

Becoming a Better Writer : A Gentler Approach

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Want to become a better writer? Want to learn how to silence those inner critics that keep you from writing? Want to write every day but can't find the time? Read this article to find solutions to your writing problems.

Becoming a Better Writer: A Gentler Approach Practical Advice on How to Write

Writing is a joy for me, but that wasn't always the case. I used to suffer from debilitating writer's anxiety. With the help of wise teachers (both live and in print), I was able to overcome (most) of my writer's anxiety. I am forever grateful for their gentle wisdom. What follows are a few of the tools and attitudes that helped me to reshape my outlook on writing, so that I could develop into the writer I've always wanted to be.

Writer, Know Thyself

Who are you? As a writer, I mean. What do you like most about writing? What do you like least? What is your favorite genre? Why? What are your favorite memories about writing? What are your least favorite? Are you a procrastinator where writing is concerned? Why? Do you prefer to write by hand? Or, do you prefer to write using a keyboard? Do you journal? If not, why not? Who was your favorite writing teacher, live or in print? What did he or she do that made you respond the way you have? Do you prefer to write in the quiet, with no errant sounds distracting you or breaking your concentration? What are your favorite places to write? Have you tried writing in a coffee house or coffee shop? What about writing in a park (charge your laptop's battery if you do), or in the public library? What about writing on your front porch, where a light breeze caresses the wind chimes into song?

Reflect on who you are as a writer. Allow the above questions to guide you. Discover your needs and allow those discoveries to guide your choices for developing a gentler writing practice.

Write by Hand

Write by hand. Everything. Outline, draft, and edit by hand. Writing by hand slows you down long enough to think, to mull over your ideas, and to give you time to decide whether things will work out. Writing by hand allows you to feel your pen or pencil scratch along the surface of what you're writing on. There is an immediate sensual connection to your writing when you write by hand. Feel the pen in your hand. Is it hard? Or, does it have a soft rubberized barrel? How does your writing instrument feel? What does the paper feel like as your pen moves along its surface? Is your paper smooth, lined loose leaf? Or, is it recycled newspaper print? Allow yourself to take in these sensations. Feel them. Enjoy them and allow your words to flow.

Free Writing

When I was first introduced to free writing, I didn't trust it. I was in college, a junior, and had years and years of traditional writing method under my belt. So, when my professor said to write without worrying about writing mechanics, punctuation, or grammar, I didn't know what to think. By that time, I had received lots of feedback that focused less on the content of my writing and more on the mechanics that shaped and secured my essays to a particular style sheet. At the time, my professor didn't tell me that free writing was an opportunity to write past the inner critic—that horrid internal voice that rattles off personal barbs meant to deflate self esteem—or that it was an opportunity to produce text. More than anything, free writing is really about free writing, writing that doesn't cost a thing emotionally. There are no evaluations of free writing. No grades. No expectations, other than to write nonstop for 5-10 minutes. Usually free writing is directed by a writing prompt, a topic, that helps you face a direction, but by no means is it supposed to tell you how to walk down the path.

Free writing is an excellent way to warm up prior to a strenuous writing workout. It gets the juices flowing; it helps the brain and hand get into sync. Free writing is unencumbered, weightless, lightened by removed constraints. It is a good way to help you figure out what you think about things. Free writing is permission to be you without having to apologize for not yet knowing all of the dance steps.

Timed Writings

How long is 5 minutes? What can you do in 5 minutes time? Brush teeth. Sort mail. Microwave a frozen meal. Light a candle and say a prayer. There are so many things that can be done in 5 minutes. You can write in five minutes, get the beginnings of a story, poem, or essay down. You can fill up the front of a 3x5 index card—the backside, too. You can set your timer if you're anxious about time. Set it for five minute and go! Don't stop writing until the timer chimes.

Timed writings are a blessing. They truly are. If you have a hectic schedule, you can rest easy that, at minimum, only 5 minutes a day is all it takes to start writing your next project, or to get some writing practice in, or to jot down an image that you don't want to forget. And, if you have more than 5minutes, say 10, then you are even more blessed, because with 10 minutes, you can sink deeper into your writing. You can change your world. Set your timer, every day, portioning out your writing time. Once you set your timer, you are obligated for only those few minutes. Feel the urgency of the timer and let it compel you to write, write, write without worrying about punctuation or grammar. Just get those thoughts down on paper! Remember, there is time later on (at least 5 minutes) to revise them to your liking.

Early Bird Writing

I've found that if I don't start my day with writing, I most likely won't do any writing for the day. While not everyone is necessarily a morning writer, I encourage you to find that time of day when you feel it is the best time to haven yourself from the world and fall into your writing. Make it a habit. Write a little bit every day. Start with 5 minutes. Then, the very next day, write for 10 minutes. Then, the day after that, write for 15 minutes. Continue each day, adding 5 minutes more until you get to 30 minutes a day. Write for thirty minutes each day for a month. Then slowly increase your writing time by 5 minutes a day until you reach 60 minutes. Then, write everyday for 60 minutes. Every day for 60 minutes, forever.

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