

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO  
WRITING ON YOUR TERMS  
USING YOUR OWN HONEST-TO-GOD, GUT-WRENCHING VOICE



BY REBECCA T. DICKSON

**The Definitive Guide to Writing on Your  
Terms, Using Your Own Honest-to-God,  
Gut-wrenching Voice**

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over your shoulder. really.

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Rebecca Tsaros Dickson

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# FOREWORD

by [Erika Napoletano](#)

I just stared at him. I had no words, no witty retort. I sure as hell couldn't slap him. I didn't even know if I should. I just couldn't believe what he said.

“Congratulations on becoming a writer!”



As I was leaving my 20<sup>th</sup> high school reunion back on a humid Houston night in 2010, these are the words that a classmate lobbed in my direction.

First, I had no idea that my writer-ness was something eligible for an award. Secondly, I was confident that this guy had no idea what I really do for a living and that writing is only part of it. Finally, it was confirmed – 20 years later and this guy was still a douche.

I didn't *become* a writer. I've *always* been a writer. Some people get their kicks from cocaine, booze, and/or hookers. Mine come from creating and telling stories. And I'll tell you – the most directionless, foundering period of my life was the seventeen years I spent *not* writing and trying to do everything else because that's what everyone else said I should do.

So, I'll ask you this: Are you going to listen to your gut – that thing that keeps nagging you to write – or everyone else? There will always be douches in the world like the guy from my reunion. They're people who don't get that

we need humans – their quirks, nuanced ways of holding coffee cups, and odd-to-us ways of getting through life – like they need a cup of ridiculously named, highly acidic coffee from a purveyor that insists we learn a new language or order a “large.” Humans fuel us. We can’t write without them.

The day I stopped listening to everyone else’s idea of what I should be doing instead of what I felt I must be doing, my life and literary path changed. I went from a girl with a blog to a girl with two published books, two magazine columns, a TEDx talk, and a community that keeps my ass on the straight and narrow.

Funny – that community is what I craved all along. Those people who loved my stories and who in turn, shared theirs with me. They’re the only reason I get to do what I love every day.

In the pages that follow, you’re going to hear some stories. You’re also going to get a few pretty useful tools. But here’s the catch – you have to *do something* with them. Your writing will never get to a place where you look at it and say, “Holy fucking shit. That worked, didn’t it?” if you’re writing from a place of fear instead of a place of purpose.

Our purpose here on this big blue marble is to tell the stories no one else can when they cry out to be heard. And that’s exactly why I just turned to my classmate, the one rich with congratulations on my *writerly* achievements, and just said, “Thanks.”

Because he doesn’t get it. Never will. And that’s cool. In fact, it’s better that he doesn’t get it, as it gave me a quirky little story to tell.

Let’s go find your stories – the whys, wherefores, and what the hell is keeping you from writing them. Sack up, pen to paper, connect your brain and gut. The days of disconnect are over.

This book is for *you*.

It wouldn't be here without Michael Xavier, Laura Howard, Erika Napoletano,  
Kellie Elmore, Raneé Dillon and Charles Bivona.

If you see them, say thank you.



“They say that times changes things, but you have to actually change them yourself.” - Andy Warhol

...

“The act of writing is an act of optimism. You would not take the trouble to do it if you felt it didn't matter.” - Edward Albee

...

“You have to write the book that wants to be written. And if the book will be too difficult for grown-ups, then you write it for children.” - Madeleine L'Engle

# INTRO

*The Definitive Guide to Writing on Your Terms Using Your Own Honest-to-God, Gut-wrenching Voice* is a digital book that includes 136 pages of “F\*@K yeah” content, exercises and samples of my own writing, as well as videos to inspire.

This book is for writers who need help figuring out their voice, how to develop it, what tools they need to make it happen, how to use those tools and then how to package it all up. In sum: It’s information, challenge, inspiration, strategy, tips, and practical advice from moi on how to be genuine and clear.

Also, I swear. A lot. And I’m not sorry.

**I wrote this handy little guide to help you find your writing voice** because it’s the first step in writing on your own terms. You are here – on this planet – to be you. Not some worn-out version of what everyone else wants you to be. Besides, the world already has too many people trying to write to please others. Sure, they also fail miserably, but it’s because they don’t know any better.

After reading this, YOU will.

For clarity, this is not a guide to publishing. This is not a “Five tools you need to succeed” piece (because I think those are bullshit). Most importantly, this is not a guide to becoming a “real writer.” No one needs those.

You’re a real writer the moment you say you are and take steps to make it happen.

What every writer does need is an internal permission slip. We need to say yes to our voice, to develop a recording in our head that says, “I am allowed to be happy.” “I am allowed to do what I love.” “I don’t care what anyone else thinks. This is what I need to say, and I am going to fucking say it.”

But who am I to tell anyone how to “just write”?

**I did it.** I wrote for my life. For my living. For my sanity. I found myself in a place where my choices were either to become the best goddamn writer I could be, or lose everything. You can read all about it on my website.

Most people do not have agendas nearly so dramatic. Maybe you want to write but feel stuck, hampered, uninspired. Maybe you’ve always dreamed of writing but don’t know where to start. Maybe you have something in progress but lost your motivation.

You can do this. In this book, I’m going to show you how.

And it starts with figuring out who you are and what you want to say.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1 – Make fear your bitch	1
Chapter 2 – Get unstuck	11
Chapter 3 – Two of the most important lessons I ever learned about writing	22
Chapter 4 – Who is your person?	36
Chapter 5 – The writer’s super power	42
Chapter 6 – Show. Don’t tell.	52
Chapter 7 – Be your foxy self	62
Chapter 8 – Create, Goddammit	74
Chapter 9 – Enthusiasm is your best f*cking friend	83
Chapter 10 – Polish that shit	90

Chapter 11 – Don't do this	98
Chapter 12 – Context is everything	106
Chapter 13 – Characters	112
Thanks for reading!	
Hang tough. Be you. The world is waiting.	119

## CHAPTER 1 — MAKE FEAR YOUR BITCH

*“If you are writing without zest, without gusto, without love, without fun, you are only half a writer.” – Ray Bradbury*

Welcome and congratulations on taking the first step to seriously amp up your writing. This book is designed to help you lose the fear, ditch the skim-the-surface storytelling, and put your readers right down in it.

### **The thing you need to know:**

Writing is a two-part process. We use two separate, distinct portions of our brain to create and then assimilate. It’s damn near impossible to do it all at once. It’s important you know why this happens and how it works. Your creativity depends on it.

First, and most important, we writers have to know how to create – how to shut off the internal editor, and write exactly what pops into our head as it arrives. Second, we have to know how to critique. This is the part where we decide what stays and what goes. What could be said better, or what’s just superfluous.

**The trick, ladies and gents, is that your brain cannot create and critique simultaneously. And if you try, you’ll get stuck. The infamous “writer’s block.”**

Here’s why:

If you’re looking to edit and place words “just so,” your brain is not open to receiving new ideas. In those moments, we are trained to detach and doubt. And most of us excel at detaching and doubting. Instead, when we

create, we need to give ourselves permission to write anything. New storylines, plots, character motives, whatever, won't come if we are in the mode that rejects and critiques.

The take-home message? *You cannot and will not generate fresh ideas, turns of phrase, plays on words, adjectives or anything other great idea if you do not open your mind to every bad idea as well. Accept them all. Every. Single. One. Editing is not part of this.*

Once you learn to separate creating and critiquing, your creativity will improve. Creating is all about saying yes. It's about losing the fear. Anything goes, so nothing is judged. Don't question it. Don't hedge or ponder. Just write.

The better you become at losing the self-editor, the more good ideas you will generate. In addition, knowing that you will be editing later actually frees you up to go further and further into new territory. Literally be crazy. Compose nonsensical paragraphs. Who cares? We'll edit later. When you know this is the first of two stages in your writing, you will feel safer and therefore write more freely. You will be more creative.

The fact is we all inherently know how to be critical, perhaps a little too well. We're writers. What we need to practice is letting loose. Embrace this gift. Celebrate it. It helps to bring the **raw, unencumbered you** out onto the page. And, if you let it, it will change everything.

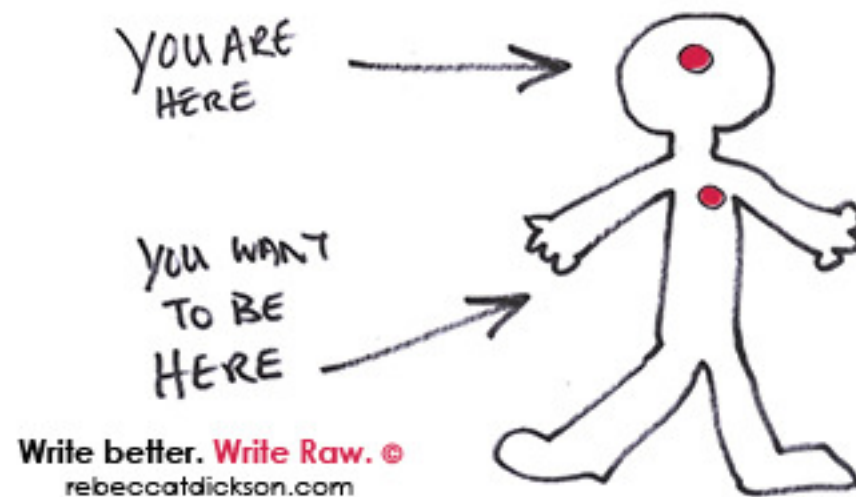
Don't worry. We'll be talking about all of the above ad nauseum. It's my thing. Well, that and no-nonsense, in-your-face prose. But enough about me. What about you?

**Your first task** is to [send me](#) a note. Tell me who you are, what you do, what you want to do, and what your toughest obstacle seems to be in writing on your own terms. Why are you reading this book? When did you begin to write? What writers do you like? What frightens you or frustrates you most about writing? Along with anything else you want to share.

This is now the great expedition for finding your voice – and letting it out.

When you've completed your bio of sorts, email it to **beckster7219 (at) gmail (dot) com**, with the subject **"Who I am."** You can paste your words directly into the email. Not kidding. (You don't *have* to email me. But it would be cool to hear from you.)

Ready to rock? Shine? Sizzle? Let's go!



Isn't he cute?



## Right. Fear.

She says: “I need help finishing this manuscript. I’ve been working on it, off and on, for almost four years. I don’t know where to go next.”

What she means: *“What if I suck? What if no one reads my book? What if I’ve wasted four years on this already?”*

He says: “I’ve never written a novel before, but I have this great short story that I want to develop into something. It started as just a few hundred words and I’ve developed it to about 2,000. But now I’m stuck. I’m not sure what to do. I really want to write this, but I’m pretty much convinced nothing more can be said.”

What he means: *“What if I suck? What if no one reads my book? I feel stuck and blocked and have no idea where to turn.”*

She says: “I’ve always had this idea to write fiction. For the last 20 years or so, I’ve only done non-fiction and deadline writing, but I’ve harbored this dream of penning my own novel. Recently, it’s been bugging me deep down that I haven’t done something about this. But I have kids and a husband and a full-time job. I’m just not sure I will ever have the time to write what I want to write.”

What she means: *“What if I suck? What if no one reads my book? What if I actually follow up on my lifelong dream and it turns out to be a disaster?”*

## Whoa. I’ve been there.

This is the voice in your head that lies.

“Putting yourself out there could be embarrassing,” it says. “If you take time to follow your dream, it could be a complete waste of time. Other people in your life might be unhappy if you’re not as available for their needs.”

Fear – albeit ridiculously normal – sucks.

In 2001, I took my first reporting gig at a prominent newspaper. I was in the midst of a divorce, raising an infant, miles from family and friends. The stress of a dissolving marriage with a tiny baby is more than enough. Add that I was nearly a decade older than my Ivy League colleagues and, in my eyes, lacked the experience and skills, and I was downright terrified.

Fear convinced me that my boss was sure to discover I was a fraud. That I couldn’t write. And then I would lose my job, my house and possibly my ability to take care of my son. What’s more, I allowed those thoughts to bind me so tightly, I couldn’t write a word without deleting it five times before committing to it.

I messed around with my words and my self-confidence so much, my work became garbage. It was under-reported. Details were missing because I spent more time dealing with the fear of writing than I did on my job of reporting.

It did not get better with time. A few months in, I became paralyzed, completely blocked – desperate to do my job and simultaneously scared to death of actually doing it. Every day, I expected to be called into the corner office and fired.

I earned my BA in journalism in 1995, and had hopes of reporting for a living since I was a teenager. I’d dreamed about *this* job for almost 15 years. I knew my anxiety was holding me back. But I didn’t know how to fix it.

## **Screw that.**

Then the strangest thing happened. The fear bottled up inside my gut turned into complete and utter indignation. I got real.

The job I wanted – talked about, envisioned and ultimately begged for (that’s another story) – for more than a decade was in my lap, as though someone had hand-delivered a pretty pink box with everything I ever wanted inside. Yet I was letting my fear take it all away.

*Um, no.*

I was going to write. I was going to feel the fear and do it anyway. Even when it meant taking notes during an interview with a particularly powerful politician while my hands shook. Even when it meant knocking on the door of a woman whose car collided with her boyfriend’s, instantly killing him. The higher the stakes, the better.

I became known for thorough reporting and exceptional deadline writing, the very skills I struggled so much with in the beginning.

What I inadvertently learned was a quirky, yet universal thing about fear: **The only way out is through.** I was good enough. Smart enough. Talented enough. But it took the risk of losing my dream job and my lifestyle before I would examine those fears in the light.

And it wasn’t that scary after all.

**You can do this.**

**Don't believe me? Watch this.**



It's so easy to get stuck thinking in terms of how things should be. Of how we want to be perceived. No one gets married planning for a divorce later. No one takes a job expecting they can't do it. But when the shit hits the fan and the pressure explodes all over you, remember you still have total control. You choose how to respond.

Forget everyone else. You want to write? Then write.

You don't need to "become" a writer. You're either literate or you're not. What you need is a boost in confidence. You need to believe in yourself.

*What if I suck? What if no one reads my books? What if I do it wrong?*

The beauty of writing is you cannot do it wrong. Even when you jot down complete and utter crap, you're teaching your brain to develop creative muscle and training yourself to say what *you* want to say. That's HUGE. That is saying yes to your voice. **And that is more than most people do in a lifetime.**

Think about how incredible it would feel to write that novel, short story, or thing you've been dreaming about writing for as long as you can remember.

Fantastic. Beautiful. Purposeful. Vital.

Instead of enveloping yourself in fear, embrace the possibilities. Anything can happen when you put your pen to paper.

To prove it, go get a pen and a piece of paper. We're going to make a list of all the things that used to scare you (or still do).

**My list goes something like:**

- Motorcycles. Never been on one. Never will. Even the sound freaks me out. This fear made it especially interesting to cover the infamous Bike Week in Laconia, NH, each year for the paper. (Look it up.)
- Giving birth. The unknown. Enough said.

- Spiders. I had a boyfriend who summed this up perfectly: “Here is a woman who thinks nothing of tossing an aggressive German shepherd across the room. But show her a spider and she’s on top of a chair, screaming like she’s about to die.” (I’ve been training and showing German shepherds for almost 20 years.)

Some people actually choose to do things that scare them. They race cars, speak in public, go sky-diving. Some people only face their fears when forced. I fall in the latter category. Either way, the critical component:

**Being fearless has nothing to do with it.**

Fear is with me and you, and everyone else, every day. Trying something new, pushing yourself to new heights, is scary. No one is unafraid all the time. The difference is in perception.

**It’s about desire.**

How bad do you want a thing? How much are you willing to risk to accomplish it? When you’re on your deathbed at 96 years old, do you want to look at your great-grandson and say, “Yeah, I went sky-diving a couple times. It was badass” Or “Yes, I wrote those books. I had a story to tell that the world needed to hear” Or even “I wish you could have seen me on the high-wire. I set a record that day”?

Or, if you’re like me, you just want to be able to call your ex-boyfriend and say, “I went into that damn root cellar and killed a wolf spider the size of my fist. So there.”

Understand, no one can completely eliminate risk. Stunt men and adrenaline junkies know this, which is why they do their best to reduce it. They wear every available piece of safety equipment. They double and triple check the race car. They take classes.

The same goes for public speakers. They know the material so well, the audience won't be able to come up with a question they can't answer. They practice endlessly. Speaking in front of people is not scary in the same way as, say, swimming with sharks. But it's still a very real fear. And it's not dissimilar to the fear of writing.

In both cases, what we're actually afraid of is looking silly. (That's pretty much every human's most basic fear, actually.) But by practicing, preparing, studying, we reduce that risk. Besides, if we screw up writing, we're not going to die.

So decide. Do you want to write? Mitigate the risks as much as you can. Then take action. No one has a choice about fear. We are going to be afraid. But we can decide what to do about it.

### **What's next?**

Define why you want to write. Be as specific as you can. Why have you dreamed about it your whole life? What is so appealing about writing? Money? Working alone? Working for yourself? Organizing words on a page gives you a sense of peace? You like those blazers with elbow patches so much and need an excuse to wear one every day?

Figure it out. Then print it in big, fat bold letters and tape it to the top of your computer screen.

Seriously. Do it. You will need this when the going gets rough.

## CHAPTER 2 — GET UNSTUCK

*If you want it, come and get it.*

In eleventh grade, my English teacher was badass. How badass, you ask? So badass, I went to the guidance office in tears every day for a week, angling to transfer to any other teacher. No dice. Without an alternative, I sucked it up and attended.

And – BAM – I learned something.



This is significant for two reasons: First, I was a typical teenage tangle of hormones and rage, complicated by too much family drama (and an unusually high level of anxiety). I was afraid of almost everything. The prospect of being forced to do something, particularly writing, scared the bejesus out of me. Second, up until then (16 years old), I had never done something against my will *and then* discovered I was good at it.

The badass teacher I tried so desperately to get away from brought about a turning point in my life. She said *I was a good writer*.

**The lesson: When you run out of excuses, you just might succeed.**



Those conversations, those tiny moments of praise in eleventh-grade English, inspired me enough to advance my education. I earned a BA in journalism from the same college the badass English teacher attended. We kept in touch over the years. I worked several jobs – as a police dispatcher and a dental assistant – to pay bills while finishing my degree. The teacher was tough, but fair, an attitude I adopted as my own. Tough hid the anxiety that only increased with time.

I graduated and moved north, taking a job as a 911 operator because the pay was decent. Life or death situations via telephone didn't bother me. But the thought of picking up a pen for a newspaper or any other publication – the thing I paid a high price for, in cash and all-night study sessions – was still just some pipe dream. It was a *"Someday, maybe."*

So I didn't write. Yet every time I saw an internal memo, I corrected the grammar and punctuation in my head. When I read for pleasure, I often scoffed at overused clichés and passive voice. Mostly, I was sure *I could say that better.*

Still, I didn't. **Because complacency is easy and fear is a douche.**

Fast-forward a few years. Now, I'm married and have an infant, a house and a slew of adult responsibilities. I'm lucky enough to stay home with my son rather than go back to answering 911 calls. But I'm still not happy. Not satisfied.

My husband and I decide the family needs a little extra income, so I take a part-time job as a newsroom clerk for a local daily. My mornings become data entry, filing, and writing wedding announcements and obituaries. I like the bustle of the newsroom. I like rubbing shoulders with some of the country's elite graduates, the up-and-coming *Times* columnists and star reporters. Because that's who they are. Unbeknownst to me, I was hired to clerk at the launching pad for those who would become some of the nation's foremost journalists.

It didn't take long for my fiery lust for writing to rekindle. I was hungry. But I didn't know if I was good enough. I didn't graduate from Ivy League. I was older, out of practice. College was a long time ago. **I made a million excuses for not exploring whatever opportunities I could trip over working for a prestigious paper.**

Until I had no choice – again.

My marriage fell apart. Things got messy. I wondered if, perhaps, I could write well enough to get a full-time job reporting. I needed options. A part-time clerk paycheck would not do. So I summoned all my courage and emailed the boss, expressing casual interest in helping out if they were short-handed. The boss replied – with my first assignment. And that was it.

I wish I could tell you that I dove in and became an overnight success. I would love to say I was a great writer and reporter out of the gait. But that's bullshit.

The truth is that a staff of incredibly patient and attentive editors covered my ass on more deadline nights than I care to remember.

The truth is that I was good at feature writing or previewing entertainment news. I did okay with shorter pieces. *But I was still scared.* And that fear permeated my deadline writing skills like a dollop of ink in a bucket of water. It clouded my ability to think. The words got stuck. The fear almost prevented me from ever writing again.

Almost.

By now, my marriage was over. Steps were underway to finalize the thing. I was killing myself to get past the fear and just write. I knew my work was not up to par, but I didn't know how to fix it. By some crazy, random good fortune, the boss decided that, despite a rough start, I did have talent. He threw me an entry-level reporting gig at a satellite office.

But I continued to struggle, almost to the point of getting fired. **That ugly fear of failure bound me so tightly, I couldn't write a word without deleting it five times before committing to it.** I did not miss deadline. But I dicked around with my writing so much, obsessing over each comma and participle, my work lost its substance. I spent more time dealing with my fear of writing than I did on my job of reporting.

My boss was not happy. I became terrified to go to work, but more afraid of staying home. This was the job I dreamed about for almost 15 years. What's more, I needed it in order to take care of my son. I knew my anxiety was holding me back. But I didn't know how to address it.

Then the strangest thing happened. The fear in my gut turned to complete and utter indignation. My dream had come true and I was letting my fear take it all away.

We already know how that ended. (If you missed it, go back to chapter one.) The point: Writing is a journey. We writers either choose it or it is thrust upon us. Either way, it's the beginning of everything.

***What if I suck? What if no one reads my books? What if I do it wrong?***

Don't get trapped by thinking about perfection. You're not perfect. I'm not perfect. Nothing is perfect. F\*ck it. Write anyway.

Forget the pressure. Forget your expectations. If you dwell on what's metaphorically over your head, you will stall. Break it down into tiny, manageable bites. One of the most common ways writers get blocked is by aiming for "one draft and done." Even Hemingway needed more than one draft. You're not superhuman. Knock it off.

**Something to inspire.**

Click. Watch. Smile.



Oh my God, right? And it's true.

"You just need to be yourself."

So what do you do when fear has you by the balls? When your words are a jumbled tumor lodged in your throat?  
A few things.

**Let's get unblocked.** Here are eight (8!) ways to get your words flowing NOW.

- 1. Just write.** Write what pops into your head. No hedging. No second-guessing. Absolutely no editing. Write song lyrics or spell your name backward if you have to. Write complete and utter crap. Incomplete sentences. Stuff that doesn't even make sense to you. Play with words. I've been known to grab crossword puzzles and word searches. You never know what will spark inspiration.
- 2. Brainstorm** around one phrase or even one word. "Her lips are soft." Why? What do they look like? Soft like powdered snow? Soft like a down comforter? Soft like melted ice cream? What color are they? Painted cotton candy pink? Glossed with silver sparkles? Are they thin or full? Fill a page about those lips with all manner of adjectives or phrases to describe them. Later, you can choose what you actually use in your work.
- 3. Break it down.** Avoid – at all costs – thinking in terms of word count, chapter breaks, pages, etc. You will overwhelm yourself. I require the writers I work with to swear off checking numbers of any kind. It's counter-productive. Instead, decide which section of the manuscript you want to work on, then concentrate only on that piece. At the top of a blank page, write one sentence that sums up the section. As you write underneath it, that sentence will remind you to think about and write about that. It will keep you focused.
- 4. Be as specific as you can.** Good writing is detailed. Those details bring readers into the story so deep, they get lost. As writers, we love this. If a man is standing at the door on page one, I want to know what kind of door, what color, what the doorknob looks like, if it creaks, how big it is, which way it swings open, and how often that door is used. Will you use every piece of that detail in your final manuscript? It doesn't

matter. Until you know the story, you cannot tell the story.

**5. Research.** This is a biggie. Sometimes, writers get caught up in writing “just enough.” We are practiced in the art of being concise. Expanding on what we believe to be a complete thought or scene can appear futile, a waste of time. Not true. Writing more than you need is necessary when you’re blocked or stuck. Let’s say you already filled a page with description of your character’s hands and decided he’s a mechanic, but you don’t know where to go next. Tell us what kind of mechanic – does he work on cars, trains or planes? Then look it up. Find out what those people do all day. The chemicals they are exposed to. The tools they use. The environment they work in. The stress level. Examine the names of whatever machine parts they work on. Will you need all of this for your final manuscript? No. That’s not the point. The more you know about your character and his environment, the easier it becomes to tell his story – and how he got those gashes on his palms.

**6. Tell a story across your hand.** Can’t complete an outline to save your life? Me either. And I have great news. You don’t need to. In elementary school, teachers tell their students to count each part of a story on their fingers instead.

So let’s say your story is about a kid who gets in a fight at school. Break it down.

1 – He woke up.

2 – He got dressed and had breakfast with his step-sister and father.

3 – He went to school and got in a fight.

4 – His teacher called his parents and he got in trouble.

5 – He made amends with the boy he fought with and his teacher and parents by X, Y, Z.

Next, write each sentence on its own blank sheet of paper. In this instance, the top of the first page would say: “He woke up.” Next, the student fills that page only with description of the character waking up. It’s ridiculously simple. *Which is what we need when we’re blocked.* This method allows you to break up your story into workable chunks. The single sentence at the top of the page keeps you focused, and prevents you from becoming overwhelmed. Awesome, no? Bye-bye, annoying outline.

**7. When your characters speak, they say things.** I work with writers every day, from all genres, who struggle with dialogue. To be clear, they don’t agonize over what the characters say, but rather how they say it.

*How do I end that quote?*

“You smell nice,” she said.

Or is it “she replied”? Or “she noticed”? Or “she mumbled”? Grumbled? Groaned?

Consistency is key. And it’s not hard. But somewhere along the way, someone told these writers that “said” is not a good word. That they should change it up, lest it get boring.

**And that is wrong.**

Characters do not spit a reply, scoff their words, shout, hesitate, blurt, or growl.

“He said.”

“She said.”

That’s it.

Sometimes, she may whisper. But anything else is a way of telling the reader instead of showing. However, *after a character says it*, the writer should describe facial expression and/or body language to show the reader what’s happening.

“I am not lazy,” she said, furrowing her brow.

“You are too,” he said, clenching his fists.

## 8. Facial expression and body language

The face is the first thing we notice and the focal point during any conversation. We connect to a person's gaze, paying attention to how their eyes widen, squint, focus inward or dart. We also watch their mouth, noting lip presses, teeth flashes, frowns, smiles and pursed lips.

By sheer mass, the body can provide thousands of possible movements, gestures and actions that will show readers what the character is feeling. All readers (all people) are body language experts. *Ninety-three percent of human communication is nonverbal.* We are constantly fed messages through body movement. What we sense as we interact with others will dictate how we feel and our behavior toward the other person.

Readers naturally apply this skill to what they read, and recognize body language on the page. Often, the way a gesture or movement is described reminds them of how they used a similar one when experiencing an emotion. This 'shared experience' is what powers up the **empathy link** between the reader and the character. Add this to emotionally rich dialogue, and snippets of the character's thoughts and internal sensations, and we can convey a powerful moment – or several hundred. You want this. And we'll talk about it more later.

### What's next?

Define exactly what you want your writing life to look like. Part time? Full time? One short story? A novel? A series? A weekly column?



We are building on the question I asked at the end of chapter one. And again, be as specific as you can. How many hours a day do you want to be in a room with a computer with no distractions? How much time daily, weekly, monthly, do you want to devote to this craft? And why? What's the goal? (See your answer to question 1.)

**Use this page to describe your ideal writing life.**

## CHAPTER 3 — TWO OF THE MOST IMPORTANT LESSONS I EVER LEARNED ABOUT WRITING

Lesson No. 1 – Old school writing techniques can fuck up your voice, until you figure out ...

Lesson No. 2 – If you think you shouldn't say it, you better say it.

...

I grew up in a great neighborhood, in a microscopic town, in a small state. I had a big backyard, plenty of kids my age and a one-mile loop to bike. (I was an epic bicyclist. Great legs, too.) People kill for less.

To me, the most interesting part of all that was the boys. Of the dozen or so kids who lived there, only one other was a girl. Forget pre-teen hormones. My choices were:

1 – Stay in the house in perpetuity to avoid the boys and their teasing.

2 – Go outside and f\*cking adapt.

What's the best way for a 9-year-old girl to gain the respect of boys her age? Don't take their shit. Obviously. (And people wonder why I'm such a smart-mouth.)

A clever comeback, a few well-timed biting words, is enough to silence a crowd of even the most obnoxious boys. I couldn't beat them with brawn. I wasn't as fast on a bike, as strong a swimmer, or as quick with a punch. But I could still outwit them in a flash.

I became the queen of sarcasm, a crown I still proudly display. I am 40 years old. To this day, if you have a conversation with me in real life, it will be peppered with one-liners and snark. It's a sick obsession.

Think on that for a minute.

If the best writing is penned the way a person talks, what do you do when your second language is profanity and your third is sarcasm?

It took me a couple decades to figure it out. But the answer is the same: You *still* write the way you talk. It's okay to be you. Because you are awesome. Your message is important. No one can share it the way you can.

If you want your work to be noticed, you have to use *words* that get noticed. That doesn't mean swearing (that would be me). It means being you. It means writing without hedging. It means every time you think, *Oh my God, I can't say that*, you better mother\*cking say it.

Take off the goddamn tie and nylons, break out your best black lace thong and let it all hang out.

And then you might think ... *But that doesn't feel like business.*

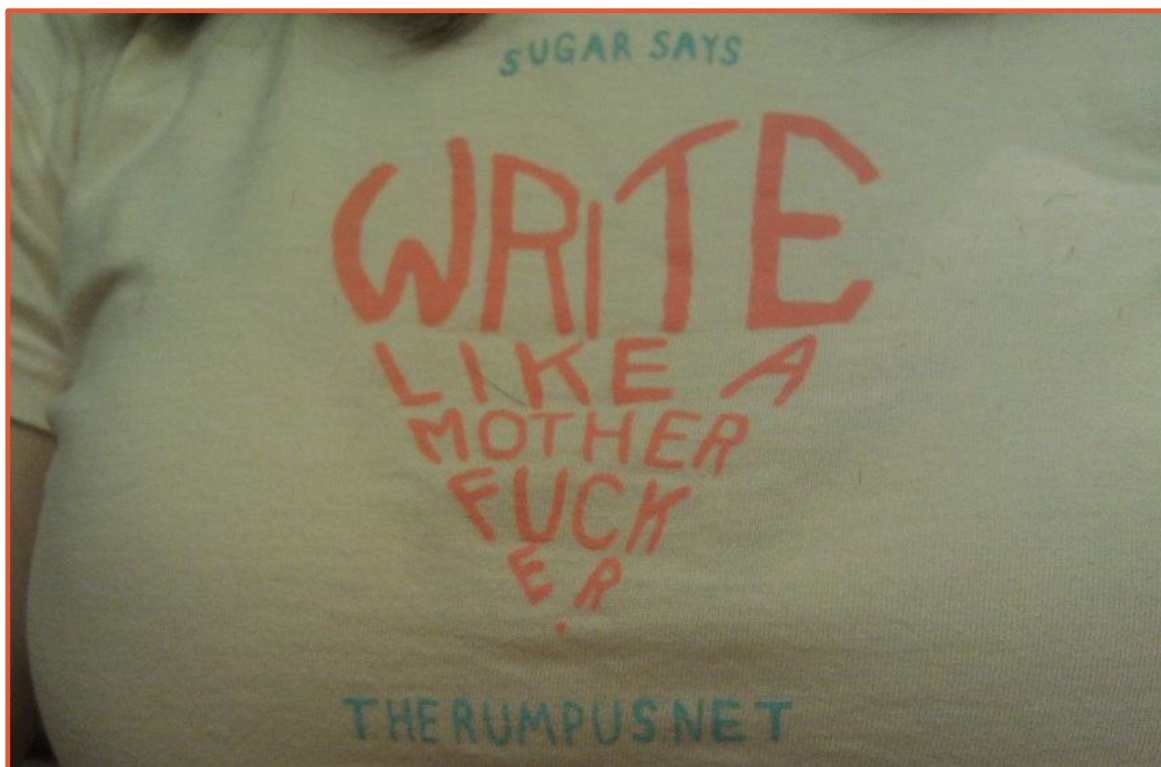
I know. Thank the gods. If it felt like business, you wouldn't be opening up and connecting with people. And if you don't open up and connect, if you aren't vulnerable, your readers aren't going to give a crap about what you say. (That empathy link I mentioned in the last chapter? This.)

You have to wade through the fear to get to the good stuff.

You have to show people who you are and why they should care. Otherwise, you're just one of a billion or so writers without a message that stands out. Rather than the author who throws her guts on the page and makes her words sing.

I don't know about you, but I'll take a little fear any day of the week if it leads to something lasting for my readers. To know that every time I crack open my chest and put it on the page, someone says, 'Oh, it's not just me?' That's success by any measure.

So, show some skin. Strip your words down to what your gut says is true.



### Do you know Sugar?

Four years ago, about the time I started blogging, Sugar started writing her infamous advice column for [TheRumpus.net](http://TheRumpus.net). One of her slogans is above, on my rack. (Yeah, I said it.)

*The Definitive Guide to Writing on Your Terms, Using You Own Honest-to-God, Gut-wrenching Voice*

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Anyway, Sugar's entire approach to this writing thing inspired the crap out of me. I've always been a brash, say-what-I-think kinda gal. But as a reporter, I didn't write that way. So when I launched my site, I was still holding back. I was worried about swearing. (Anyone who knows me understands how difficult it is for me not to curse.) I was worried about not pleasing my readers. Until I found Sugar. And bought the shirt.

What I learned from reading her, and others like her, is that the best writing is honest writing. People who eliminate the pretentious crap are easier to identify with. And if your readers identify with you, you've found the elusive empathy link – the thing that connects them to you with fervor.

So that's what we're going to talk about. Voice. What it is. Why it matters. And how to develop yours.

### **What the hell is a writer's voice?**

Your voice is you on the page. It's your thoughts, feelings, emotions, in your words. It's your personality. And it's a bitch to figure out when you start.

It takes big balls – backbone, daring, boldness, panache, cojones – to show yourself to the world in your writing. The three big questions are ever-present: *What if I suck? What if no one likes me? What if I offend someone?* Being a writer means pushing that aside and saying it anyway.

Fear sucks. And it's promoted throughout our lives. We're taught to conform, or else. Life brings a lengthy list of rules, in school, work, parenthood, etc. We are conditioned to do and say what everyone else does. Because what if people don't like us?

In writing, that shit does not work.

This is where being like everyone else will only hurt you. No one can create new worlds, fantasies, realms, by trying to be someone else. We call that regurgitating another author who *is* original.

So how do you find your voice?

I could tell you it's like tuning an instrument, but that's trite. And *my* voice is anything but trite. So let's say it's what you bring to your words that makes them sound like *you* – and thereby different from anyone else.

Quick and light. Dark and slow. Suspenseful. Dry. Sarcastic. Or boring as shite. You pick. Just make damn sure it is you. Voice is not something you can fake, at least not well.

Most people have a particular author they love so much, they will read anything penned by him. Most people also have a short list of authors they can't stand. Readers draw those conclusions based on how they react to the author's style – the voice. They either love it or hate it.

In Roy Peter Clark's *Writing Tools: 50 Essential Strategies for Every Writer*, he says the most useful definition of voice came from friend and colleague, Don Fry:

*“Voice is the sum of all the strategies used by the author to create the illusion that the writer is speaking directly to the reader from the page.”*

Yeah. That.

Write as though you're chatting with your best friend. When you do that, your words become more intimate and revealing, friendlier even. You lose the stuffy bullshit and big words. You become more genuine – more *you*. You're also more helpful.

Writing to one person, especially a friend, makes it about that person, not about you as the author. The result is the reader is better able to follow your plot, understand your meaning and, **care about what you're saying**.

If you study creative writing, the so-called experts encourage you to experiment with different styles and techniques in order to help develop your voice. Good call. Try out some pretty prose, action or adventure. Lengthen sentences to slow your pace. Clip them to add suspense.

A strong voice makes every word count, grabs your reader and establishes your relationship. No author is all things to all people. Find your niche – your voice – and run with it.

### **How?**

Read different styles. Grab some Kurt Vonnegut, Jane Austen, J.K. Rowling, Leo Tolstoy or even Dr. Seuss. Then look at some brochures, newsletters and your local daily paper. Do any those writers appeal to you? Does their personality shine through? Do you feel as though they are speaking to you?

**Figure out how you *want* readers to describe you.** Funny, sarcastic and direct? Straightforward, business-like and dry? Pretty prose wrapped in a bow?

**Decide how you *don't want* to be described.** Arrogant. Boring. Repetitive. Nonsensical.

**Look at your works – short stories, novels, blog posts, whatever.** Ask yourself:

- Are my words more concrete or abstract? Do I use slang, or am I more philosophical and logical?
- Do I write in first person (“I” or “we”)? Or third person (“they” or “you”)? Or both?
- Do I use frequent metaphors, similes, etc.? Do I sound like a poet? Or is my voice more like a business writer who only uses those for a particular effect?
- Do I typically have long, complex sentences, as though I am slowing the pace? Or are my sentences short and crisp? Perhaps both?
- Are your words full of fiery passion or do you remain neutral? How do you play with language?



## **How do we take the answers to those questions and turn them into our words?**

Look at the adjectives you chose to describe your work. Do they sound like you? Are they how you want to be recognized?

Some experts claim a writer cannot find his voice without a thorough understanding of writing mechanics in several genres. Yes and no. You don't need a degree in English to write a story. But you do need to know how to complete a sentence. Mostly, voice goes back to creative muscle (lose the internal editor and you become more creative). And the more you use it, the stronger it becomes.

The key to voice is always the same. Ask yourself over and over: Would I say this out loud to a friend? Does this paragraph sound like me?

**The biggest, fattest, hairiest mistake a writer can make is to try to be – or write like – someone he is not.** It doesn't ring true. It isn't engaging. More often than not, the author ends up talking *at* the reader instead of *to* the reader. Don't do that.

Some of the most compelling works I've ever read were penned by authors who opened up and talked to me as though we were having coffee together. That's the goal. Check your work. Strive for clarity and simplicity. Be yourself.

### **The ultimate test**

The easiest way to examine your voice is to read your work out loud, preferably *to someone*, or have someone read it to you. (I can hear that collective groan. Zip it. You might learn something.)

When I read my work to others, I'm interested in three things: Does it sound like me? Do I trip over words or stumble on phrases? And, most importantly, how does the listener react to my words?

This is knowledge I can use in my writing long-term. I'm interested in revision, but that's not the focus. I want to see the emotional impact.

A little-known benefit of reading out loud is that it makes you – the author – take ownership of your words. And that ultimately gives you more power which, in turn, strengthens your writing voice. (The method to my madness.)

So read a draft of a story out loud. Be hyper-aware of anything that you wouldn't normally say to a friend. Keep things clear and simple. Do you stumble or trip over phrases or words? Go smooth them out. Is it too formal for the topic? Go back in and make it more casual. Anything that sounds off usually is. (<– Look at me, ending a sentence with a preposition. Screw it.)

Anyway, fear of reading out loud is related to fear of writing. You need to get over both if you're going anywhere in this game.

I'll say it again: A strong voice makes every word count, grabs your reader and establishes your relationship. You can totally do this.

### **How to develop your own**

The most important thing you can do in developing your voice is to make sure it sounds like you. Earlier, we talked about ways to do that: Evaluate your work, make lists of adjectives that describe it, read different styles, and read your work out loud. I also mentioned that writers need to *write to one person*.

This is *so* big – so utterly fundamental – it deserves space all its own. Because people don't really know what it means or how to do it.

First, what not to do: Writing with multiple people in mind actually binds you. It tangles your words. You overthink every line. You **lose your voice** trying to please all the faces peering back at you inside your head. *What will Grandma think? What will my husband say? What if I offend someone? Oh, and my boss?*

Screw that.

You need one person, and only one person. When a reader opens your book, she is by herself. She is not surrounded by a group of friends.

Some writers write to their spouse. Some write to a friend or relative, a fictional character, or another author. Whoever you choose, make sure it's **someone you can be yourself with**. No hedging. No holding back.

Why is this so important?

**Because good writing is simple and clear.** Because great writing comes from the ability to say something in a way no one else can. Because both of those things require you to examine *who you are* underneath the flesh and bullshit exterior, and *why you write*.

The best writing requires vulnerability.

The person you write to, therefore, needs to be someone you trust implicitly, who regularly calls you on your crap, and who understands you perhaps better than anyone else. This is the person who will read your work and say, "Why the hell would you say that? It doesn't sound anything like you?" Or "I really love the fifteen F-bombs in this one. But maybe next time, we can go for five instead."

\*

*“Write to please just one person. If you open a window and make love to the world, so to speak, your story will get pneumonia.” – Kurt Vonnegut*

\*

In sum, your voice is your ability to say: This is me.

No precise formula exists. No one has come up with the ultimate combination of rhythm, sentence length, punctuation and personality. It would sort of defeat the purpose anyway. The only one who can be you on the page is you.

What I can tell you is blocking out the world and telling your story as though speaking to a friend makes your words more intimate and friendly. Some writers like to use a cloak and dagger style in their writing. That only confuses the reader. Words that reveal more, paradoxically, also draw your reader in more. We don't use big words to impress our friends. We have casual conversations meant to communicate clearly.

So becoming more genuine – more you – also means being more helpful.

It's our job as writers to show readers where we are going and why they should care. Writing to one person makes our words about that person – that reader – and not about us as the author. The result is the reader is better able to follow the plot and understand the meaning. The easier it is to understand, the more engaging and entertaining it becomes.

And that is the point of telling the damn story.

When you get stuck or feel you're not being genuine, remember to **make it personal**.

One of the things that sets you apart from every other writer is your story. No one else has lived your life or shared your experiences. Use that. Share your thoughts, opinions and hard-earned lessons. Trust yourself. We like other people who are like us.

**Writing to one person means relating:**

**What *you* needed to hear when you were going through that.**

**What grabbed *your* attention at that time.**

**Whatever is interesting and fun to you.**

Use your own experiences to make your writing real and easily relatable. Connect to your reader.

**First, good shite. Tell me what you ...**

Inspired:

Started, founded, initiated:

Your diplomas, degrees, certifications:

What people say you are awesome at:

Have written, published:

Produced:

Raised, cared for, earned:

Traveled:

Motivated:

Don't stop. What else have you done, created, been recognized for?

### **Now, where do you need help?**

Editing? Outlining? Grammar? Spelling? List the areas of this writing game that you think may not be your strengths. Be as specific as you can.

Next, take a good, long look at the previous page, where you listed your good shite. Then compare it to your list of things you need to work on. Then ask yourself: “How f\*cking ridiculous is it that I’m not writing – I’m not doing what I love – because I think I suck at spelling?”

Once you’ve pondered that, **take this page outside and burn it. Not kidding.**



## CHAPTER 4 — WHO IS YOUR PERSON?

In the last chapter, we talked about writing to one person. Now we're going to talk about how to define who that person is for you. **Important note:** The person you write to for whatever you are working on now may not work for your next project. Every book does not appeal to every person. Remember that you will have to find you one person for each new project.

Now, who is it? It can be a real person or fictional. It can be a character from a book you love, or from one of your own books.

Your husband. Your mom. An author you admire. A mentor.

The idea is to focus on writing to *your person* so you don't try to please a million people, fail, get blocked or write bland crap. (An exceedingly common problem, by the way.)

In the marketing world, businesses work hard to define their ideal customer so they can focus their sales efforts on that niche. Writers use the same principles – for the same reason: Empathy.

Empathy is the ability to put yourself in someone else's shoes. To understand their feelings, thoughts and motivations. In writing, we want our readers to have an empathy link with our characters. We want them to feel connected to the people who live in our books.

The best empathetic writing is written for one person. That means you, the author, must know who your one person is, what he wants, what kinds of issues he must navigate and how.

If you're writing about bullying, open with being bullied. If you're writing about alcoholism, write about cleaning up the alcoholic's vomit at 6 am before you go to work as a waitress for a 10-hour shift, while he sleeps it off. If you write about the loneliness and depression in old age, open with being alone and unable to use the stove – and write about what happens to your friends of the same age.

So think of your person.

Our goal in this chapter is to describe this person so well, you will be able to see things from her perspective. Think like her. Talk like her. Feel her feelings. Be her.



Some writers work on defining who their person is regularly. They save newspaper or magazine clippings in folders – stuff that their person would like. Whatever methods you use, remember that whenever you write, it will be to this person.

**You're going to try to convince yourself to skip this part. Don't.**

**You might even say to yourself, "That might work some other writer, but it won't work for me." That's crap.**

**If you want to squash the self-editor, and write with guts and laser focus, you NEED to do this. Answer the questions below as your person.**

Name

Age

Male or female

Hair color

Eye color

Marital status/children (include names)

Where does he/she live?

Income

Occupation

Favorite music and television shows.

Example: I don't watch TV, because I'd rather read. But I love alternative music – because it's not the norm.

What does she drive? (Assuming she drives.)

Example: I drive a tricked-out Jeep. Because it's durable and fun. I can take it off-road and never worry, and I can take it to the city. It's adaptable, sexy, funky.

What does she do with her free time? Are her weekends Saturday and Sunday, or does she have midweek days off?

What are her guilty pleasures? Chocolate? French fries? Bacardi? B-rated movies and too much beer?

Who does she idolize? Oprah? Ghandi?

What does she read? Who are her favorite authors? (Aside from you.)

What's her favorite food?

Next, we're going to pretend to BE your person. What does she feel when she's about to read your words? And how do your words make her feel? Why is she reading your book/story/poetry/blog post?

What is she saying to herself? Free write every thought you have. No editing.

And now you have pages upon pages of stuff to help you when the going gets rough. And it will. It happens to the best of us. Use this information to connect with your person as you write.

What would she say if you wrote:

*"It is useless to attempt to indoctrinate a superannuated canine with innovative maneuvers."*

My person would say:

*"You can't teach an old dog new tricks. And who the hell says 'indoctrinate'?"*

Save your notes from this chapter. It will inspire you when you least expect it. It will shape your words in masterful, lovely ways. It will help you write like YOU. **For best results, read this chapter and answer the questions every time you start a new writing project.**

\*

And when you're inevitably in the dumps, so far down you can't see a speck of hope, mull over this list of famous books. In parentheses after each one is **the number of times they were rejected**:

*Carrie*, Stephen King (30)

*Chicken Soup for the Soul*, Jack Canfeld and Mark Victor Hansen (140)

*Diary of Anne Frank* (16)

Dr. Seuss books (15)

*Gone with the Wind*, Margaret Mitchell (38)

*Harry Potter*, book one, J. K. Rowling (9)

*The Princess Diaries*, Meg Cabot (17)

*Watership Down*, Richard Adams (26)

*A Wrinkle in Time*, Madeleine L'Engle, (26)

No shit.

*The Definitive Guide to Writing on Your Terms, Using You Own Honest-to-God, Gut-wrenching Voice*

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## CHAPTER 5 — THE WRITER’S SUPER POWER

In 2007, Dustin Hoffman and Natalie Portman starred in one of my favorite movies of all time: *Mr. Magorium’s Wonder Emporium*. In it, Molly Mahoney (Portman) is an employee at a magical toy shop run by the eccentric 243 year old – yes, 243 years old – Mr. Edward Magorium (Hoffman).

Magorium announces he intends to leave (die) and is giving the shop to Mahoney as a way of helping her get “unstuck” in life.

A particularly poignant scene unfolds this way:

(Mahoney hugs Magorium)

**Magorium:** (in a quiet sigh) Oh, Mahoney...

**Mahoney:** Don’t go.

**Magorium:** My darling.

**Mahoney:** I’m not ready. I’m not ready for it to end.

**Magorium:** I’m sorry.

(Mahoney sits down on a step)

**Magorium:** When King Lear dies in Act Five, do you know what William Shakespeare has written? He’s written, “He dies.”

That’s all, nothing more. No fanfare, no metaphor, no brilliant final words. The culmination of the most influential work of the dramatic literature is, “He dies.”

It takes Shakespeare's genius to come up with, "He dies." And yet every time I read those two words, I find myself overwhelmed with dysphoria. And I know it's only natural to be sad, but not because of the words, "He dies," but because of the life we saw prior to the words.

I've lived all five of my acts, Mahoney, and I am not asking you to be happy that I must go. I'm only asking that you turn the page. Continue reading. And let the next story begin.

And if anyone ever asks what became of me, you relay my life in all its wonder, and end it with a simple and modest, "He died."

**Mahoney:** I love you.

**Magorium:** I love you, too.

(Magorium takes Mahoney by the hands and pulls her to her feet)

**Magorium:** (sighs) Your life is an occasion... Rise to it.

(He kisses her forehead and walks away)

\*

Yep. Writers have a super power. It's not dreaming up fantasy realms or talking to characters in our heads, either. What we do better than anyone else is say yes to the power of our voice, even for just a short time.

You can't tell me with a straight face that the scene above didn't rip your heart out in less than 30 seconds.

He wants her to get "unstuck." **(Just write.)**

She's "not ready yet." **(She's scared.)**



He quotes goddamn Shakespeare, reminding us that it's two simple words at the end that weigh the most. **(We don't need fancy words, equipment, college degrees or even permission from anyone else.)**

AND then he tells her to turn the page, keep reading, and rise up to face what is possible – to believe in herself. **(Be you.)**

Hello? Were those screenwriters reading my mind?



We've all watched movies and read books where the words leap at us, then depart as we breathe out a humid sigh. Some of them clutch us in solidarity. We think, *'Oh, it's not just me.'* We hold our breath, clench stomach muscles, and rush to turn the page – or perch on the edge of our seats for the next line in the dialogue. These stories speak to us, rip open our chests and beat in time with our hearts. It happens. With truly great, honest-to-God, gut-wrenching writing, it happens frequently.

What those writers know better than anyone is fear has no place in this craft. They stare it down with a big, old 'f\*ck you.' But even beginning writers have an innate ability to pause how the outside world measures them. They believe they have something to say, and that someone will want to hear it. They believe in themselves enough to put pen to page and try to make sense of their world.

*That's huge.*

Writing takes courage. Maybe that's why writers make up less than one percent of the population.

I've spent my entire writing life talking to others about how to dissolve fear. I mean, if you're going to bring your readers into the story with you, if you want them to feel your damp shirt sticking to your back while you climb that cliff, then you really can't be worrying about what other people might think. As I mentioned in chapter one

(and will undoubtedly again), writing is a two-step process, and neither step involves weighing the opinion of the masses.

We create, write. Then we critique, edit. Those functions use two distinct sections of our mind. It's damn near impossible to do both at the same time. And if you try, you will likely find yourself "stuck" or "blocked."

**You already have a super power.** If you don't believe me, listen to Dustin Hoffman, for chrissakes. You + your life = the only tools you need. Use them to write on your own terms.

Eckhart Tolle says it beautifully, too, in *The Power of Now*:

*Stop looking outside for scraps of pleasure or fulfillment,  
for validation, security, or love —  
you have a treasure within that is infinitely greater  
than anything the world can offer.*

But I don't know where to start.

What if I have nothing good to say?

Who would read my stories anyway?

As if I would bring this up without offering the solution. Please. **Below is a list of tried and true – proven, I tell ya – questions to prompt creativity.** Ideas, stories, flashes of bloody brilliance. Let's go.

Why do you do what you do? Career, daily chores, school, whatever. Tell me why.

Tell me about one of your most memorable experiences – at work, at home, at play – at any age.

What's the best advice you've ever received?

One person – teacher, parent, relative, spouse, lover, caretaker, friend – who challenged the hell out of you, but made you a better person. Who and what?

One thing you did today you're proud of. One thing you did today that made you smile. And one thing you did today for yourself. (If you follow my [Facebook page](#), you've seen this a million times. Powerful.)

What's the biggest downer? What stops the flow of words? Stifles your creativity? And what are your remedies?

**Now, watch this.**



The longest word in that story is “universe.”

Nothing fancy. No alliteration. No thought of pentameter, even cadence. Because none of it matters. It’s a man, ripping open his chest to tell a story about his childhood and how it affects his personal life. He just says it. And we feel it.

## The Bullshit Detector – and the scariest thing I’ll ever ask you to do

One thing all great editors and writers have in common is an exceptional ability to get to the bottom of things. They can sum it up, dumb it down, and translate the technical with ease. These people excel at wading through jargon. Call it a sixth sense, a mental checklist. They have an innate ability to detect and eradicate bullshit.

How? Mostly, years of practice, applying the same general tenets to everything they read. Proper grammar, punctuation, spelling, verb/noun agreement, run-on sentences, etc. But each also has her own style, her own particular *things* that take mediocre writing to the next level.

My tool of choice is known as **The Bullshit Detector**.

And it’s not so much a tool as it is two short lists. The first list is stuff I expect a good writer to do, and I can tell if it has been done. The second list is made up of things I consider verboten.

I’m not sharing those lists here. (More in Chapter 6.) But I am going to talk about the big thing I expect a writer to do. Because it’s so simple, and has such an incredible impact on your writing – and almost no one does it.

I expect a writer to **read her piece out loud**. (Just like Michael Xavier did in the video on the previous page. Just like I mentioned in the previous chapter.)

The obvious benefit to reading your work is it helps you see where to stop or pause for periods, commas, etc. It’s a way to make sure those seem natural. It also helps you detect stumbling spots. If you trip over the words when reading out loud, your reader will too.

The other more important and less noted benefit is that saying your words out loud **gives you ownership of them**. It makes you feel more accountable for what you've written, and that helps you build confidence. As in, "Holy shit. I wrote that?"

Would these sentences pass unnoticed out loud?

1 – *Bees don't eat flowers they gather nectar from them then they go back to the hive.*

2 – *Wishing she'd brought her raincoat, Sarah waited for the bus all morning in the rain Tuesday because her mother's car was in the shop.*

3 – *"Vaguely, I'm aware that I'm still in my sweats, unshowered, yucky, and he's just gloriously yummy, his pants doing that hanging from the hips thing, and what's more, he's here in my bedroom... Finally, my medulla oblongata recalls its purpose. I breathe...."*

- 50 Shades of Grey, p 189.

You can't read it to yourself silently. Say the words out loud. **My Bullshit Detector is going wild**. Below are edits.

1 – *Bees don't eat flowers. **T**hey gather nectar from them. **T**hen they go back to the hive.*

2 – ~~*Wishing she'd brought her raincoat,*~~ **With her mother's car in the shop,** Sarah waited for the bus **Tuesday** morning in the rain, **wishing** she'd brought her raincoat. ~~*Last Tuesday because her mother's car was in the shop.*~~

Check this out – because it's fun... <http://goo.gl/1Q3QQ>

3 – ~~Vaguely~~, I'm **vaguely** aware that I'm still in my sweats, un-showered. **And**, ~~yucky, and~~ he's just gloriously yummy. **His pants** ~~doing that~~ hanging from **the his** hips. ~~Thing, a~~ **And**, what's more, he's **here** in my bedroom... Finally, my **body/vagina/girl parts/pussy (for the vulgar) – anything but** → ~~medulla oblongata~~ recalls its purpose. I breathe..."

Yup. I did a video of this one, too... <http://goo.gl/Fwrh3>

\*

Reading out loud helps in ways far beyond catching missed punctuation.

Laura Howard, author of the forthcoming paranormal novel *The Forgotten Ones* shared an excerpt of her book before and after this exercise.

*"Since it was Sunday, I didn't have to work, but I almost wished I did, if only for the distraction. The sky was bright blue as I stepped back out onto the front porch. My mother sat in the den calmly bowing her violin. I sat on the top step with an ice cold glass of lemonade. Uncle David had mowed this morning, the smell of freshly cut grass added to the illusion of a perfect summer day. Puffy clouds moved swiftly through the sky, matching the speed of the thoughts passing through my mind."*

Became:

*"I didn't have to work on Sunday, but I almost wished I did, if only for the distraction. The sky was bright blue as I stepped out onto the front porch. I could hear the chords from "Drowsy Maggie" as my mother played her violin in the den. She hadn't played such a peppy tune in years. I sat on the top step with a cold glass of lemonade, tapping my foot to the melody. Uncle David mowed this morning. The smell of freshly*

*cut grass added to the illusion of a perfect summer day. Puffy clouds moved swiftly through the sky, matching the speed of the thoughts passing through my mind.”*

The difference: She eliminated run-on sentences and added detail to show the reader what the narrator sees, hears, smells, tastes, feels. She also varied sentence length so that the paragraph isn't choppy, but a smooth, pleasant read. All that, and gorgeous description, without changing the meaning. Simply by reading it out loud.

When you read *your work* out loud (to someone, or even to yourself), imagine you are the reader. You need to find out what it feels like for readers as they experience your words for the first time. We learn more about our work this way than through any formal review. Because, in the end, we hand our book to the reader, not an expert. It's the readers' understanding, feelings and ultimate opinions that matter.

If you find that you are too close to your work, you've read it so much, you can't step back to evaluate, then read it to someone else. But be sure it's someone who you know will be straight with you. Someone who will say, "I was bored after the first page" or "I felt like you were talking down to me" or "This doesn't make sense to me. Can't you just say it? Why are you bogging it down?"

Sometimes, readers won't say what they think because they can't justify the opinion or feeling. They may lack the technical vocabulary, or they may simply not know why your words evoked that particular feeling. But we need those voices in order to improve.

Make clear you're only asking for raw data – what they saw and felt as they listened.

### **What's next?**

Go get your work in progress, find a warm body and read it to him. Or have him read it to you.



## CHAPTER 6 — SHOW. DON'T TELL.

The key to truly great writing is in flushing out details. Writers are told pretty regularly to support and elaborate. Our mantra: **“Show. Don’t tell.”**

But what does that mean?

How do we writers help readers see the action? Feel the characters’ emotions? How do we stop skim-the-surface storytelling and put our readers right down in it? For starters, we have to slow the freak down. Waaaaaaay down. We need to imagine a full, complete picture of every scene in our minds’ eye.

But it goes further than that.



Writers need to learn the **kinds of details** that effectively “show.” The stuff that helps readers see the wisp of blond hair curling toward her chin when her gaze falls to the ground. Feel the chill of a morbidly gray morning in November while hunting pheasant. Or suffer the metallic taste of irony when she first learns her lover is cheating with her sister.

It’s our job to give readers a reason to care about our characters and what happens to them. Here is a handful of the kinds of details that **help a writer “show,”** followed by examples from my novella, [Say My Name](#).

- **Character details** (moving, thinking, feeling, talking). Moment by moment description of action. Get inside your characters’ heads, inner thoughts, opposing perspectives.

Example: *“Out of nowhere, three weeks ago, I picked up the phone to the sound of his soft, dewy inflection drawing out my name. My knees buckled, inflaming the itch at the back of my neck. He didn’t have to identify himself. I knew. This man’s hands encircled my hips like so many chains of love. Then he cleared his throat and said the thing.*

*“I have AIDS.”*

- **Setting details** (smell, touch, taste, hear, see). Create a living, breathing picture.

Example: *“The words, issued from his thin, pink lips, surrounded by a clean-shaven and sharp jaw, remind me of what’s always hung between us – something finite yet unfinished. He has a boyish charm, which is only enhanced by intense good looks. Behind me, I hear the closing of ‘Bring Me to Life.’ It’s then I remember the car is still running.”*

- **Important object details** (color, size, texture, temperature). Compare objects to something everyone is familiar with.

Example: *“I pull up just beyond where he stands, slam it in park – not bothering to shut off the engine – and open the door in a rush. In two long strides, my arms are around his torso, my face buried in his shoulder. This is what I love most: I fit perfectly inside his chest, as though we have been carved from the same tree. We don’t hug. We meld.”*

- **Non-narrative details** (quotes, statistics, facts, anecdotes, definitions)

Example: *“It’s lunchtime on Wednesday. I’m at a red light by the river, my fingers strumming the steering wheel in time with the heavy bass of Evanescence. It’s insane that in a minute or so, I’ll be visiting the man I’ve loved since before puberty, yet haven’t seen in person for 20 years. Since we last met, I’ve had two husbands and two kids, a life entirely and purposefully removed far from where we grew up. The only part of my youth I ever missed was him.”*

\*

Books have an advantage over movies or television because they let readers inside characters' heads. Beginning writers often forget this. But it's critical to reveal characters' inner thoughts and feelings. To show different perspectives by getting inside the minds of people from different times, places and backgrounds. Good writers will also reveal characters' personalities, thoughts and feelings through dialogue.

When you're adding these kinds of details, try not to get caught up in editing or critiquing. This part of the writing process – the flushing out of stories – **is about using YOUR power and magic**. But it can be a frustrating time, too, pausing frequently to compare the scene in your head with what is on the page. It's hard work to adequately convey in writing what your mind has constructed so clearly for you.

How hard you push yourself during this step is the difference between mediocre writing and excellence. Put another way, **slowing down and adding details is the difference between editorializing and writing rich**.

A crude example: Walk into a class of third-graders and write on the board, "I have a dog." Then tell the students to draw a picture of a dog. Each picture would be completely different. And likely vastly different from the dog you imagine in your head. The solution lies in the details.

Example number two: "Yesterday, my husband brought me home some cookies. They tasted good." Forget that these sentences are boring and poorly constructed. Just think about what you would ask in order to learn more. Why did he bring me cookies? What kind were they? Did they have frosting? Did he make them? Did I share?

Once writers know how to ask the right questions – and that it is, in fact, okay to ask those questions – they become more adept at deleting the irrelevant to make way for what is more specific and concrete.

\*

Details help to create a picture in the mind of a reader. But *how* you go about adding them can make a huge difference – the difference between smelling the chlorine by the pool and feeling your head submerge in the icy water.

**Don't:** Novice writers often try to cram every detail of a character in the first paragraph.

*“The short, fat, pasty-faced woman with a wide-brim straw hat, dressed in her best white Sunday skirt, had dirty, black fingernails and a grin that revealed yellow teeth.”*

That overwhelms the reader.

**Do:** Use descriptions of others to reveal something about the main character.

*“His thick black hair reminded me of my own, when I was pregnant with my oldest. Back before the cancer treatment left me with a threadbare scalp.”*

**Do:** Bring description at unexpected moments.

*“The sky was metallic and grainy that night, as though sheaths of rain could come down any second. As she reached for the shutters, I could see where years of self-cutting scarred her forearms like some sort of bold tattoo.”*

**Do:** Show details during conversation.

*“I left him,” she said, crossing her thin arms defiantly, wrinkling the fine lace and white satin of her wedding gown. “Don’t try to talk me into going back.”*

**Do:** Add a bit of character detail when describing something important.

*“She had a nasty habit of biting her full, pink lips when she was uncertain, which happened frequently when he was around. He noticed – and he liked it.”*

**Do:** Add detail while another character’s action is being described.

*“She watched him moving to the dance floor with envy. He was so graceful on his feet, while she tripped merely walking across the ballroom in her stilettos.”*

\*

### **A little more about setting details.**

Most of us learned to describe the senses when writing back in elementary school. That’s a great starting point. If you don’t remember, don’t worry about it. We’re going to go over it right now, with more detail.

Let’s say you want to describe coming home from work. The hallmark questions – the things you need to include that will transport your reader there with you – are all about the senses.

What do you hear, touch, see, taste, smell and feel? We don’t use them all in one sentence. Or even one paragraph. But these details make your descriptions rich. They give your reader something to easily identify with, so they can feel what you feel.

### **Hear:**

- What sounds do you hear, both close-up and far away?
- What sounds are absent? Maybe you should hear something that’s missing. If you’re coming home, why don’t you hear the kids anywhere? Why isn’t the dog barking?

**Touch:**

- What does it feel like? Is your front door soft, smooth, rough, cold?
- How do you feel touching it? Happy to be home? Curious where everyone else might be? Depressed at the thought of making dinner after a long day?

**See:**

- What is around you? Your patent leather pumps. Your polyester skirt. The front door ajar. A cat in the bushes.
- How would you describe those things? Polished. Itchy. Grainy. Intense. Perched.
- What's going on around you? And where are you? Outside or in? Bedroom or boardroom? Mowing the lawn or hiking a trail?
- Who else is with you and what are they doing/saying/wearing?

**Taste:**

- Yes, food. Sweet, bitter, sour? And what does it remind you of? Tastes often bring about strong memories.
- Even without food, we taste. The metallic taste of blood and the acrid taste of bile, for starters. And we also taste things in the air. Irony comes to mind.

**Smell:**

- What can you smell, faintly and strongly?
- What do you “almost” smell? An ex's cologne? The flowers in front of Grandma's house? The tall pines at summer camp?

## Feel:

- What does your body feel like? Relaxed, tense, nauseous, happy, excited, limber, sweaty, exhausted. The list is endless.
- Don't forget the weather – in spite of how the character feels. It can be rainy and cold, but he's sweaty with fever. A blizzard could be underway, but she's toasty in front of the woodstove. Or, despite high winds, she can feel a dead calm.

\*

Kurt Vonnegut has famous advice on how to write a good short story. As far as I'm concerned, it should apply to everything you ever write. Below the link, I've added the list. **Watch.**



### **Vonnegut's eight rules for writing a short story:**

1. Use the time of a total stranger in such a way that he or she will not feel the time was wasted.
2. Give the reader at least one character he or she can root for.
3. Every character should want something, even if it is only a glass of water.
4. Every sentence must do one of two things—reveal character or advance the action.
5. Start as close to the end as possible.
6. Be a Sadist. No matter how sweet and innocent your leading characters, make awful things happen to them — in order that the reader may see what they are made of.
7. Write to please just one person. If you open a window and make love to the world, so to speak, your story will get pneumonia.
8. Give your readers as much information as possible as soon as possible. To hell with suspense. Readers should have such complete understanding of what is going on, where and why, that they could finish the story themselves, should cockroaches eat the last few pages.

\*

**And now for some almost entirely useless word play. “Almost” because if you have a website, you will use it. Plus, it’s f\*cking fun.**

I picked this up from Ash Ambirge over at [themiddlefingerproject.com](http://themiddlefingerproject.com). (If you don’t know Ash, get your ass over there.) It’s primarily for writers who sell or giveaway something on their websites.

### **Start by answering these five questions:**

1. What do people *get* from having a relationship with me / reading my work, blog, facebook posts, whatever?
2. How do they *benefit* from that?



3. What two things will they be able to do / achieve / have / accomplish as a result of that benefit? (The more concrete the better.)
4. What's one negative / annoying / sucky thing that doing / achieving / having / accomplishing will prevent them from ever having to do again?
5. Optional: A light-hearted, fun, humorous negative / annoying / sucky thing that doing / achieving / having/ accomplishing will prevent them from ever having to do again.

**Then take your answers and plug them into the following sentence:**

Enter your email below and grab my \_\_\_\_\_ (#1)  
 designed to help you \_\_\_\_\_ (#2)  
 and \_\_\_\_\_ (#3)  
 - and *never* have to (*or can* stop) \_\_\_\_\_ (#4) again.  
 (Or \_\_\_\_\_ (#5).)

**So, as an example, let's say you're me. Your answers would be:**

1. What do people actually *get*? **FREE book about your writing voice**
2. How do they benefit? **Designed to help you write like you**
3. When they look like a pro, they'll be able to: **say what you want to say, how you want to say it, and**
4. So they'll: **stop worrying about what everyone else thinks.**
5. Or: **writing like a pretentious asshat.**

**Plug them in, and you'll end up with:**

Enter your email below and grab my free book about the writers' voice, designed to help you write like YOU. So you can say what you want to say, how you want to say it – and stop worrying about what everyone else thinks.  
*(And writing like a pretentious asshat.)*

Cool, right?

**Perhaps you're thinking, "Yes, that's just adorable, Beck. But how the hell does it help me write?"**

A fair question. And I have a simple answer. It's word play, *fool*. And word play makes the mind get scary creative. Sort of the same way your brain releases adrenaline when you're on a rollercoaster. Any idea how many times this little exercise has gotten me unstuck?

Give it a whirl.

Let's say you wrote a paranormal novel.

1. What do people actually *get*? **A paranormal tale of gripping emotion**
2. How do they benefit? (in this case, it's an incredible story) **that could forever shatter two lives and one great love**
3. When they read it, they'll be able to (be taken away from real life): **sweep you away**
4. So they'll: **forget you have kids, laundry, a spouse or a job. At least for a little while.**
5. Or: **maybe longer, if you want.**

Unless your book is free, you will need to modify the formula a bit. Like this:

Go here and grab my \_\_\_\_\_ (#1)  
which could \_\_\_\_\_ (#2)  
and \_\_\_\_\_ (#3)  
- so you can \_\_\_\_\_ (#4) – at least for a little while.  
(Or \_\_\_\_\_ (#5).)

**Plug them in, and you'll end up with:**

Go here grab my new paranormal tale of gripping emotion, which could forever shatter two lives and one great love – and sweep you away. So you can forget you have kids, laundry, a spouse or a job. At least for as little while.  
(Or maybe longer, if you want.)

## CHAPTER 7 — BE YOUR FOXY SELF

*“You won’t get anything unless you have the vision to imagine it.” – John Lennon*

On my fortieth birthday (last year), I wore these shoes. I bought them specifically for the occasion. Which was a party I threw for myself. (Yeah, I did. And it was fantastic.)



People I have known since grade school came. Extended family, close friends, even my ex-husband was there. He actually did the cooking.

This was a party I planned for three months. And the entire time, one particular family member told me over and over *and over* that I could not throw a party for myself. That it was inappropriate. That people will think I was self-centered, or worse.

I processed this feedback the same way I approach just about everything nowadays: F\*ck it. I’m doing it anyway. The people who love me will show up to support me. The people who have a problem with it don’t have to come.

I knew what I wanted for my fortieth – **40<sup>th</sup>**! – birthday. I knew I wanted a party at my house. I knew who I wanted to be there. I knew what the decorations would look like. (I made most of them.) I knew what I wanted to eat. No one knew the details like I did.

The party was just before Halloween, so I filled the house with all manner of spooky decorations. I made funky labels with names like “Petri-fied Insects” and “Frog Brains” for the candy jars on the side table. We used a

cardboard coffin to disguise the cooler. We even made topiaries out of candy, and covered pumpkins in pink glitter.

I told all the guests not to bring presents and I made sure to send them home with armloads of stuff instead. Each kid got a plastic pumpkin that was literally overflowing with Halloween candy and toys. The grownups filled bags for themselves. I gave out test tubes with gum drops and jelly beans.



And the food... My step-mother baked herself into a frenzy. The cookies and sweets were incredible. My ex-husband fired up the grill. People came with side dishes galore.

The whole thing was a smashing success.

Naturally.

If I had given in and allowed someone else to throw the party, it would have been a sham. I mean, I had all the details figured out. I planned the invitation list, decorations, menu, etc., months in advance.

My birthday celebration was an expression of me. It was a blast for everyone because *I was myself*. Because I am not self-centered. Because anyone who had known me for more than five seconds also knew I wouldn't give a rat's fine ass what anyone else *\*might\** think anyway.

This was my fortieth birthday. If ever there was a time to do something I wanted, the way I wanted to do it, it was then.

And the same thing applies to writing. It's all about *you*. You can try to write like someone else. You may even have some success imitating the voice. But you won't be able to do it for long.

Faking it – who you are, how you write, what you want – is ridiculously hard. It sucks up an exorbitant amount of energy, which you could be using in a much more productive way. And it sends a message: *I'm not good enough, so I have to pretend I am someone else.*

I don't think so.

No matter what anyone else may think or say, wasting your time trying to be someone else is counter-productive. Not only is it okay to be you, it's absolutely necessary in good writing.

If someone doesn't love what you have to say or the way you say it, they don't have to read your stuff. But you can't spend hours trying to bend your words to suit everyone. That's how writers get blocked. That's how parties fall flat.

\*

Ever listen to someone talk about something they love? They are inspiring. Even if you don't like or have no knowledge of the topic, their words light a fire under you. You can feel their excitement, and it builds yours.

Sometimes, if they are particularly pumped, they talk really fast. They get animated – hands and arms flailing. Their faces get red. (That's how I was when I planned the party.)

That's passion. That's what moves us forward. That's being genuine, honest, authentic.

Most writers are passionate about what they have to say. But many of them don't dive into their work with the same fervor they would a conversation. It's unusual to grab the keyboard and type the whole thing out in one sitting. Instead, we write a couple sentences. Stop. Go back and edit.

Then we write a couple more sentences. Stop. Go back and edit. And again and again.

What we are doing is interrupting our own creativity.

Back in chapter one, we talked about the two parts to writing: Create, then critique. If we stop every few lines to go back and edit, we are also detaching and doubting. That means we're putting the breaks on the part of our brain that creates and inspires.

Don't do that.

Let loose instead. Create more than you will need in whatever final version you have in mind. This is the time to free write, brainstorm, generate fresh ideas and follow tangents.

Bringing passion to writing means doing it because you love it. It means not writing for feedback, or a publishing contract, or money. And the truly amazing part is, as soon as you stop thinking about the results you want out of your writing, your words become more genuine and real on the page. You connect with readers on a deeper level.

That's the best kind of writing.

\*

Most of you know my writing style as sassy, in-your-face, brash and ballsy. When I'm writing for my business, that is who I am. I write for my clients. I know who you are and how you feel because I've f\*cking been there.

I also know how badly – with *minute* precision, in fact – it sucks to wallow in self-doubt, depression and the resulting writing paralysis. What’s more, I know how awesome it would have been if someone told me to feel the goddamn fear and angst and write anyway.

So that is how I communicate with you.

What many of you may not realize is that my fiction writing voice is vastly different. If we were to compare it to my business voice, one would be an A and the other a Z. It’s not that one is better than the other. It’s just they are suited for entirely different audiences and different purposes.

This is the part where you think: What the hell? We have more than one writing voice?

Um, yeah.

No matter what you pen, once you learn to write authentically, you will always be you on the page. Figuring out that what you have to say *does* matter is a huge lesson. As you develop your skills, you will also learn to adapt your message to your audience.

If I want to motivate my reader to take action, I use verb-noun combinations that inspire. I may clip sentences to add a sense of urgency or anticipation. If I want my reader to feel what the heroine feels in a romance novel, I use words to create images people associate with a longing or lust.

Below is an excerpt of my novella, *Say My Name*, which tells the story of two lovers in their 40s reconnecting after decades:

*The year I turned 12, I was thrust into the kind of emptiness that makes your bones shake. Held, suspended, in the middle of a big, wide nothing. It was the same year I met*



*John. We lived seven miles apart. (I didn't learn this until later, when I clocked it in my mother's Toyota.) It started on a random autumn weekday.*

*He was 13 when he rolled his four-wheeler into my driveway. I was sitting on the couch with my math book open in my lap. I had a small stack of scrap paper – the thin, brown kind that rips every time you try to erase something. I remember the TV was on in the background. Then I heard the whining of an ATV engine, followed by a knock.*

*It scared the hell out of me (I was home alone), until I saw it was him. The boy who smiled in my direction in the hallways of my new school had braved miles of wooded trails, muddy terrain and biting cold, just for me.*

*He invariably wore blue flannel shirts that played off the contours of his eyes, a fleece-lined denim jacket and skin-tight Levis. He lit a fire inside me without trying. I think about it now and the burn spreads across my clavicle, up my neck to my cheeks. That day changed everything. I didn't know it at the time, but the first feeling of comfort came when his fingers entwined with my own.*

*But why wouldn't it? My parents' divorce was uneventful, except that it took them almost five years to get it done, and they used me as the tug-o-war rope. My father moved out. My mother worked her ass off bartending to pay the bills. And my little world blew up.*



*I was plucked from the only school I had ever attended – all-girls, Catholic and expensive – and dropped into the town’s public middle school up the street. When I got up in the morning, my mother was asleep. When I got home, she was gone to work. When I went to bed, she was still working.*

*By all accounts, I lived alone, in a brown, split-level house that smelled like too much Pledge. I watched my mother’s prize-winning rosebushes rot, and my father’s perfect lawn fade to yellow. It was just enough stress that I nearly drowned in my own stomach acid.*

*Yet here was this boy, showing up out of nowhere, often several times a week. Seven miles on a four-wheeler for me. How easy it is to put weight on other people in our lives. How simple to expect them to make up for everything we never had as children. I was pretty sure John liked me more than my parents. For the better part of 10 years, he was my one constant.*

*Which is probably why, for as long as I can remember, I’ve been one of those girls who makes bold, sweeping changes on a whim. I don’t think. I do. Especially when it comes to love.*

*Over the years, I have thought long and hard about his strong, calloused hands and well-muscled thighs. About his uncanny way of making me smile, especially when I didn’t want to. About how I could have saved myself a few decades’ worth of heartache and wretchedness if I hadn’t run away. Which probably isn’t true, but maybe ...*

*I saw him in the hush of the snow-covered trees this morning. He sneaks up on me like that sometimes. Today, it reminded me that uncertainty is always in my favor – as long*

*as I don't hold on too tightly. A flexible agenda allows destiny to kiss me at will. The memories will surface when they wish.*

\*

In Chapter Four, we talked about finding your one person to write to. We also talked about answering the questions to find your person **with each new writing project**.

Here's why:

My voice in this book, for example, would not be suited for *Say My Name*. The latter requires a certain vulnerability – to show the reader what the characters feel and want. But before I can show the reader anything, I need to know who she is and how she perceives the world. Enter the exercises in Chapter Four.

So depending on your purpose, the genre of your writing, how you reveal yourself, your characters, their motives, feelings and thoughts, will all change. As writers, how do we adapt our voices?

In Chapter Three, we talked about experimenting with different styles. Which, of course, means you have to know what the styles are – what kind of books are out there. So read. Adventure, suspense, thriller, romance, short stories, novels, poems, paranormal, young adult, contemporary, non-fiction. All of it. Expose yourself to as much as you possibly can, and keep doing it for as long as you write. (Forever.)

You will find your writing starts to mimic that of who you are reading. You'll pick up the cadence, vocabulary and patterns. That's normal. And it's part of the process of finding your own voice. Over time – the longer you expose yourself to a wide variety of good writing – you will figure out which shifts in storytelling, sentence length (long to slow pace and clip to add suspense) and plot make you feel good. The components of your voice.

The more you read, the longer you write, the better you get.

A strong voice makes every word count, grabs your reader and establishes your relationship. No author is all things to all people. Find your niche – your voice – and run with it. Celebrate your power to move an audience. And remember, no one writes one perfect draft. Writing is a skill that even the masters bust their asses to hone.

\*

### **Why do some people hate writing, and even the ones who love it still get stuck?**

In school, the first things we are taught about writing are the rules, the mechanics. Spelling. Punctuation. Grammar. Later, we learn the notorious five-paragraph theme for academic writing. (If you didn't, you're not missing anything).

Nowhere are we encouraged to expand our creativity. Self-expression is literally marked up with the red pen.

Instead, we learn to obsess about structure of writing at the expense of our voices. We are told over and over to shove our ideas into a particular formula, a mold. It make us hedge. We don't trust ourselves. And that's fatal to writing. It's also why many adults still struggle with it.

We're too worried about getting it wrong to let it all out.

We're so caught up in where to place a comma, we're afraid to say what we need to say.

The point of our story and the art of the telling both suffer.

The professional writers I know didn't give a shit about ninth-grade composition. They were the teenagers who got jazzed writing poems or songs, personal journals or letters to friends. Most of them were also huge readers.

Is it important to write correctly? Of course. But that's only one component of good writing.

## The torture that is Composition 101

In November 2011, a *Washington Post* columnist summed it up better than I could:

“We have the entire English department at a local high school ... embracing a schoolwide essay format that calls for exactly three central paragraphs containing exactly eight sentences: topic sentence, detail sentence, commentary sentence, another detail sentence, another commentary sentence, a final detail sentence, a final commentary sentence, and a concluding sentence.

“At a different high school across town, a history teacher hands out zeros to students who don’t have the thesis statement as the final sentence in the opening paragraph. Meanwhile, a woman I know who teaches at an elite research university bemoans the fact that her students, among the best in the country, have mastered the five-paragraph essay but can’t develop a complex idea in writing.” [Read the full article here.](#)

We need to stop shoving orderly writing down everyone’s throat and start going for vivid. We need to have some fun, goddammit. Because fun is where we build creative muscle – and that muscle sustains good writing.

### What’s next?

My 13-year-old writes short stories about his friends – with their knowledge and permission – every day during study (his free period). He started this at the beginning of the year, and now (April) the kids clamor to be the star each day. Since he’s *my* son, he doesn’t write the way anyone expects or dictates. His stories are chock full of random nonsense. **Which makes them fun to write and to read.**

In one tale, his friend, Nick, may be on the roof shouting a reminder that you should only eat French toast that has peanut butter on it. In another, Sydney might take her bicycle to school every day, on her back, while reciting the alphabet backward.

The idea is to come up with the bizarre and outlandish. The crazier the better. My son has fallen in love with writing because of it.

You're assignment? Yep. Write something wild. Make it 500 words and go nuts.

## CHAPTER 8 — CREATE, GODDAMMIT

*“Here’s some matches. Go set yourself on fire.” – Walter Mathau, Grumpier Old Men*

People write because they have something to say. A story to tell. We don’t write without a reason, without something that compels us. Yet we grew up learning to write for situations and prompts. We were told what to write about, when, how, how much and how often.

Many novice writers still look for the contrived. They want to be told what to write about. How long their piece should be. How much detail to add. Where to break paragraphs.

*What are the rules? I’m afraid I’ll get it wrong.*

Everyone knows it’s important for writing to be correct. You could write the next *Moby Dick*, but if it’s full of misspellings and bad punctuation, it loses value. On the other hand, correct is only one piece in the rather large puzzle of good writing. “The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog” is correct. It’s also boring as hell.

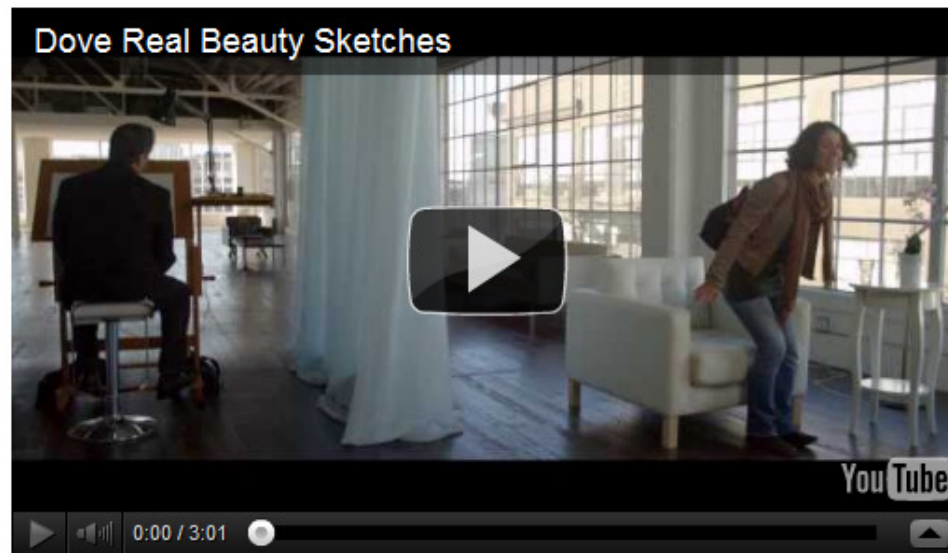
What do the pros know that these beginners haven’t yet figured out? You can’t worry about editing when you’re writing. You can’t critique until after you create.

Authentic writing – writing with a purpose – motivates the writer and it entertains and engages the reader. Polished writers learned long ago to do it their own way. They broke out of the “thesis, supporting evidence, conclusion” formula and said it, without thought of the rules. They shut off the internal editor. They write as the story unfolds in their minds. **Because we can always edit later.**

One of the most common struggles writers share is the firm and wickedly distorted belief that we suck. That we are not writers. That we will be “found out” and exposed as a joke. Because writing has rules that have been shoved down our throats since first grade. Part of our self-doubt comes from our notoriously human ability to

beat the shit out of ourselves. Part of it comes from insecurity – and every good writer has that in spades. The dysfunction almost seems to be a precursor to the Great American Novel.

But it's more than that. We underestimate ourselves in every arena. To prove it, Dove – yep, the freaking soap company – recently put together this genius video for women. In it, a forensic artist sketched seven women who were hidden behind a curtain. But there was a catch. First, he drew the women based on self-descriptions. Then he drew a second set of sketches of the same women based on how strangers described them. You won't believe what happened.



We learn self-doubt. We learn to think we're not good enough. Just like we learned to shove our words into someone else's prescribed formula for a successful book/essay/poem.

The fabulous news is we can *unlearn* it too.



And we have to, if we are going to shut off the editor in our head.

A short story. A poem. A book. Even a series.

You can.

You can do anything.

And you can be f\*cking amazing at anything, too.



But you can't wing it and expect perfection.

You have to learn.

To paraphrase William Faulkner, the only way to make it good is to write down the crap.

This whole notion of perfection needs to be blown off the face of the earth anyway. **Perfection is for losers.** Life is messy, difficult, heavy. It's also exhilarating, intense, awesome. Making mistakes is supposed to happen. We mortals have no other way of learning – because we never learn from other people's mistakes in quite the same way we do from our own. (Man, I could tell you stories.)

Today counts and do-overs are not allowed, so you really need to adjust to the fact that if you don't get past the fear of failing, you'll be stuck at square one indefinitely. Or worse.

\*

*“And now that you don’t have to be perfect, you can be good.” – John Steinbeck*

\*

### **Open mouth, insert foot.**

I have a remarkable ability to say things that quite literally leave people slack-jawed. As I mentioned earlier, it’s a game for me these days. And it took me a while to allow myself to use that same skill in writing. I couldn’t grasp that it was okay to be myself in print, too. That, if anything, it’s almost always more fun to write the things I think than it is to say them.

When you get right down to it, the only original thing you can bring to writing is *you*. Every story has already been told. The only difference you can make is in the telling. I like being irreverent and outrageous. What do you like?

It’s about you – the writer – your interests and your meaning.

Trying to write like someone else, imitating style, cadence, wastes time and talent. Do it your way. And by “your way,” what I mean is don’t be a pretentious asshat.

The world already has way too many people writing to impress. And it’s shitty writing. It’s also easy to recognize. You see it with writers who use language as a weapon. They fill pages with \$10 words when a once-cent noun or verb would suffice. They’re trying to intimate you with their blown-over vocabulary – or justify their existence. Either way, they want to make their stuff as complex as possible. They think it makes them look smart.

They also say things like, “I refuse to dumb down my words to a sixth-grade reading level because people are lazy.”

What they will never understand is laziness has nothing to do with it. As writers, it is our job to distill things. We take the complex and make it as palatable and easy to digest as we can. We want people to feel something, to relate, to attach and *empathize*. No one does that when they use “edification” instead of “understanding.” Those are the big words that make our eyes glaze over.

And if no one is reading it, why bother writing it?

### **Creative muscle**

So you understand why it’s important to be yourself. You’ve learned the value of writing to one person. Now it’s time to work out. Your brain needs to learn how to create, uninterrupted.

During my coaching sessions, I probably talk about the value of free writing more than anything else. What is it? Sit down with your pen and paper, or at your keyboard, and mentally vomit. Anything and everything in your head, as it arrives, without correcting spelling or punctuation or pausing to rethink how to word something. Just dump it all on the page.

*But I can’t do that. I’m too wrapped up in taking care of my kids. I’m worried about paying bills. I’m not in the frame of mind to write like that.*

Mmmmmm. Don’t be a douche, okay? Nothing about free writing can hurt you, and you will find your best ideas when you let loose and do it. We talked about the two separate parts of the brain help us write. One part to create and one to critique. When you free write, you turn **create** on HIGH. The more you do it, the bigger that creative muscle gets.

Free writing is, in fact, *the* way we write on your own terms. It’s how we identify what’s hiding inside. When we stop thinking about how it might sound or what someone else might think, we loosen up. That’s when we find the gems and expose them.

But don't take my word for it. Anne Lamott said it in *Bird by Bird*:

*"For me and most of the other writers I know, writing is not rapturous. In fact, the only way I can get anything written at all is to write really, really shitty first drafts.*

*The first draft is the child's draft, where you let it all pour out and then let it romp all over the place, knowing that no one is going to see it and that you can shape it later. You just let this childlike part of you channel whatever voices and visions come through and onto the page. If one of the characters wants to say, "Well, so what, Mr. Poopy Pants?," you let her. No one is going to see it. If the kid wants to get into really sentimental, weepy, emotional territory, you let him. Just get it all down on paper, because there may be something great in those six crazy pages that you would never have gotten to by more rational, grown-up means. There may be something in the very last line of the very last paragraph on page six that you just love, that is so beautiful or wild that you now know what you're supposed to be writing about, more or less, or in what direction you might go – but there was no way to get to this without first getting through the first five and a half pages."*

Ideally, you should try to free write for about 10 minutes, minimum. The point is to give yourself permission to say it all. Again, the more you do it, the easier it gets. This helps you seek original images. It helps you free associate. It helps you surprise yourself with language.

Get unstuck. Learn to trust yourself and your voice. Keep free writing.

### **Carry a notebook**

I carry a green steno pad in my purse. It has a blue Bic pen inserted in the spiral. If I do not have these items with me, I lose my mind.

I've lost count of the number of times an idea got away because I was able to scrounge up a napkin to write on, but didn't have a pen. Driving. At the beach with my boys. Watching one of their soccer games. Even at the goddamn grocery store. In a flash, a difficult paragraph makes sense. I discover the solution to the transition I need. I am struck by a brilliant metaphor, a cleaner structure for a short story, a phrase.

Don't do that to yourself. The deeper you engross yourself in your work (and you will, if you haven't yet), the more time you will spend mulling words and stories. The more you free write, the more you will need a notebook.

*Why do I need a notebook? I have a smartphone, a tablet AND a laptop.*

Because batteries die. Because electronics break. Because cold weather can make them stop working.

Because a piece of paper and a pen remove all of those obstacles. (And if it's really cold, carry a pencil in case the ink freezes in your pen.)

Be prepared. This is one time the f\*cking Boy Scouts knew what they were talking about.

### **A few words on clichés (I despise them) and brainstorming**

Your main character falls in love with the man of her dreams. You write, "The boy sent shivers down her spine." A cliché. A worn-out metaphor.

Thrills. Chills. Sparks. Whoever used this metaphor first was original. By now, it's stale.

In George Orwell's *Rules for Writers*, he says "Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print."

Because clichés substitute thinking.

“Prose consists less and less of words chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of phrases tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated henhouse,” Orwell said. Note the last seven words are an original metaphor. The man was the master of harnessing the power of language.

When you’re tempted to use a worn out phrase, just stop. Go to a blank page and write it there instead.

Let’s say you’re trying to describe a character that is exceptionally intelligent. She passed her exams “with flying colors.” Go to a blank page and write down “with flying colors.” Underneath it, start brainstorming alternatives.

- With flying colors
- Colored flags
- Fast boats
- Smooth sailing
- With easy
- Easy

I’ve worked with writers who say sometimes they brainstorm more than a dozen ideas before picking the right one. I’ve also worked with writers who bitch when I point out one cliché, then they tell me I shouldn’t be so hard on them.

Writers who use clichés think they are being clever. All they are doing is settling. It’s easy to grab a phrase we’ve heard 500 times before. It takes skill and effort to be original.

If you’re truly stuck, write it straight. Skip the metaphor or simile entirely. “She got the highest marks in school on her exams.” Because that is better than a cliché.

## What's next?

Brainstorm alternatives to these metaphors: white as snow, blue as the sky, cold as ice, hot as hell and walking on eggshells. Because you *learn* when you practice.

## CHAPTER 9 — ENTHUSIASM IS YOUR BEST F\*CKING FRIEND

*“Enthusiasm is one of the most powerful engines of success. When you do a thing, do it with all your might. Put your whole soul into it. Stamp it with your own personality. Be active, be energetic and faithful, and you will accomplish your object. Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson*

When our friends are down, we cheer them up. Bring them food. Take them out for a drink. Tell them their ex is an ass. That they're brilliant and beautiful. No matter what, we stand by our pals and cheer them on – in work, play, love and everything else.

*“You’re almost there. Don’t stop now.”*

*“You’ve so got this.”*

*“What do you mean you can’t do it? You already are!”*

No one has made it this far without friends to keep us sane, and to help us go insane for short stints. Births, deaths, marriages, divorces, awards, rejections, graduations and times when we fall flat on our faces. These people bring us smiles, warm words and booze. So when we say:

*“I’m way too busy to do that.”*

*“No one is going to read this anyway.”*

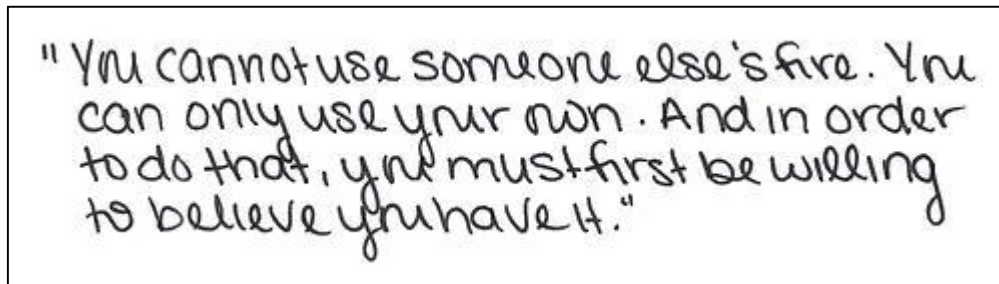
*“I don’t have the book smarts or the experience to pull this off.”*



They invade our personal space and say, "Um, bullshit."

We're there for our friends, too. It's how we humans navigate the pitfalls of life. We need each other. But sometimes, our friends can't be there. They have lives too.

So here's the deal: You need to learn how to channel their enthusiasm. And it's not as hard as you might think. What would you say to a friend who was depressed about a pending divorce? Or someone close to you who is struggling with work? Or finishing a doctorate?



"You cannot use someone else's fire. You can only use your own. And in order to do that, you must first be willing to believe you have it."

Pick and choose those words and apply them to yourself. Be your own cheerleader.

Optimism is contagious. And it feels really good. Much better than, say, bathing in all the reasons you can't do something. Sitting with negativity requires the same energy as

embracing the positive. And you do choose which one you want.

Sit and stew in your smallness and write complete crap because you tell yourself over and over that you can't do it.

Or...

Take a deep breath and say you will try.

Without enthusiasm, there is nothing to drive you toward a goal. No substance. No accelerant (think lighter fluid). If you lack passion for what you're doing, how the hell are you going to be creative enough to write something great?

And I know enthusiasm is difficult to sustain. It takes practice and effort. Like everything else, you have to decide how bad you want a thing and what you're willing to do to achieve it.

So how do we build enthusiasm?

Start with why you're writing. What's the point? Why this topic? Why now?

Do you want to reflect on something in your past? Talk about something that's happening now?

Do you want to evaluate something? Examine it up close? Do you want to express your opinion about something controversial?

Lastly, who are you writing for? Is this for you to gain clarity? Is it for your kids? Who will read this and why will they care?

Getting specific about what you want to say and why you want to say it helps you get motivated. It brings power to your voice. Knowing the purpose and the audience further pinpoints the direction of your words. But mostly, you have to believe what you want to say has value, and that it's important enough to write.

The key ingredients: a real issue with a real purpose for a real audience. Not an archaic writing formula shoved down your throat in school.

Some of the most remarkable writing comes from a place inside that we don't always want to unearth. As Anne Rice so eloquently put it: *"Writers write about what obsesses them. You draw those cards. I lost my mother when I was 14. My daughter died at the age of 6. I lost my faith as a Catholic. When I'm writing, the darkness is always there. I go where the pain is."*

For example, my son stopped talking at 10 months old. No one could tell me why or how to fix it. So I wrote a piece for the *Concord Monitor*, where I was reporting at the time. I didn't say, "My son stopped talking two years ago." I opened with a typical morning at home:

*"My son, Niko, walked into the living room on a recent Saturday morning with a Blue's Clues video in hand, his favorite fire engine slippers on his feet and a pout.*

*"Uhm," he said.*

*I looked at the movie and pretended I didn't know what he wanted. "Hi, honey," I said. "What would you like?"*

*"Uhm," he said again.*

*For the millionth time since my son stopped talking, I had to make an impossible choice: Do I comply with his obvious request or pretend I don't know what he wants and hope he'll respond with a sound?*

*Niko will be 3 years old in a few weeks. He is one of the 3.6 percent of children in this country who have a developmental disability that causes a delay in speech and language.*

*The good news for our family is he does not seem to have any of the more severe diagnoses than can accompany the disorder, such as autism, hearing loss, some form of mental retardation or cerebral palsy. The bad news is he's not talking, and nobody knows why.*

*So far during his tiny life, Niko has been shuffled to countless specialists who have largely given us misinformation about what is wrong. We've been told he has a severe hearing loss in one ear. A speech pathologist, who saw him for less than an hour, insisted he absolutely, positively has autism. The last doctor said there was nothing wrong with him physically, "Although he may need a child psychologist," he said.*

*What saves me from insanity is his pediatrician, who said from the beginning that our son was choosing not to talk, and his speech therapist from Early Intervention, who won't let us give up hope.*

*In the competitive world of toddlers (and their parents), Niko actually fares pretty well. He reached every childhood milestone ahead of schedule, including identifying all his primary colors, most letters of the alphabet, shapes and numbers up to ten before he was two and a half years old.*

*But he has not said more than a syllable since he was 10 months old. When he quit speech – as I call it – his vocabulary was 30 words...*

I think you get the idea. At age three, my son had the expressive language skills of a 9 month old. Imagine my kid *not* talking? Well played, Mother Nature. Anyway, that was a decade ago. Between then and now, he learned sign language with the help of a local nonprofit who came to the house. Then one day – poof! – he was talking. Just like that.

And now he's fine. He builds computers in his spare time. He writes stories about his friends. He hardly shuts up.

But see what I'm doing here? We've moved from talking about writing to talking about my kid's verbal skills – because the story matters. It reaches in and grabs you. It moved me, his mother. I wrote it for parents like me. I

wrote for snotty mothers of so-called normal children who ran their mouths about what was *wrong* with my son. Right. In. Front. Of. Him.

It lit a fire in me. Therefore, it lit a fire in the reader.

So what gets your hackles up? The local incinerator? Child molestation? Global climate change? Divorce? Abandonment? Daddy issues? We've all got something. We all fight to keep it inside. We're all afraid that if we let it out, it may consume us.

It's f\*cking scary. Writing is hard. **Cliché alert:** If it were easy, everyone would do it.

And when you finally do it, when you release the caged animal, you change lives – yours and your readers'. Here's proof.

Lewis Carroll wrote *Alice in Wonderland* for a little girl, Alice Liddell, whose family he knew well. Through the years, when Alice begged for a story, Carroll always came through. But at age 10, she asked him to do something different: Write it down. Enough said.

In the James Joyce classic *Ulysses*, the main character is Leopold Bloom. His wife, Molly, was modeled after Joyce's own wife, Nora Barnacle. The novel, which takes place in a single day, is set on June 16, 1904 – also the day Joyce and Nora had their first date.

Ian Fleming, who created James Bond, was personally recruited as a spy by the director of Naval Intelligence during World War II. Eventually, Fleming's job became creating plans to disrupt enemy forces. One example (of way too many to list here) includes Operation Ruthless, where British troops pretended to be injured Germans and then killed their rescuers. Later, Fleming became chief planner for a special task force trained to do pretty much everything James Bond ever did.

Truth is stranger than fiction.

\*

Ernest Hemingway, who made his name with *A Farewell to Arms*, ultimately earned the 1954 Nobel Prize in Literature. In spring 1958, he allowed a rare interview – with George Plimpton, the original editor of *The Paris Review*:

**Q:** How much rewriting do you do?

**Hemingway:** It depends, I re-wrote the ending to *Farewell to Arms*, the last page of it, thirty-nine times before I was satisfied.

**Q:** Was there some technical problem there? What was it that had stumped you?

**Hemingway:** Getting the words right.

### **What's next?**

Find out what sets you on fire. Chances are fabulous that you already know. What story is burning inside your chest? Itching your brain? What do you wake up at night thinking about? Take whatever *that* is and free write.

## CHAPTER 10 — POLISH THAT SHIT

*“You don’t start out writing good stuff. You start out writing crap and thinking it’s good stuff, and then gradually you get better at it. That’s why I say one of the most valuable traits is persistence.” — Octavia Butler*

So now, you’ve gotten off your ass. You made it past the fear long enough to free write. Although it was a struggle, you trusted your voice enough to be true to yourself. You wrote whatever popped into your head and came up with a dozen or so pages of what you’re sure is crap.

Let’s clean it up.

By way of example, two authors generously contributed their own free writing and polished work for this chapter. We’re going to look at the before and after of each, then recap the how-tos. Full disclosure: Both writers are clients who I coached.

\*

Laura Howard, author of [The Forgotten Ones](#), likes lists. They arrange things in her head, and show her where she may want to add more detail. Here’s a half page of her early notes:

- *Allison grudgingly goes on a trip to beach w/her cousin.*
- *She is always out of place with Nicole's friends-all people her age.*
- *Among Nic's friends is Ethan which makes it esp. difficult b/c she has always had a thing for him.*

- *She's managed to resist his flirting for years (mostly) not taking him seriously, laughing him off, etc.*
- *She heads home after. Lives w/ g.p.& schizo mother. Never known dad.*
- *Mother diag. shortly after her birth as schizo.*
- *Lately been hearing sounds when nothing's there/seeing things out of corner of her eye.*
- *Having strange visions and dreams.*
- *Worried she's going crazy.*

Those nine bullets became her first novel: The story of Allison O'Malley, whose life plan is to go to grad school so she can get a good job and take care of her schizophrenic mother. Allison has closed herself off from everything else, including a relationship with Ethan, who she's been in love with for as long as she can remember. Below is the scene at the beach with her cousin, Nicole, and others.

*I inhaled the salty ocean air, and the lingering scent of suntan lotion filled my nose. The sun was searing my legs, and it was time for a break in the shade. My skin burned easily and although I had sunscreen on, I was already looking a little pink. I put my bookmark between the pages and attempted to brush some of the sand off of my legs as I stood. Lifting my arms, I stretched before retreating to the chair under my umbrella.*

*Down at the water, I could see Rachel with her arms wrapped around her middle, the wind whipping strands of dark hair into her face. She kept jumping and shrieking when Sean or Ethan stumbled on their boogie boards and splashed her. Ethan caught my gaze and motioned for me to come join them. I laughed as a wave collapsed on top of him and shook my head.*



*Settling into my spot, I took off my sunglasses and closed my eyes, listening to the sound of the gulls. I sighed contentedly. This wasn't so bad.*

*A loud cawing interrupted my tranquil moment. I pried open an eye and looked at the kids building a sand castle next to our spot. There was a crow standing a few feet away, facing my direction. Weird. I'd never seen a crow at the beach before. Maybe there was a beached seal nearby.*

*I started to open my book up, but the hairs along the back of my neck stood up, and a funny feeling came over me, like I was being watched. I glanced around, and this time, the crow locked eyes with me. Something about its beady eyes made me shudder, and I turned away quickly.*

...

*A few minutes later, I heard a quiet thud as Ethan dropped down to his knees on the blanket by my feet. He dug around the cooler and pulled out a soda.*

*"Aren't you having fun?" he asked breathlessly between gulps.*

*"As a matter of fact, I am," I replied, gesturing to the umbrella and my book.*

*"Yeah? Whatcha reading?"*

*I felt a blush rise on my cheeks as I held the book out for him to see. I was reading Gone With The Wind. Again.*

*Ethan started laughing, nearly choking on his soda. "I imagined you up here reading The Guide to Modern Physics. I would've never guessed you were reading a romance novel!" He stretched himself out on the blanket and closed his eyes to the sun, his lips curved up in that mocking little smile. His dark hair was slicked back with water, and he was perfectly tanned. I couldn't help noticing that his lashes were a thick, dark fringe. I forced myself to look away.*

So how did Laura go from a handful of random sentences to the beach scene?

"Ask questions. How can I paint the entire picture in someone's head, the way it is in mine? What does my body feel like while I'm imagining it?" she said. "What would it be like to be so closed off that I don't want to have any friends?"

She trusted her voice. She took those abbreviations and bullets one at a time, examined them and wrote details for each scene. She showed her reader with rich description, rather than telling with flat words. And she did more than her fair share of brainstorming.

\*

Ranee Dillon, author of the trilogy *The Binding of Twelve*, found the opening for her first book, [Ring Binder](#), by free writing.

"I was stuck in this particular chapter. I had no idea where to start, so I clicked the keys about an entirely different issue, which I thought would end as a blog post. Little did I know that it was the perfect intro to the chapter."

Her free writing is below:

*The things that haunt us rarely go away. We see an opening to run when the wind drops and the woods are quiet, but ice locked to the ground our feet refuse to move. At least that's what happened to me. I could point to bumpy night things or the feeling I get when walking past an old building to prove my case. Somehow I don't think that's enough proof for the mass of those who refuse to see. So instead I'll spin a tale or two, and then maybe they'll see past black and white to find the truth. Maybe.*

*Is the moonlight to blame for the madness people feel or is that they are simply mad? I used to think insanity was an illness, born inside a mind at conception, waiting for a trigger pull to set the wheels turning. I'd blame the moonlight too, if it weren't for that night in London. The one clear night they'd had in months. The weather was tricky out here. Just when you think the sun was ready to pop through the clouds another rain storm hit, but not tonight. It was perfect for a late walk in the moonlight.*

“At that point in my book, I'd considered walking away from novel writing. Honestly, I didn't think I had the chops,” Raneé said. “So I sat down at my computer and let my mind wander. After the second paragraph, I stopped suddenly. The overwhelming character trait I'd built into Gran (Shanley) was insanity. I looked back through the paragraphs and found the perfect line to start my chapter. From then on, whenever I get stuck I turn to free writing first.”

Her free write became part of chapter four:

*I used to think insanity was an illness, born inside the mind at conception, waiting for a moon-shaped trigger pull to set the wheels turning. Crazyness followed in every corner of the world, including mine. I'd blame it for Shanley's behavior, if not for all the weird things that had gone on lately. Then again, it could be that I hadn't been ready to face the truth. She was just losing her mind.*

*I strummed my fingers against the countertop, staring at the full moon through the kitchen window.*

*A week had passed since I'd told Shanley that I loved Nickolas. Though she hadn't said anything in particular, she tsked every time I mentioned his name. That was clear enough. She'd continued to talk about the Binders coming for me, but very little of what she said made sense to me anymore, and they hadn't magically appeared as she promised. Between working at the shop, taking care of the house, and her regular outbursts, I was ready to pack a bag and hide in some far off land.*

### **Quick and dirty ways to proof your shit**

The first rule in my writing world is easy: Keep everything. You will use it later. Take anything you don't want in whatever you are working on and paste it into a blank file. If nothing else, those words could serve as inspiration later. (Or reminders of what you don't want to say again.) Save it all.

1. Read it out loud. You hear errors. If it sounds funny, confusing or wrong, if you trip over words, fix it.
2. Check punctuation, grammar and spelling. Use your computer's built-in mechanisms. Ask family and friends to help. No valid excuse exists for messy prose in your final version.
3. Write tight. Be concise. Eliminate unnecessary words ("had" and "that", for starters) and details that clutter a sentence. Don't be afraid to break things up.
4. Kill every instance of "suddenly" and "there". They suck the meat out of a sentence. (We'll talk more about both in the next chapter.)

5. Choose active verbs over passive verbs. Passive verbs include is, am, was, were, to be, has been, etc. Which sounds better?

“He was sure he had nothing else to learn.”

Or

“He was buttoned down, flattened against the night’s wisdom, like he had nothing else to learn.”

6. Vary sentence structure and length. For fight scenes and high tension, use short, crisp sentences. Choppy even. Those mimic the motion of your body during a fight. Longer sentences slow the action. Those give you time to develop a situation or character before a big scene.

7. Details. Details. Details. They bring life to the damn story. And no, I don’t mean just poetic imagery. Sensory details. Sound, taste, touch, smell, see, feel. Don’t forget temperature, the weather, and emotion. Make your words reflect the life around us.

8. Read. Classics, chapter books, comics, magazines, newspapers, cereal boxes, romance and even junk mail. Writers need fresh ways to present material. Never stop reading.

Then hit my handy-dandy checklist, adapted from the teachings of the infamous [Michael Xavier](#):

- Does your story have a beginning, middle and end? At the start, do you present the conflict? Do you unravel it at a real pace? Will readers care about your characters? Do they do things that are believable? Is the story easy to follow, even with twists and turns? Is there a climax, a resolution and a conclusion?
- Does this story make sense? Is it logical?

- Does the first sentence make you want to keep reading? *This is essential.* You want a line that makes the reader say, “Oh my God.”
- Does any part of the story stand out to you as unfinished or not quite done? Anything you want to change?
- Does any part feel like it may be presented too soon or too late? Something you may want to move to a different place?
- Does anything in the story feel as though it is out of place? Hint: If it doesn’t move your story forward, delete it. Unnecessary details about peripheral characters. Too much description of a room where no real action takes place. Look for things that may take your reader out of the experience of the book.
- Do you need to say more about your characters? Will people care about them as they are presented? Do readers know enough about them to be scared, sad or happy when something happens? Do you feel tense during moments of tension?
- When you read the story, can you see the places and faces in your mind? Do you need more detail?
- Does this story have a problem that gets solved? A conflict that is resolved?
- Do the events lead to the problem *and* a believable solution?
- Do you like the ending? Did you like your story? Did you like your character?
- Did your hero evolve? Did your hero learn something important about himself or the world? Did your hero actually act heroically and perform the action? If your hero watched while another character solved the conflict, your hero did not do his part.

## CHAPTER 11 — DON'T DO THIS

*"It's all fun and games until someone uses an exclamation point." — Me*

Three things: Exclamation points, words that suck the blood out of sentences, and making the simple complex.

Let's start with the exclamation point. We all know what it is, what it does, and what it is for. Why, then, do they show up where they clearly do not f\*cking belong?

Using an exclamation point is the equivalent of shouting. Imagine the little vein on the side of your character's forehead throbbing an angry red. It's unusual for a person, real or imagined, to have that happen more than once in an entire book. Unless he's nuts. But even then, multiple exclamation points are just bad writing.

Use this form of punctuation sparingly. And by sparingly, I mean **almost never**.

**"I have learned through bitter experience that the only three words that deserve an exclamation point are: Sex! Fire! and, Police! . . . and not always in that order." --- michaelxavier (CHUCH OF ST. JULIO)**

Exclamation points are most frequently used in quotes. But they don't belong in your characters' quotes. And do not say, "But that's how my character talks. I can't change his inflection."

That's crap.

You created that character. You can make him say or do anything you damn well choose. And you can choose not to make your work look elementary. Because that's what too many exclamation points does to writing: dumbs it down.

For the record, Grammar Nazis agree the exclamation point has its place.

To raise your voice or express a strong feeling.

- "What a fantastic house you have!"
- "Leave me alone!"
- "Shut up!"

To express exuberance.

- "Hi!"
- "Oh! I had no idea."
- "Ouch!"
- "What idiots we are!"

You also see them all over emails, text messages and social media posts.

- I met John yesterday. He is so handsome!!!
- Don't be late!!



- I'll never understand men!!!

But that doesn't mean they can't be replaced with rich descriptions, active verbs or setting details. Don't tell us he is yelling with an exclamation point. Instead, show us with body language, physical description or a reference to the volume of his voice.

\*

The **runner-up for most annoying writer habit** is use of the word "suddenly." It almost never gives the sense of urgency the writer is after. And it's just plain lazy. (Yeah, I said it.)

The goal is to show the reader, not just tell.

-

"And **suddenly** her face felt hot."

*The words, issued from the over-saturated redness of his lips, burn my cheeks.*

(Illustrate the cause for the physical reaction instead of using suddenly.)

-

"He appeared **suddenly** behind another guard and shot him in the back of the head."

*The guard never heard the man's boots silently creeping in the sand behind him. The shot to the back of his head was so quick, it probably wouldn't have mattered.*

(Show the reader why the guard never had a chance instead of using suddenly.)

-

“And **suddenly** what was being asked of him didn't seem so ridiculous.”

*Just like that, her short skirt and low-cut blouse dissolved his resistance. In that moment, he might agree to do anything the dark-haired beauty asked.*

(Paint a picture of why it didn't seem ridiculous instead of using suddenly.)

-

If you write a scene correctly, you don't need **suddenly**, or a synonym. The reader is smart enough to sense tension. The trick is to get into your character's head and stay there. Let the reader see what the character sees and feel what the character feels.

Don't: **Suddenly**, *the other fighter pulled out his knife and jabbed at him.*

Do: *I dodged the other man's left hook, then I moved my hand down toward his knife. A flash of steel. I threw myself backward, away from the knife, and slammed into the ground.*

Capiche?

\*

**The third most annoying writer habit:** Sentences that use a “there” phrase. *There is. There are. There was. There were. There have been. There will be.*

Can you feel me cringing?

Technically, it's not wrong to begin a sentence that way. But it is bad style. "There" phrases are passive. Boring. Often confusing. And definitely unnecessary.

Help your writing and your readers by eliminating the word entirely.



**Don't:** "There is always a way to eliminate the word 'there.' "

**Do:** "A way to eliminate the word 'there' always exists."

#### **Passive versus active**

Everyone recognizes good writing as that which sucks you in. We're beside the old man in line for the guillotine. We cry with the 9 year old boy who lost his mother to cancer. We get seasick alongside Orange Juice. (Read "Life of Pi".) But readers don't get there – in the story, beside the characters – with passive voice.

It's too easy to leave out the person or thing doing the action.

**Don't:** "There was a car accident." (And?)

**Better:** "The neighbor crashed his car."

**Do:** "The neighbor crashed his black Toyota Tundra into a stop sign up the street."

The last sentence tells you who did what, and where. It holds plenty of detail, yet won't overwhelm the reader.

Bonus: The person and the action are identified. No generic bullshit here.

### **“There” is boring**

Please, please, *please* tell me your story. Carry me right down into it and hold me the entire time. If you’re not concise, I’m bored. Quickly.

**Don’t:** “There was no way I was going back in there.” (Huh?)

**Better:** “I was not going back in there.” (Oh.)

**Do:** “I was not going back into that house.” (Got it.)

Because now I know what the hell you’re talking about, and where.

### **It’s confusing**

Don’t make your readers guess. Don’t leave blanks for them to fill in. The whole point of reading is to escape. Don’t force your readers to imagine your scenario. Details, please.

**Don’t:** “There’s something about the way he looks at me.” (Like what?)

**Better:** “Something about the way he looks at me steals my breath.” (Ah.)

**Do:** “The way he looks at me, crouched down and hungry, steals my breath.” (Goosebumps.)

When we use “there” phrases, we set up a sentence with a subject and verb, *and* a “dummy” subject. The dummy subject – the word that is NOT the subject at all – is the word “there.” It confuses the shit out of people. Writers clarify by being specific. Our task is to make things more understandable.

### **So eliminate “there.”**

Try removing “there” from the following:

- **There are** three characters in the play that are very important.

- **There have been** a few unsuccessful attempts at imitating his style.
- **There was** a brown bear in one of my favorite books as a child.
- **There are** several tall pines near the rusty cemetery gate.
- **There was** a bright full moon smiling at them.

\*

*“So avoid using the word ‘very’ because it’s lazy. A man is not very tired, he is exhausted. Don’t use very sad. Use morose. Language was invented for one reason, boys - to woo women - and in that endeavor, laziness will not do. It also won’t do in your essays.”* — Robin Williams in the 1989 film *Dead Poets Society*

\*

### **The fourth most annoying writer habit:**

Using too many words or complex words when simple words will do. Just f\*cking say it. Don’t try to dress it up. We don’t need pearls and lace. Jeans and a T-shirt are more comfortable.

"It is pointless to attempt to edify an elderly canine with novel maneuvers."

or

"You can't teach an old dog new tricks."

-

"In the unlikely eventuality that you encounter various and sundry difficulties with the above-referenced project, apprise me of the situation at your convenience."

or

"Let me know if you have any problems."

## CHAPTER 12 — CONTEXT IS EVERYTHING

*“The problem is not the problem. The problem is your attitude about the problem. Do you understand?”  
– Captain Jack Sparrow*

Five generations of family photos are scattered across the side table in my living room. Among them is a black and white image of an old man standing in a field. I’ve had that picture for almost twenty years. It inspires me every day.



During a visit last year, I heard my sister telling my kids the man in question must be one of our great-grandfathers. It’s the one indistinguishable photo among many others of family my sister does recognize.

That is context: an expectation, a conclusion drawn, based on surrounding facts, circumstances, events.

Except my sister was wrong. The photo is actually Robert Frost on his farm in Derry, NH, not far from where I grew up.

And just like that photo confused my sister, you can completely lose your reader if you don’t lay out your story properly.

Context affects how you organize your story. Which information you share and when. It helps structure your delivery. It also affects your readers’

understanding – on multiple levels.

When we talk, we create context during the conversation, in the moment. What we are doing, when, where, why and how. We share an understanding of the subject and where we are having it. We can see each other's body language, facial expression, reactions. All of that establishes our context.

But writing is different.

We sit down to write in a particular place and time. But those words can be read at any random place and time in the future. That means we can't rely on a shared understanding of the subject, the story, the setting. We can't see the reaction of our readers. We can't add explanation if they don't get it right away.

As a writer, it's our job to fully create the context on the page. It has to be there for future readers to see it the way we imagined. And it's a bitch.

It separates the men from the boys. It's the part that makes every writer pull at her hair and yell, "JesusChristonACracker."

Or maybe that's just me.

The bottom line is we have to figure out how we want our readers to respond to our words. What do we want them to feel, think, do? Then we need to figure out how to make that happen. We need to plan it.

Something informal, like an email, is quick and dirty without much detail. An academic essay requires a certain format and formula. Fiction writing demands you put your reader right down in it, with rich details, vivid background, etc.



The reason context is so difficult for writers is we already understand what we are writing and why. Our readers don't. They need every tiny nuance in our heads in order to make sense of what we put on the page in the way we intended. As writers, we need to slow waaaaay down and visualize the minutiae. Sometimes, the things we think are trivial help the reader the most.

But don't take my word for it. **See for yourself.**

-

This doesn't have to be hard.

**Writing** doesn't have to be hard.

**Fiction** writing doesn't have to be hard, **especially for those who free write regularly.**

Fiction writing doesn't have to be hard, especially for those who free write regularly **and carry a notebook.**

Those who free write and carry a notebook regularly **find it easier to write fiction since both habits build creative muscle.**

Those who free write regularly and carry a notebook have more creative muscle, **which allows them to trust their voices to create whole new worlds.**

Those who free write regularly and carry a notebook have more creative muscle, which allows them to trust their voices to create whole new worlds. **Because if you don't trust yourself, writing can be torture.**

-

Do I really need to go on?

The more details you add, the more clear your message becomes. What seems normal to you may not be to your reader. The best example of this is a card game I grew up playing, called [forty-fives](#).

I was nine years old the first time I was allowed to join the table, a holiday tradition that spans five generations. This is the Holy Grail of cards in my family. It never occurred to me that anyone outside a 25-mile radius of Merrimack Valley in Massachusetts hadn't heard of it. In fact, I didn't discover that part until I was 25 years old and moved to central New Hampshire.

*Me: "Hey, let's play 45s."*

*Them: "What?"*

Naturally, if a character in my novel played cutthroat or partners, most of my readers would be lost. We won't even talk about reneging when lower trump is led. *Because you have no idea what I am talking about* and I really don't want to lose your attention.

It's a huge mistake to rely on your characters' quotes to tell the story. That is your job. The context should set the scene for when, where, even how the characters speak. But their words should not tell the reader everything about the setting.

Let's look at context another way. In Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim jumps back and forth between moments of his pretty-horrid life. In this excerpt, he's watching a World War II movie, but because he moves through time, he is seeing it in reverse.

*American planes, full of holes and wounded men and corpses took off backwards from an airfield in England. Over France, a few German fighter planes flew at them backwards, sucked bullets and shell fragments from some of the planes and crewmen. They did the same for wrecked American bombers on the ground, and those planes flew up backwards to join the formation.*

*The formation flew backwards over a German city that was in flames. The bombers opened their bomb bay doors, exerted a miraculous magnetism which shrunk the fires, gathered them into cylindrical steel containers, and lifted the containers into the bellies of the planes. The containers were stored neatly in racks. The Germans below had miraculous devices of their own, which were long steel tubes. They used them to suck more fragments from the crewmen and planes. But there were still a few wounded Americans, though, and some of the bombers were in bad repair. Over France, though, German fighters came up again, made everything and everybody as good as new.*

*When the bombers got back to their base, the steel cylinders were taken from the rack and shipped back to the United States, where factories were operating night and day, dismantling the cylinders, separating the dangerous content into minerals. Touchingly, it was mainly women who did this work. The minerals were then shipped to specialists in remote areas. It was their business to put them into the ground, to hide them cleverly, so they would never hurt anyone ever again.*

*The American fliers turned in their uniforms, became high school kids. And Hitler turned into a baby, Billy Pilgrim supposed. That wasn't in the movie. Billy was extrapolating.*

*Everybody turned into a baby, and all humanity, without exception, conspired biologically to produce two perfect people named Adam and Eve, he supposed.*

The details give the reader context. Where is the narrator? What does he see? What is he doing? What time of day is it? What's the weather?

Vonnegut is so awesome, he gives us a clear picture of war *in reverse*, where most writers would struggle with it in chronological order.

But why bother? Why share information so readily when you've had to bust your ass to create it? Because readers who don't follow your plot will quit reading.

You do want readers, right?

## CHAPTER 13 — CHARACTERS

*“The only characters I ever don't like are ones that leave no impression on me. And I don't write characters that leave no impression on me.” — Lauren DeStefano*

Character arc is how a character evolves. How he grows. What he learns. How he changes as a result of the plot.

It's human nature to want characters better off in the end than where they began. But that doesn't mean characters should always end up richer or smarter, or even married. Sometimes it means bad guys to go to jail. People die. Changes take place. Real, believable changes.

So how do we help our characters come to life, change over time and find a resolution? Slooooooowly. Because, just like real life, meaningful and lasting things do not happen overnight. We lead up to the book's climax through rising action – the challenges a character faces that start out easy and get tougher the deeper we read. Each scene has its own mini-climax.

Characters travel along their arc wrestling with and then overcoming flaws. But not in perfect sequence. Not when the character wants it to happen. And definitely not the first time the character tries to get past whatever adversity the plot introduces. The growth is gradual. It comes in stages. And it doesn't come easy.

Shitty character arcs, on the other hand, are sudden. They jump or shift and make huge leaps in character behavior. They aren't believable because humans just don't operate that way.

A good character arc makes the character travel, wrestle with what he finds, fail, try again, travel, wrestle, fail, try again...

In most stories, the character doesn't choose the challenge, but has no choice. Pretty much like real life. We don't change until staying the same is more painful. Which is why this formula connects the reader to your story.

The character arc is the journey from fear to courage, callousness to empathy, cold to loveable. Sometimes, the character has his beliefs changed by the events in the story. Sometimes, they are validated instead.

Harry Potter starts his adventure as a bumbling pre-teen, would-be wizard who doesn't even know his dead parents weren't Muggles. (Nor does he know what Muggles are, for that matter). By the end of the series, he's an accomplished wizard taking on the darkest magic in history.

If you start with a flawed character, you'll have plenty of room for his growth. Especially if that flaw is what gets the character into trouble – the story conflict – and then requires him to grow in order to solve the problem. Besides, everyone loves an underdog.

Good character arcs are natural. Readers see the character's bad behavior or habit being confronted and then changing slowly over time. The character's struggle to change also helps the reader empathize.

A character almost always makes the same mistakes several times before moving on. Think of it almost like an intervention. People and events keep confronting the character about his flaws until he is forced to face the truth. Then he has to make a choice: Change or don't.

A couple of examples:

- In *Tootsie*, Dustin Hoffman's character begins as a misogynist. When he is forced to play the part of a woman, all that changes.

- In *The Godfather*, Michael Corleone doesn't want a thing to do with his father's crazy-ass crime business. When his father is attacked and nearly dies, Michael does a 180 and starts a nasty war of retribution.



\*

Now that you know what your characters have to do, let's talk about the story. I'm only going to address the so-called three act story structure. Because it's the most common and the easiest for the budding novelist.

### **Questions to get you started**

In your story, what will carry your character from the beginning to the middle and the end? Let's break it down.

*The start* - What does your main character do for a living? What's his daily routine? Is he married? Single? Does he have kids?

What major event drastically changes the main character's life? What gets his ass in gear?

Based on whatever that thing is, what does your character need to do to restore life to normal?

*The end* - Yeah, I know the middle comes first. But write the end so you know where the middle will take you. It's soooo much easier.

At the climax, what will your character do to finally reach his objective (change or not change)? Will he succeed or fail?

*The middle* - The middle is the meat. It makes up almost 90 percent of your story. When you're making notes for this section, get specific. You're going to ask yourself the same questions over and over in order to plot out the book.

Who or what are the obstacles preventing the main character from obtaining the goal?

What is the first thing your character tries in order to restore his life? How does it fail?

The key: It's normal for people to use minimal effort. Whatever requires the least amount of our time and energy is what we go for. When that doesn't work, we up our game. The middle of the story is when the character goes through that process. The obstacles get progressively more difficult, or your character uses more energy and skill, or both.

So what is the second action the character takes? How does it fail?



Continue the pattern as many times as you want or need, escalating the conflict each time.

## **Characters**

Next up is the people in your head. Make a list of your characters, preferably at least five, and what they want.

You have two choices: Will your characters work together or against each other to do what needs to be done? When you look at it that way, it's easier to write down how the characters are related, how they know each other, or how/why their ideas conflict.

Character #1: What does he do? What does he want? How does it conflict from those around him?

Character #2: What does he do? What does he want? How does it conflict from those around him?

Character #3: What does he do? What does he want? How does it conflict from those around him?

Character #4: What does he do? What does he want? How does it conflict from those around him?

Character #5: What does he do? What does he want? How does it conflict from those around him?

Each of those characters has his own arc, usually smaller subplots. For the main characters in your story, ask yourself:

1. What happens to flip your character's world?
2. What does your character want to do or get in order to get back to normal?
3. What gets in his way?
4. How does that your character's wants conflict with other main character's goals?
5. Will the character get what he wants in the end?

\*

*“It begins with a character, usually, and once he stands up on his feet and begins to move, all I can do is trot along behind him with a paper and pencil trying to keep up long enough to put down what he says and does.”*

— William Faulkner

\*

## **The scenes**

Okay, so now you know where your story is going. You have some idea of who your characters are and what they want. Keep those ideas loose. They will probably change, and that’s okay.

The first scene sets up the reader for whatever major change is coming. Forget gradual introductions. Dive in. Give your reader gripping action. What does your character do just before the upset?

Once you’ve got the big change, work on how your character will react. Some writers jot down a few options. Some flush out two or three different scenarios before choosing one. After you figure out how he reacts, you have the beginning. Nice going.

The middle is where most writers stall, procrastinate, give up, or hurt their computers. This section is most of your book. But you can’t look at it that way. Being overwhelmed by page or word count is the quickest way to dissolve motivation. Break it up into as many manageable chunks as you need.

Start by going back to the questions on page 113:

Who or what are the obstacles preventing the main character from obtaining the goal?  
What is the first thing your character tries in order to restore his life? How does it fail?  
What is the second action he takes? How does it fail?  
Continue the pattern as many times as you want or need.

Each cycle – each time those things happen – it's another hunk of the middle.

Toward the end, your character needs a crisis. This is where he chooses to give it everything he has so he can try to get his life back. Then slap the ending on and you're done.

# HANG TOUGH. BE YOU. THE WORLD IS WAITING.

Learning to write well is a lifelong process. And as you change, your voice changes. What you learn over time is that it's okay to be you, whoever that is at any given time. Millions of people are waiting for you to say what you want to say – in the way only *you* can.

*As my mentor Michael Xavier always says, "No one can tell the story like you."*

If you have a burning desire to write, then write.

If you think you cannot do it, **you're wrong.**

If you think it's unrealistic, **you're wrong.**

If you think it will be scary, **you're right.**

If you're willing to go after what you want in spite of that fear ...

If you want to go out knowing that you did everything you could ...

**you're in the right place.**

You know what you need to do.

You've known for a while.

So let's make it happen.

**I'd like to extend an invitation** to consult with me via email on your existing work in progress, story idea, shaking off writer's block, whatever.

This is not a service I advertise publicly, and is only available to you as a thank you for purchasing my book, and because I know that I can help you.

By providing these consults via email, I can offer them at a lower price point. Because, let's face it, we're all broke. I've also found that it is much easier for people to talk about something as sacred as their writing, and be more real, when they are not on the phone. Email seems to help people get exposed - down and dirty, if you will.  
\*snicker\*

I provide [editing services](#) for all genres, full or partial manuscripts, where I tell you how to make shit sizzle. Packages start at \$600.

I also hold intimate [month-long programs](#) where we work together, one on one via email and telephone, on you and your writing, and I help you find your voice and make it fucking sing. And we polish the shit out of whatever you want to write, so you can publish it, sell it, or give it away on the street corner as a manifesto to change the world. It sells for \$499.

I also offer [one-hour consults via telephone](#), which include a recording you can play back any time you need inspiration, as well as a written recap with everything we talked about, how to implement it, and a list of your next steps. It sells for \$149.

While it's insanely important to have moxie, be yourself, feel the fear and write it anyway, not all of you have that kind of money to spend right now.

That said, if you need help, advice or a sounding board, you're welcome to purchase **an email consult for \$79**, where you ask me any three questions related to your writing, your voice, your words. I will write back within 48 hours with as much depth as I am able. My response will be tailored to you, to help you stay focused, give you answers and reassurance about the direction you're heading. And if you're off track, I will totally tell you – and then I'll tell you why.

**One catch: You must purchase your email consult within one week of purchasing this book.**

Why? Because it helps me weed out who is serious and who isn't. I don't have time to waste. Do you?

If you'd like to purchase an email consult, [just shoot me an email with the subject "Email consult"](#). After that, you'll receive instructions on how to send your questions.

On the next page, you'll find a list of recommended resources and people who can help you. And if I can be of any help to you, please tweet me [@RebeccaTDickson](#).

Remember, saying you're GOING TO WRITE means sweet f\*ck-all. Let's do it.

## PEOPLE, PRODUCTS & SERVICES TO HELP YOU

[The Desire Map](#)

[Your Big Beautiful Book Plan](#)

[Erika Napoletano](#) - she gets shit done.

[Peter Elbow's \*Writing with Power\*](#) - the single best writing book I have ever read.

[Premise](#) - for your website.

[EchoSign](#)

[Uber Conference](#) - call, record, biz communications made simple.

## **BLOG POSTS TO GET YOU STARTED**

[Writing and Marketing. What you want.](#)

[Top three reasons writers give up](#)

[No Fuckery Allowed](#)

[We don't need help in the Oh-My-God-I-Suck-Department](#)

[When you push past the bullshit](#)

[No one can write the story like you](#)

[A writers' routine means sweet f\\*ck-all](#)



# NOW GET TO WORK.



XOX

Becky