for that chance. Allow your readers to grow with you. Now *that's* perfect!

“Speak nicely to yourself, because you are always listening.”
Lisa M. Hayes, Life Coach

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Mind Over Matter



As we’ve learned, your brain is hard-wired to avoid risk. There will *always* be some part of your brain that isn’t “ready” for you to start, to finish or to publish your book. Just accept that, but don’t let that portion of your amygdala run the show!

Throughout this book, I’ve offered tips to deal with specific “blocks.” Affirmations and visualization (as well as Tapping, described in chapter five) are techniques that can override any of these blocks – and more.

Focusing on a vision – whether a picture or a spoken statement – creates a tension in your brain between where you are now and where you want to be. While your lower brain might squeak “eek” at the change, your higher brain will kick in and start problem-solving: *How do I reach this goal?*

Thus, clear and firm affirmations and visualizations can jump-start your brain into closing that gap between your reality and your vision. Done regularly, this can refocus the brain away from your negative self-talk and toward achieving your vision.

A daily practice of saying affirmations or visualizing your goals raises your energetic vibration above fear, makes you more aware of your thoughts and emotions, and gives you greater control over your thoughts and emotions. Greater control = Book published!

Here are tips to enhance your daily affirmation/visualization practice:

1. Visualize the steps required to finish your writing project and feel the emotions associated with each step. Really *feel* the sense of accomplishment at finishing the first draft. Really *feel* the excitement of sharing your draft with a trusted friend or editor. It's the emotional connection that makes visualization so powerful.
2. Keep it positive. Brains don't differentiate between "has" and "has not." Instead of affirming, "I am not a procrastinator," where the brain doesn't compute the "not," say, "I enjoy writing my book right now."
3. Keep it in the present tense. If you are affirming something for the future, your brain will respond by keeping your desire in the future! Instead of affirming, "I will write chapter four of my book today," say, "I am writing chapter four of my book today."

The Law of Attraction.com suggests this method of stating daily affirmations:

1. *Take three deep breaths, inhaling and exhaling to a count of 10.*
2. *Stand in front of a mirror and look yourself in the eyes. Smile, if it feels natural.*
3. *Say your affirmation (or list of positive affirmations) slowly and clearly.*
4. *Repeat the affirmation(s) 3-5 times, really focusing on the meaning of each word.*
5. *Take another three deep breaths, allowing your body to absorb the positive feeling of the affirmation(s).*

In addition, note that it's important to set aside a specific time that you dedicate to your affirmations. They are much less powerful if you rush through them on the

way out the door rather than taking the time to truly visualize what you are saying!

The idea behind this is not “wishful thinking.” It’s to give your brain every biological and chemical advantage to override its fear of change and to support you in getting your book out there!

“No one can hit their target with their eyes closed.”
Paulo Coelho, Author

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5-4-3-2-1

Motivational expert Mel Robbins (author of *The 5 Second Rule*) has a trick for pulling a fast one on her brain: Before her brain can start talking her out of what she knows she should do, she counts “5, 4, 3, 2, 1” and makes a move toward that constructive action.

She calls this technique turning off the internal snooze button. Once she’s begun moving, momentum takes over.

Scientists call this “activation energy,” the least amount of energy needed to get a chemical reaction started, or the force needed to change. Robbins harnesses this energy – the sheer physical energy (that is, the jumping out of bed, or the step toward the laptop) – to end run the limbic brain’s desire to keep things as they are. That’s how she stops an old habit from taking over.

The goal is to consciously activate the frontal cortex, the rational, logical part of the brain in order to override the amygdala’s automatic reflexes. One way to do this is to practice mindfulness. Mindfulness refers to staying in the moment – not worrying about the future or fretting about the past – and being aware of your emotions in this present moment.

Robbins silences her limbic status quo brain by counting 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, and physically moving. Before your brain talks you out of writing that next chapter, try this technique and count down to your success!

“When walking, walk. When eating, eat.”
Zen Proverb

* * * * *

The Next Three Feet

Kyle Maynard (author of *No Excuses*) followed his summit of Mt. Kilimanjaro (19,340 feet) with a summit of Mt. Aconcagua, the highest peak in North and South America at 22,838 feet. He’s one of the few people in the world to master both mountains. Cool achievement, right?

But here’s the kicker: He was the first quadruple amputee to do so! He climbed both mountains *without* prosthetics or special equipment.

Kyle was born with arms that end at his elbows and legs that end near his knees.

“It was our last day,” he described his grueling 15-day ascent of Mt. Aconcagua. He’d been “bear-crawling” for six or seven hours every day, fighting tears, fighting intense pain and swollen limbs, fighting the urge to helicopter out.

“We woke up at 6:00 am. We had to hit the summit by 4:00 or we had to turn around.

“[By afternoon,] the summit was in sight, but I wasn’t moving fast enough. I had a moment of feeling sorry for myself. ‘We’ve been here for 17 days and I’m not going to make this!’ I thought. ‘I’ve been here for 17 days and I’m going to waste this!’

“I had a moment of surrender: No amount of thinking about wanting to be on the summit, or imagining how far we’d come, matters. *It doesn’t matter.*

“The only thing that matters is *right here*. This is the only three feet I have to deal with right now. And then another three feet...

“An hour and half later, I was standing at the roof of South America. It was an amazing moment.”

We’ve all heard we should eat the elephant in bite-sized pieces. Here’s why this works:

Focusing only on the next action – the next scene, the next chapter, *your* next three feet – calms the brain and creates a bit of self-deception.

Smaller actions mean smaller, more specific goals (“three feet”). Specific goals focus us better, inspire us to be more persistent because the goals are more achievable, and keep our brains moving toward finding a solution (i.e., completing the task).

When we achieve each smaller goal, our brain rejoices, feel-good dopamine is released and momentum is created. These constant “wins” give our brains quicker gratification. Remember, our brains are very impatient and hate waiting for rewards!

So, don’t think about writing A BOOK each time you think about writing. Think about writing a chapter, or a scene, and finish your book three feet at a time.



“Make the most of yourself, for that is all there is of you.”
Ralph Waldo Emerson, Author and Poet

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“If I Finish This, I’ll Die...”

I just saw an incredible performance of Tennessee William’s *The Night of the Iguana*. In a play filled with characters who are all seeking something elusive, my favorite is the 97-year-old poet who has been working on one last poem for the past twenty years.

In the final scene (yep, spoiler alert, but you see it coming), the old man finally nails his poem. He recites it while his granddaughter dutifully writes every word. He sinks into a chair, she covers his shoulders with a blanket, and ... you guessed it ... he takes his final breath.

It’s fitting, the man was 97, and his granddaughter was conflicted: She loved her “nano,” yet she wanted her own life. All the old man wanted was to finish his damned poem. But, for how long had he lived with the conflict that when he did, his life as he knew it would be over (figuratively, if not literally)?

Some of my clients struggle with this belief, too. (One of my clients had been working to turn her Master’s dissertation into a book for 25 years! Every time she told me she wanted to write this book, she looked a little forlorn and would say, “But then what?”)

One of my favorite techniques for banishing those type of defeating beliefs is to question them. I love “The Work,” a technique championed by Byron Katie (author of *A Mind at Home with Itself*). It’s a simple process of self-inquiry that challenges my thoughts about my writing – and about everything else. Here’s how it works:

For any self-defeating belief, such as “If I finish my book, I’ll be through,” I ask myself these four questions:

1. Is it true? Is it really true that I’ll be “through” as a creative human if I complete one book?

2. Can I absolutely *know* that it's true? How can I be so certain of the future? And if it *were* true that I have only one book in me, how can I be certain that another interesting, purposeful project won't show up?
3. How do I react when I hold this belief? How do I treat myself? What thoughts loop through my head? How do I feel physically? Emotionally?
4. Who would I be *without* this belief? (This is where I close my eyes and return to my limiting belief and imagine myself without that belief.)

The last step in "The Work," is to turn the original statement around and see if I can find something that might be more true. A turn-around of "If I finish my book, I'll be through" might be "If I *don't* finish my book, I'll be through." Another might be "If I finish my book, I'll be on my way!"

“After all, the true seeing is within.”
George Eliot, Author

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Higher Guidance When You Are Stuck

Very early in our written-word history, the word “inspire” (which literally means to breathe or blow air) morphed to take on a more religious or supernatural connotation, and it’s not coincidental that “inspire” shares a Latin root with the word “spirit.”

When I’m stuck and need inspiration, I solicit help from what I call my “higher self.” Others might call this “going within.” However you describe that special “spark,” tapping it can really super-charge your stalled writing.

Here are my three special ways of tapping into my higher self or inner wisdom:

Who Would Play My Main Character or Narrator?

I close my eyes, get quiet and take a few deep breaths, then I silently ask myself, “If my book were a movie, what actor would play my main character/narrator?” I stay silent and accept whatever thought pops in first.

Still with my eyes closed and staying silent, I ask myself: “Why [X]?” And I listen for the answer.

The first time I did this, I was stuck on an essay about my experiences in Iraq during the war. It was a first-person journalistic essay, and I was having a tough time placing myself in the scene. I got quiet and did this meditation.

My answer? Tilda Swinton or Felicity Huffman. What a shock! Two very different actresses.

When I asked myself, “Why them,” I got, “Because they tend to play characters who have very hard shells, but have quite vulnerable underbellies.”

That insight helped me “place” my narrator (in this case, me) in my essay.

WWOA?

The second quiet meditation I do when I'm stuck is to ask myself, "If my character/narrator were being interviewed by Oprah Winfrey, what question would she ask that would make my narrator/character cry?" Then, I'm still and wait for the answer.

This is a brilliant way to get to the essence of what a character or narrator needs in a particular scene. In another tough essay about my Iraq experiences, I asked myself that question ("What would Oprah ask me in this scene that would make me cry?"). The answer: "Why are you irrelevant?" {Sob!} It was the perfect insight into what I needed to convey in the essay.

The Runes



Runes are an ancient form of Germanic alphabet used by those seeking advice or guidance. The symbols have been found on jewelry and weaponry dating back to the third century AD. I have a set of 25 tiles each inscribed with one symbol that is explained in *The Book of Runes* by Ralph H. Blum. My runes are kept in a small cloth bag.

When I'm stuck, or sometimes before I sit down to write, I think about the subject of my task at hand. I pick a Rune from the bag and read the description in the corresponding book. Often, I get some insight or guidance I hadn't expected.

You could use tarot cards or druid cards for this purpose, too.

These are ways for my subconscious, or my higher self, or my inner self, to shed light on my writing. I call it true "ghost writing," for the spirits are weighing in!

“I can shake off everything as I write; my sorrows disappear,
my courage is reborn.”

Anne Frank, Author, *The Diary of a Young Girl*

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Ready, Set, WRITE!



Writing prompts can kick-start your stuck brain. They are a great way to challenge yourself, expand your writing, and inspire creativity.

I recently started dabbling in fiction by using common idioms as writing prompts. As a journalist, I wrote exclusively factual essays, but I wanted to flex my writing muscles. I considered the challenge a bit like creative cross-training.

The best prompts evoke an image that creates a conflict. It's the *conflict* that gets your problem-solving brain engaged.

Here are some ways to shake up your writing:

- Rewrite a piece you have from a different character's point of view.
- Write a piece in a different genre. If you are a fiction writer, for example, draft a personal essay in first person.

- Write using only dialogue. Practice making the characters identifiable only by their speaking patterns, observations, etc.
- Notice how your body is feeling and write a sentence for each of your senses: What do you smell? Hear? Taste? See? How hot/cold are you? What does the chair you are sitting in feel like? (This is a great exercise for travel writers!) Riff off of one (or more) of those sentences.
- Take a scene from a favorite movie or book and rewrite it with a different ending. Where are Harry and Sally now after three kids and eight years of marriage?
- Answer a simple question: “Why him?” “Who broke the lamp?” “When is she leaving?”
- Finish this scene: The setting is a cramped row house. It’s drizzling outside. A man is sitting in the living room watching a football game. Remnants of a lunch litter the coffee table. A woman walks in drying her hands on a dish towel. What’s next?

“Don't believe every thing you think.”
Byron Katie, Author

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The Final Word: A Guide to the Tips

Throughout this ebook, I've woven in some techniques I use to overcome my fears that block my creativity. Not all of them work all the time. But I like to keep a lot of arrows in my quiver!

Any of these techniques can be used with any of your fears. Here's where to find each of the techniques:

Reframe the issue through a guided meditation – a conversation with your brain

“Invite Your Brain to Tea”

page 8

Shake up your routine

“Who'd'a'thunk I'm Like Truman Capote?”

page 10

Become more mindful when making commitments

“Have You Ever Been Stood Up?”

page 12

Emotional Freedom Technique – Tapping

“Tap Your Way to a Bestseller”

page 15

Create curiosity

“Curiosity Killed the Cat”

page 19

Focus on the personal benefit of a completed task

“How Do I Start?”

page 21

Create a consistent mini-habit
“How I Wrote a Whole Book, Two Minutes at a Time”
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Replace your brain’s current reward
“I’m a Master Procrastinator!”
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