

Includes More Than 500 Prompts

The Writer's



# Idea Book

*How to develop great  
ideas for fiction, nonfiction,  
poetry and screenplays*

Jack Heffron

# PRAISE FOR THE WRITER'S IDEA BOOK

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In a field crowded with disappointing tomes, what a joy to open *The Writer's Idea Book* and find vast regions of opinion and experience mined for creative fodder. As much fun to read as it is to use.

— JANET FITCH, AUTHOR OF *WHITE OLEAN*

*The Writer's Idea Book* is a fascinating, no-nonsense, sit-your-butt-down-and-work approach invaluable to all writers hoping to stretch their imaginations, deepen their understanding of the craft, gain new experience, and explore their moral visions. Not since John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction* has there been such a useful and informative and comprehensive resource book. In fact, if writers have only one book about writing on their shelves, it should be this one.

— LAURA HENDRIE, AUTHOR OF *STYGO* AND *REMEMBER*

Jack Heffron's *The Writer's Idea Book* is the literary equivalent of attending the Actor's Studio. Wise, entertaining, and inventive, the book liberates beginning and advanced writers alike, helping them get to the heart of their story.

— DAVID MORRELL, AUTHOR OF *FIRST BLOOD* AND *BROTHERHOOD OF THE ROAD*

What an inspiring book! *The Writer's Idea Book* does exactly what it sets out to do—offer writers at all stages of their careers a seemingly endless variety of ideas to noodle around with, explore, and ultimately make their own. Jack Heffron's voice is so nurturing, funny, and wise that, as he guides you along the writer's path, you'll feel as though you've made a new best friend.

— JANICE EIDUS, AUTHOR OF *THE CELIBACY CLUB* AND *URBAN BROTHERHOOD*

*The Writer's Idea Book* is an excellent workbook for people interested in any kind of writing. The advice is helpful and practical, without making grand promises or arousing inflated expectations in the writer. I recommend it highly.

— JOANNE GREENBURG, AUTHOR OF *I NEVER PROMISED YOU A ROSE GARDEN* AND *WHERE THE ROAD GOES*

Every writer out there will benefit from *The Writer's Idea Book*. Whether you are just starting out, or immersed in a project, or simply feeling stuck, Jack Heffron has an idea to help you along. This is a book to keep close at hand as you will be referring to it often!

— ANN HOOD, AUTHOR OF *THE PROPERTIES OF WATER* AND *SOMEWHERE OFF THE COAST OF MASSACHUSETTS*

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10th Anniversary Edition

THE WRITER'S  
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# How to Develop Great Ideas for Fiction, Nonfiction, Poetry, and Screenplay

Jack Heffron



Cincinnati,  
[www.writersdigest.com](http://www.writersdigest.com)

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*For Michael and Nick,  
and for Amy*

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## AUTHOR'S FOREWORD TO THE NEW EDITION

It's tough for me to believe that ten years have passed since the first edition of *The Writer's Idea Book* was published. I remember writing it as if it was, well, not yesterday but not all that long ago. At the time I didn't imagine it would still be around a decade later, and since that time I have heard from many writers who found something valuable in its pages—some exercise that launched a rewarding project. Those letters and e-mails are always gratifying to receive.

I've learned much since that first edition, through the process of putting words on the page, as well as from teaching. At the time when the original edition was published, I had just begun teaching at what became an annual writers conference with two amazing colleagues—Sheila Bender and Meg Files. And we're still doing it. What began as the Colorado Mountain Writer's Conference has evolved into the Writing It Real Conference, produced through Sheila's online magazine by the same name. Through the years, I've learned from Sheila and Meg, as well as from the hundreds of writers who have come to the conference, each with a story to tell.

One lesson I've learned is that the exercise that tickles our fancy is not always the one that sparks the best writing. Sometimes we reap the most results from an exercise that forces us to struggle, to push a bit harder. Writers at all levels of experience tend to go toward the path of least resistance, but often we need the resistance in order to find the material we most need to explore.

Sometimes, frankly, the starting point doesn't matter much at all. The initial challenge presented by an exercise can be merely a gateway—a means to accessing deeper, richer material. After our imaginations connect with that material, we must leave the first inspiration behind, which, of course, is not always easy to do.

In her essay "Notes for Young Writers," author Annie Dillard explains: "Usually you have to rewrite the beginning—the first quarter or third or whatever it is. You'll just have to take a deep breath and throw it away ... once you finish the work and have a clearer sense of what it is about. Take up the runway; it helped you take off, and you don't need it now. This is why some writers say it takes 'courage' to write. It does. Over and over you must choose the book over your own wishes and feelings."

As you write your way through this book, keep these thoughts in mind. It is a journey that requires courage. And faith. Sometimes a piece of writing takes its own sweet time in revealing itself to us. If we're truly engaged by the material—even if on some days we feel more doubt than faith—then we need to push on, believing that a discovery will reward our patience and our trust.

In short, you can begin anywhere. Close your eyes, flip open the book, and jab a page with your finger. Then begin with the nearest exercise. You might, as some of my students have done in the past, let out a loud groan, thinking you have nothing to say in response to the prompt. That might be just the one you need to do. Give it a try.

In this edition of the book you'll find many new exercises. I've also added some new chapters covering topics that hadn't occurred to me when I was writing the original. You'll also find some revised and expanded chapters from the follow-up book, *The Writer's Idea Workshop*. That book focuses on developing and jump-starting projects already under way. My hope is that you'll find enough here to spark any number of projects from poems to screenplays to short stories and personal essays to novels and memoirs.

I'm looking forward to taking that journey with you. I don't promise that it will be easy. In fact,



can pretty much guarantee that it won't be. Writing well requires a commitment. Like most any skill you can name, writing requires a lot of practice. It also requires a lot of reading. Without reading the best writing you can find, and studying that writing to discover what qualities make it special, you'll have a tough time progressing in your own work.

But as I tell my students, if it were easy we wouldn't get to feel so darn special about ourselves as writers. I tell them to recall the scene in the movie *A League of Their Own*, when Dottie Hinson, played by Geena Davis, quits the baseball team, saying that the game is simply "too hard." Her manager, Jimmy Dugan, played by Tom Hanks, responds, "It's supposed to be hard. If it wasn't hard everyone would do it. The hard is what makes it great."

The same is true about writing. "The hard," however, doesn't mean it can't be fun. In fact, it's probably the most fun when we break through some obstacle, feeling the "writer's high," losing ourselves in the world of the piece. Suddenly our everyday world falls away, and our imagination cartwheels from word to word, image to image sentence to sentence.

My hope is that this book creates many such moments for you. In fact, if you're willing to face the "hard" part, I guarantee that it will.

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## INTRODUCTION

Writing is an act of hope.

It is a means of carving order from chaos, of challenging one's own beliefs and assumptions, of facing the world with eyes and heart wide open. Through writing, we declare a personal identity amid faceless anonymity. We find purpose and beauty and meaning even when the rational mind argues that none of these exist.

Writing, therefore, is also an act of courage. How much easier is it to lead an unexamined life than to confront yourself on the page? How much easier is it to surrender to materialism or cynicism or to a hundred other ways of life that are, in fact, ways to hide from life and from our fears? When we write, we resist the facile seduction of these simpler roads. We insist on finding out and declaring the truths that we find, and we dare to put those truths on the page.

To get ideas and to write well, you have to risk opening yourself. In her book *When Things Fall Apart*, Buddhist teacher Pema Chödrön writes of this risk:

When we regard thoughts and emotions with humor and openness, that's how we perceive the universe. ... We begin to find that, to the degree that there is bravery in ourselves ... and to the degree that there is kindness toward ourselves, there is confidence that we can actually forgive ourselves and open to the world.

There must be that softness, that openness. Rather than making us weak, it makes us confident and fearless. The more confident we grow, the more open we can allow ourselves to be. If you can write even when your life seems dark and bleak, even if all you can write is "Life sucks," then you have the hope and courage necessary to keep moving, to persevere as an artist. In perseverance you will find your creative self.

Writing also is an act of joy and celebration. With it we say that life is worth preserving, worth exploring in all its facets, and to do it well we must have fun. It must be approached with a sense of play, of risk and experiment, openness and laughter. Throughout his book *Fiction Writer's Workshop*, Josip Novakovich entreats the reader to "have fun." This is not a catchphrase. It's an important piece of writing advice.

## GETTING IDEAS

Most writers have more ideas than they can explore in a lifetime—subjects and situations that someday will be short stories and novels, memoirs and poems and screenplays, bits of scene, a greaser zinger of a line, characters, moments of loss and triumph to capture on the page. This book will help you explore those ideas and help you generate new ones. It will help you push deeper into your ideas to plumb their possibilities. The book is organized in four sections that follow the process of creation: warming up, deciding what you want to write about and beginning to generate ideas, finding a form for those ideas, developing those ideas. But you should feel free to open the book anywhere and find a prompt that interests you. If you respond to enough of the prompts, you will generate ideas for many new projects. You also can use the prompts to find new ways of seeing projects already underway. You might be stuck, for example, on a way to develop a minor character in your novel. Find a prompt that focuses on character and follow it. Then put the character into your novel.

## A FEW POINTS TO KEEP IN MIND

In many of the prompts I use the word *story*. By *story*, I mean any sort of narrative—short story, short-short story, narrative essay, memoir, narrative poem, novel, script, even blog or journal entry. Rather than repeat all of these forms again and again, I use *story* as a shorthand word. Work in whatever form interests you. I do suggest that you try your hand at a few forms rather than sticking to just one. A new form can suggest all sorts of new possibilities and can provide a fresh context for your ideas. Sometimes I use the word *piece* to mean any type of writing—any “piece of writing.”

Next, I’ve tried to vary gender-specific pronouns. Sometimes I use *she*; sometimes I use *he*. I’ve done this in an arbitrary way. If there are more of one than another, this is purely accidental. In my experience, I’ve found that writers can be either male or female, and I’ve tried to acknowledge that fact in as unobtrusive a way as possible.

As you can see from the introduction, the tone of the book will vary, from high-minded to playful to downright cranky. As for the content of the book, I hope you find it useful, that it sparks a great many ideas that lead to satisfying projects. Unfortunately, I can offer no hidden formulas, no *secrets* in this book. I don’t know that any exist. The secrets to getting ideas aren’t really secrets. Open your mind and heart. Open your eyes and ears. Take risks. Trust your talent and your instincts. Be willing to see your ideas—and your life and the world around you—in new ways. Be patient. Be positive. Don’t be distracted by the opinions of others, real or imagined. Don’t worry about getting published—that’s a whole new topic, and one worth investigating if that’s your goal, but it’s a needless and potentially harmful distraction when you’re writing. Don’t worry about “getting better” or fret about whether you’re really any good. Read a lot. Write a lot.

Most of all, as I said earlier, have fun. Your sense of freedom and play will infuse your writing with energy, and that energy will make your words enjoyable to read. And you’ll be having fun, which is an end in itself. You’ll be learning about yourself and about others. You’ll have a place to nurture yourself and explore your ideas. You’ll have a place to investigate things in all their maddening ambiguity, to seek and find your own opinions and truths. You will expand your powers of empathy as well as your understanding of life. In empathy and understanding, we find compassion, for others and for ourselves. We grow. With those goals in mind, let’s begin.

## BONUS ONLINE EXCLUSIVE:

“50 Writing Questions to Consider” download available at [www.writersdigest.com/50-questions](http://www.writersdigest.com/50-questions). Registration (it’s free!) and log-in is required to activate this download link.

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Part

INVITING

idea

# MAKING YOUR WAY TO SCHENECTADY

*It is good to have an end to journey toward; but it is the journey that matters, in the end.*

—URSULA K. LE GUIN

If you've been writing for any length of time, you've been asked this question by well-meaning friends and family: "Where do you get your ideas?" Perhaps you've even developed a stock, smart-ass reply, such as Robin Hemley's: "Joyce Carol Oates gives me her extras." Ray Bradbury had one, too: "I get them from the Schenectady Center for Ideas."

If you're feeling kind, you might reply, "Dunno," with a shrug. "Everywhere, I guess. They just sort of come to me." And you'd probably be telling the truth. But even this straightforward pool-poohing of any grand source of ideas won't demystify the creative process for your listener. Instead, she'll probably be awed, convinced that your self-effacing response is a sign of genius.

"She's so creative," you will hear—and probably feel like the biggest fraud since Barnum and Bailey.

Unfortunately, there is no magic elixir we can brew to conjure ideas from the air, and though we've been told we're "so creative" since we were sucking on Tinker Toys, we often don't feel creative at all. Our ideas seem stale. Or we feel stuck, unable to get a pleasing voice on the page. Or we feel blocked on a particular project. If only there were a real center for ideas in Schenectady. On a frabjous day—we'd write every morning and evening, pouring forth words of divine beauty.

But before we get to specific idea prompts, let's look at some general truths about writing more creatively, ways to keep your mind fresh and your imagination fertile. You possess the resources, you know you do, to come up with many good ideas. It's simply a matter of tapping into them and trusting them and understanding how your creative self works. To achieve these goals, you will need to help your creative self function at its best by shaping the way you perceive your writing and by structuring your life to write.

## SHOW UP

Showing up is the main thing. Get to the desk regularly. You'll find you have no end of ideas if you can make writing a regular habit. Remember Woody Allen's famous observation that 80 percent of being successful in life is just showing up. We all know this is true. The writers we admire—or envy—might be geniuses whose talent dwarfs our own, but more often they're people who show up, with seven-hundred-page novels they've been rising at five to write every morning for the past year. You think, *I'm as talented as Anne. I could have done that.* But alas, you have no seven-hundred-page novel. You have six novels, varying from twenty-five to sixty pages. They're in a drawer or filing cabinet, or even still in computer files. Is the culprit writer's block? A dearth of ideas? Cruel and fickle fortune? Nope. If you want to write, you must begin by beginning, continue by continuing, and finish by finishing. This is the great secret of it all. Tell no one.

**PROMPT:** Writer Thomas McGuane goes to his study at a certain time every day and stays there for a scheduled length of time. He sits at his desk. "I don't have to write," he explains, "but I can't do

anything else.” Try his approach for a week, scheduling a specific period of time during which you must sit at your desk or wherever you write. You don’t have to write, but you can’t do anything else.

## **ACKNOWLEDGE THE DIFFICULTY**

People, like me, say, “Just show up,” as if it were the easiest thing in the world to do. It’s not. It’s hard. Why? Because writing creatively can be hard. Yes, it can empower you and free your spirit and can be a source of great joy, but it’s not always easy. Sometimes we just don’t feel creative. We’re tired or bored. Also, as I said in the introduction, and many more brilliant folks than me have said before: Writing is an act of courage. Sometimes it’s just too scary to face the page. Or too frustrating. We’ve worked hard, and still our skills seem small, our writing clumsy, our ideas foolish and hackneyed. Who needs it? Our friends get along just fine without opening the vein every day to pour their blood onto the page. They have more time to do things—have fun, enjoy themselves.

So if you fall away from your schedule, if you wake up at 5 A.M. but pop the snooze button several times rather than getting out of bed, don’t beat yourself up. Telling yourself, “I’m lazy,” “I have no willpower,” “I’m not a writer,” won’t help you become a writer. That approach will convince you instead, that you’re a lazy loser with neither willpower nor talent. Such a person ain’t flinging back the covers at 5 A.M., striding to the coffeemaker. Such a person stays in bed. Give yourself positive messages.

**PROMPT:** List the positive messages you have received about writing or about any creative undertaking. What did people say? How did they say it? Then write about times when you felt good about your writing, such as when a great idea zipped into your mind or when you finished a project that turned out well. Keep these messages and memories handy. When you’re feeling stale or want to berate yourself about your work, read about what you’ve done in the past and know you can do it again.

**PROMPT:** Acknowledge that writing is hard. Write it down. Then write about how you’re going to make writing happen. How will you find the balance in yourself to combine willpower with relaxation, stubbornness with joy? Write about how you’ve struck this balance in the past, with writing, a sport, a musical instrument—anything you’ve done.

**PROMPT:** If the McGuane approach mentioned previously doesn’t work for you, create a writing schedule for the next three weeks. Start with five minutes per day. Add five minutes to every writing session. Note on your schedule how you’re doing.

**PROMPT:** If you’re blessed to have a friend or two who also struggles to write, create a schedule—maybe as a Google Doc—on which you check in every day, noting with a simple X next to the date that you did or did not write. Miss enough days and you’ll feel the need to start adding those X’s. Doesn’t matter how long you write or how much you write, the key is keeping it in your mind, forcing yourself to “touch” it on a regular basis. If you don’t have friends who could join you in the program, do it for yourself.

Like many things, writing becomes a habit. If you do it, you just keep doing it. If you want to break a habit—smoking, watching television, eating chocolate—instead of trying to will yourself past the habit, cultivate the habit of *not* doing it. Get in the habit of not not writing. Sounds like psychobabble. All right, phrase it however you’d like. But it’s one way to reframe the situation. I learned this from a friend who quit smoking. He told me he did it, gradually, by cultivating the habit of not smoking.

True, this took willpower. But he started by not smoking in his car, then not smoking right before going to bed. The same can happen with writing! Start small. Start cultivating the habit of not writing.

If this refraining approach doesn't work for you, don't worry about it. It probably sounds a little weird. But it does eliminate the structured, even puritanical implications of disciplining yourself. It takes from your hand the *I should be writing* stick with which we are tempted to beat ourselves. It keeps discipline in a more positive, nurturing context. A positive mind-set is important for sustaining joy in your writing. If you turn it into a teeth-grinding test of your willpower, you'll lose the fun. If you lose the joy and the fun, why bother?

**PROMPT:** Collect some motivational statements about writing or about creativity or about perseverance. Choose ones that speak directly to your needs or beliefs, and post them where you write. You can find a number of these statements in this book. Use them to keep yourself writing.

## JOY AND GRATITUDE

There's no question that only through regular writing will you generate a lot of good ideas. But joy and fun are important, too. We must find a balance. As writers, we know what the "writer's high" feels like, the sense of elation we feel when we're cooking on a project. The world and all of its problems melt away. Our lives have purpose, direction, meaning. We feel our passions rise within us. We tap into thoughts and emotions, and feel restored. As Annie Dillard said, "It is life at its most free."

**PROMPT:** Write about a time when your creativity flowed, perhaps when you were immersed in a project or when you spent a few hours at a coffeehouse scribbling in your journal. Try to describe the feeling. Describe, too, the circumstances—the time of day, the location, your mood before beginning. In this exercise, try to get to know your creative self a bit better.

**PROMPT:** Celebrate your creative self, the writer inside you. Write about how writing is an important part of your life. Write about the pleasure it brings. Write about your gratitude in possessing such a gift. Shakespeare once wrote the following:

This is a gift I have, simple, simple; a foolish extravagant spirit, full of forms, figures, shapes, objects, ideas, apprehensions, motions, revolutions .... But the gift is good in those in whom it is acute, and I am thankful for it.

Though it may sound stupid, cultivate gratitude even for the obstacles that stand in the way of your writing, the ones that sometimes impede your ideas and creativity. Recent psychological studies show that these obstacles actually aid creativity.

Difficult to believe? Consider: Have you ever suffered from too much time to write? Though we all wish we had much more time to spend writing, sometimes when we receive such a gift, we find the well is dry. We don't feel creative. When we're snatching a desperate hour here and there, before work, during the kids' baseball practices, then the ideas seem to flow. We find a way to make it happen, and that fuels our imaginations.

Successful author Nicholson Baker (his books *The Mezzanine*, *U and I* and others are some of my favorites) said that, through the years, he has turned down teaching jobs because he feared that his life would be too easy—an undemanding schedule and a regular paycheck would lessen his need to write. He wouldn't be motivated enough to write regularly or to complete projects.

So instead of cursing your obstacles, be grateful for them. In chapter two, we'll discuss enemies of creativity, and you'll notice they share a common quality: They all exist inside us. Obstacles

outside ourselves only make us more creative.

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**PROMPT:** Reframe your view of the obstacles in your life that impede your writing. Make a list of these obstacles. Then, next to each one, write about how you can overcome the obstacle and how it might be used as a tool for creativity.

**PROMPT:** Research a few inventions. Write about the circumstances of the inventions: How were they discovered or made? What obstacles did the inventors overcome? If you want, write an essay about an inventor or invention.

Now is the time to be more creative. Today. Trust that there is no better time, that no time in the future will offer you more of what you need. I often hear people talk about a time when they will be able to write—when they retire, when the kids are grown and gone, or when they can quit the moonlighting job. Postponing your writing life is like postponing a new diet. It can be an excuse for never starting. My advice: Start now, if only in a limited way. A time in the future may exist that will hold fewer obstacles, but these can be dealt with today, and, as we've discussed, removing all the obstacles can hurt creativity. There's an old saying about life that applies to writing:

Happiness is not a destination. It is a companion we can choose to accompany us on our journey.

You're not going to be a writer someday. You're a writer today. Discipline yourself to write and take time to enjoy writing. Do it a lot. Have fun with it. Begin now.



# ENEMIES OF CREATIVITY

*What is needed is, in the end, simply this: solitude, great inner solitude.*

—RAINER MARIA RILKE

Getting ideas, as we've discussed, is largely a matter of showing up. Waiting for inspiration is a loser's game, because without a work in progress, even if you're only doing some personal journaling and the work in progress is you, ideas that arise will have no context. They won't be recognizable ideas. Or, they'll be great ideas for a novel or article that will never be written. And so, at writing conferences and workshops, teachers will say the key is "Just do it."

And they're right. But "Just do it" is a slogan for shoes. And slogans work because they make things seem easier than they, in fact, are. If just doing it were simply a matter of deciding, anyone could do it. But sticking to a schedule goes beyond will. As we discussed in the [previous chapter](#), it's a matter of consciously developing a writing habit.

But there are enemies to that habit, dark forces that keep us from writing creatively. Read this chapter to find out who they are—as if you didn't already know. Each has its strengths and weaknesses and all can be beaten. The key is awareness. Recognize the force at work against you. Recognition is a large part of the battle against these nefarious foes.

## THE PROCRASTINATOR

What a great word: *procrastinator*. All of those crashing consonants. The Procrastinator sounds like the name of a comic book supervillain. This guy should be kicking Spiderman's butt all over New York.

Instead, he's at my house. And your house. He's convincing us we will write, yes we will, and we'll get started next week. Absolutely. No exceptions this time, no way. Well. Next week may not be ideal because there's a big meeting at work on Tuesday, which means all of those reports have to be finished, and Wednesday is parent-teacher night, and then there's soccer practice and the appointment with the eye doctor and something has to be done before the first freeze with that tree branch hanging over the garage. But the week after, no problem. We're all over it.

This is the voice of The Procrastinator. He's merciless. Very tough to beat. He can hit you with excuses so good your priest, minister, mother, and therapist would absolve you of your decision not to write. They'd even write a note for you. If you want, write your own, just like you used to do in grade school in your best Mom handwriting.

How does your excuse sound? Does it ring false in your ears? Will the muse believe this excuse? Like a clever truant, make a dozen of these notes, and when you miss a day or a week or whatever your schedule calls for, write a note to the muse explaining why. Look at your excuse on the cold white paper. Does it justify not writing? This strategy can keep The Procrastinator at bay.

But maybe your excuse really is valid. Stuff comes up. It really does. We all have worthwhile reasons not to write, and if we're not writing, we're not creating new ideas. If you made a list right now for why you can't write, or couldn't write the last time your schedule said you should, I'll bet you can come up with at least five reasons, three of them excellent.

**PROMPT:** The next time you skip a writing session, write five reasons, three of them excellent, for why you must skip. These reasons are The Procrastinator's power. Now, one by one, take back the power by writing a sentence or two explaining why each excuse is not good enough or how schedules could be shifted, arrangements made, to allow you to write some other time.

By using these strategies, you can defeat The Procrastinator. Today. That's the key. Don't delay. Have you ever had a friend tell you that she's starting a diet "on Monday"? Usually she's crunching through a mouthful of Doritos at the time. Yep. Monday. That's when she's starting. Meanwhile, you couldn't be more sure that the diet will fail. You just know it. Why? Because the postponement shows the lack of commitment and desire necessary to make a diet work.

The Procrastinator feeds on delay. To vanquish him, start now. If only for five minutes. Then do five minutes tomorrow, until you're churning out ideas and writing pages. Go ahead, start now. Write a scene from your current story. Pull an unfinished poem from your files and tinker with it. Write anything. Make a list of your favorite foods or a list of your favorite friends, then explain why you like them. List ten things you hate about the holidays and explain why. Describe in detail the most romantic evening of your life. Open this book to nearly any page and follow the prompt. Do it now.

Really. Right now. Go. What are you still doing here?

## THE VICTIM

All of us are, at times in our lives, victims. Life can be cruel. And we use the role of victim to stop being creative. We give up control of our creative selves because:

- our families don't understand or appreciate us.
- our bosses are demanding and fill our lives with stress.
- our children are demanding and fill our lives with stress.
- our finances are a mess.
- our mates are insensitive to our needs for space to create.
- our cars refuse to run properly.
- our neighborhoods are noisy and overrun with children.

As with The Procrastinator and his excuses, The Victim makes some valid points. The key is taking back the power. In her book *Awakening the Warrior Within*, Dawn Callan speaks of "owning your victim self" as a way of finding one's inner warrior. How? Stop complaining about the forces victimizing you. Stop making your lack of a creative life the fault of someone or something other than yourself. Any or all of the reasons on the list above might be true for you. But when you hear yourself complaining about them, hear the voice of The Victim. And, as with The Procrastinator, know that The Victim is inside you, under your control.

**PROMPT:** List the most common and frequent reasons you give for not spending enough time being creative. Next to each entry on the list, note who is in control of that situation. Now write a short plan for taking back control. It may require some tough admissions and a little creativity, but you're taking the first step toward opening your creative side.

**PROMPT:** Recognize victim talk when you hear it. Don't condemn yourself for it, just recognize what it is. Then stop. Take control. Give yourself a place to be creative again.

Taking back control is a wonderfully empowering experience. When you beat your victim self, you

feel a sense of victory and you know that anything is possible. You *can* finish that novel. You *can* finish that screenplay. It really *is* within your power. I've seen it happen so many times as a teacher at our annual conference. One year, a writer shows up with a little bit of writing and a lot of excuses why she doesn't have more completed on the project. The next year, a new person, but one who looks just like the old person, shows up and she's got an entire draft of a book she's been struggling to write (or not write) for years.

## THE TALKER

Speaking of talk, this enemy just can't shut up. You've cooked up a great idea for a screenplay or an essay or you've made a revelation about your protagonist that will give your novel a much-needed new dimension—then The Talker takes over. She has to tell everyone in your writing group. She tells your mate. Or your mother. Or anyone at work who will listen. The Talker is an expert at squandering the creative nest egg. By the time you sit down to put this idea into action, it's dead, or at least not as zesty as it seemed to be a few days ago.

The Talker needs attention. The Talker needs validation. The Talker would rather talk about an idea than confront its complexities and obstacles. The Talker wants the glory but none of the hard work that really lies at the heart of all creative efforts. The Talker is a bit of a coward, frankly, a narcissist, a layabout. If you want to develop your ideas to their full potential and to see a work through to completion, take control of The Talker. When writers tell me they can't help it, or that they *need* to talk it all out first, my advice is simple: Whenever you're talking about a work in progress, don't. Just shut up. Really. The story you're writing is a secret. Anne Tyler takes a somewhat gentle approach:

It makes me so uncomfortable for them. If they're talking about a plot idea, I feel the idea probably going to evaporate. I want to almost physically reach over and cover their mouths and say, "You'll lose it if you're not careful."

Writing is a private act. It is a way of communing with our imaginations, our subconscious minds, our secret lives. Bringing in a third party is almost always a bad idea. The sense of intimacy and revelation are lost, and you end up making small talk. By preserving the privacy of the creative process, you preserve the excitement of that intimacy. Getting back to that intimacy becomes a guilty pleasure, and it keeps the tension high. Ideas will spawn more ideas and you'll find yourself, and your project, rolling right along. Novelist Jay McInerney describes it this way:

I find it helps to remove myself, as much as possible, from the world of daily life. Living in New York, it's tough to block out the din of the city. So I go away. I try to find a tree house somewhere and pull the ladder up behind me. Once I have begun to believe in my alternate fictional universe, I can come and go from the tree house. But it's a fragile state in the beginning.

Some writers simply think it's a jinx to talk about a work in progress. One writer I know was working on a novel for months and yet refused to even refer to the project as "a novel." She called it "this thing I'm working on" until, after more than a year, she finished it. She took care to avoid letting The Talker get so much as a toe in the door.

The best illustration of this process is also an admittedly silly one that I've used in classes and workshops for a number of years. It involves a TV commercial for grape juice. (Stick with me on this.) The commercial opened by demonstrating the way the competition made its grape juice—a rather primitive and cartoonish illustration of a big boiling vat of purple liquid. Above the boiling vat

smoke wafted into the air, and within the smoke sparkled little purple gems of flavor. Lost flavor. Flavor gone forever. Next, the illustration changed to show the sponsor's process. The vat of burbling purple stuff looked the same, but there was a cap on top of the vat, an inverted funnel with a pipe at the end that channeled the smoke (complete with sparkling purple gems of flavor) back into the vat, thus giving more flavor to the juice.

I can't believe this is how it's really done. But the ingenious ad person had created a good illustration of how The Talker can hinder the creative process. The Talker lets the steam out of your work, making it less rich and interesting. Your glistening purple gems of ideas are lost forever. Don't let that happen.

**PROMPT:** Remember some writing projects that were great at the start but stalled or remained unfinished. Write down why they weren't completed. Did you talk away any of them? Remind yourself when you're discussing a story in progress or an idea for a piece you've yet to begin that it's best to keep quiet. Tell yourself you'll talk about it after the next scene is written, then try to wait for the scene after that one.

**PROMPT:** If you really want to share the excitement of a new idea with someone, write an e-mail explaining everything you want to share. Then put that e-mail in a folder and save it for later. Don't send it. Not yet.

## THE CRITIC

The biggest surprise I've found about The Critic is that he strikes every writer. As a young apprentice I always thought that publishing a few stories would calm The Critic, that I'd gain the confidence to know that I was good and wouldn't be plagued by doubt and frustration. Since then, I've learned that's not the way it works. I've met esteemed writers, award winners, authors of best-selling books who still hear the voice of The Critic. As you get your chops and collect publications, your confidence grows but never to the point that The Critic is silenced. And maybe that's good, unless it's keeping you from writing, unless behind your chair The Critic is wailing an off-key version of Linda Ronstadt's classic "You're No Good."

In his book *Darkness Visible*, esteemed author William Styron discusses his near-overwhelming feelings of self-doubt as he flies to Paris to accept an award. Despite tremendous reviews for her first novel, *A Bigamist's Daughter*, National Book Award-winner Alice McDermott still had such doubts about her ability that she considered quitting writing to attend law school.

The Critic is sometimes personified as a wicked English teacher from high school—Mrs. Crabass. She of the narrowed eyes and prodigious behind, she whose autocratic and hard-hearted insistence on rules of grammar and composition stripped us of our ability to let go, have fun, and be creative. Alas, she ruined us, or nearly so, and we must fight her at every turn.

Maybe. For some reason, I often hear a false note in this characterization. The majority of English teachers I've known and know would weep ecstatic tears if a student showed so much as a hint of an original thought. The Critic is, in fact, within us. We have, perhaps, absorbed the voice, from a teacher or a parent, or created the voice from our mythic personification of The Editor, who mocks with relish our feeble attempts at meaningful narrative. Once again, the voice of The Critic is our own voice. In fact, if we'd absorbed the lessons of composition from our English teachers, we may have fewer doubts about our ability.

The point here is not to "stop your whining." The Critic is a fearsome adversary, no question. And even after your flight to Stockholm to accept the Nobel Prize in literature, after you win the favor and admiration of readers everywhere, that voice still will be there. Publication and praise help, but

doubt. As you practice, you will gain confidence, allow yourself to experiment, even risk looking-gasp—stupid. But the real growth comes from inside, where The Critic resides. In an interview conducted with author David Guterson, he spoke of this process:

The actual act of writing is no easier than it was. You can have all the awards and sales and reviews you want, it doesn't get any easier the next day. On the other hand, I feel a deep confidence in myself. It doesn't come from [his best-selling book] *Snow Falling on Cedars*. It comes from the years going by. I feel more confident because I've practiced more.

When you hear the voice of The Critic telling you your idea is stupid, your writing dull and pedestrian, tell the voice to wait. He may, indeed, be right. And he will have his turn, you promise, but it's not his turn now. The early draft is not the place for The Critic. If he insists on interfering, try not to fight him directly. Instead, observe the voice, name it The Critic, and let it go. Continue writing despite the distraction, just as you've learned to write when your kids have the television cranked and are fighting brutally over the remote control.

Listening and letting go is the process used in meditation to let go of your Thinking Mind. The meditator knows that thoughts will intrude. When they do, she simply tells herself, "Thinking," and lets the thoughts go, without labeling them good or bad, without labeling herself weak or scattered. Don't turn The Critic into that bifocaled, bun-haired termagant with a red pen; don't turn The Critic into that insidious editor with a blue pen. The Critic is a necessary voice, at times. As you grow as a writer, you cultivate an aesthetic, a criteria for recognizing strong writing and weak. With this growth you become a more useful reader, of your own work and the work of others.

But in the early stages of a piece, send The Critic to a movie or on a nature hike or into the other room where he might at least fold laundry. He'll probably pop his head in from time to time, asking "Ready for me yet?" In as kind a voice as you can muster, simply say, "Not yet."

## THE JUDGE

This guy is your conscience. I see him as Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, the first commissioner of baseball. You've probably seen a picture of Landis in history books—a grim-faced, fierce-eyed gentleman, an old-time moralist, a hard-line arbiter of right and wrong. He appears when we feel guilty about spending time writing. Would our families be better served if we were with them instead of shut behind doors with "Do not disturb" signs warning intruders to stay away? Would our spouses be grateful if we didn't head off to bed early to get up and write in the morning? Shouldn't we, for heaven's sake, be:

- raking the yard?
- playing with the kids?
- cleaning the furnace filters?
- making money?
- paying bills?

How selfish of us to demand this time to indulge pointless fantasies of publication. How silly to be working through yet another draft of the memoir, dredging through events that took place twenty years ago. This is the voice of The Judge. His weapon: Writer's Guilt.

Women, especially, seem to have a wrangle on their hands with this guy. In our society, women more so than men, have been raised to ignore their needs, to put themselves at the service of the

families. And families, therefore, expect this behavior. Ask your family for an hour alone in the evenings, then watch their need to bond erupt. You'll field more questions and solve more dilemmas than if you'd plopped down in front of the television with them. Or, if you do get the quiet you ask for, the voice of The Judge might start speaking in your head.

In an interview with *Publishers Weekly*, fiction writer Gish Jen spoke of fighting The Judge, even after publishing three successful books:

Even today, I think my family would be more relieved than dismayed if I were to stop writing, but I still struggle with the question, Is it selfish? It's hard on the people around me, it's hard on the children. Is it worth it? I was programmed to be selfless, and I go through periods where I wonder.

Men, too, suffer from Writer's Guilt. We feel we should be out there winning some bread, bringing home some bacon or, at the least, spending time with our spouse and kids. Our own fathers, by God, wouldn't be nursing along some narcissistic novel project when the grass could be cut or the garage painted. What a damp-souled, ineffectual man to have this need to create art at the expense of our dearest loved ones.

Of course, times have changed, and, I hope, things are not quite so regimented and old-fashioned in your world, but there's no denying that Writer's Guilt strikes often, and is tough to beat. The Judge would seem to have bivouacked himself on the moral high ground with a phalanx of rocket launchers and barbed wire. To take back that ground, ask yourself why you're spending time writing rather than with family and friends and your ever-beckoning "To do" list. Is it because of your undying hope of fame and fortune? Are you seeking revenge on high school teachers who said you'd never be a writer? Are you intentionally hiding from responsibilities by using writing as a shield?

Probably not.

If you're writing out of a need to communicate, to hear your own voice on the page, then you owe it to yourself—and to your family—to write. You have a moral imperative to do it. Try to ignore that imperative and you will unleash The Victim, the woeful sod who would write if only the world were a more understanding place. To be the best mother/father, husband/wife, son/daughter, brother/sister, friend or lover you can be, you need to have an outlet for your creativity. Even if those around you don't understand what you're doing, they should be able to understand that.

Of course, stealing creative time may require some sacrifices—getting up earlier, scheduling your time more tightly, delegating some responsibilities to family members. Can you do this and keep writing with a clear conscience? For most people, it's possible. But those blessed or cursed with an especially guilty conscience may have some trouble with The Judge. I may be one of that group. I've always admired people who put their writing first and live their lives accordingly. I remember reading John Gardner's *On Becoming a Novelist*, in which he says, in effect, use the people around you. Live off a spouse. Accept money from parents. Don't get a job. Write, write, write.

For some, this works. Books do get written that way. Take Gardner's advice at face value and make your own choices. My advice leans more toward striking a balance between the needs of others and the needs of your creative life. As much as possible, meld them. Work to see them not as warring factions but as two key elements that make you a unique individual. If The Judge rears his tyrannical head, don't trust what he says. Insist upon your need for writing time. In fact, write about it.

**PROMPT:** Write about your need for a creative life or simply your need to write. Why do you do it? What needs are fulfilled through it? Call your essay "Why I Write." For examples, you can find an anthology of such essays—titled *Why I Write*, edited by Will Blythe—in which big-name authors

explore their need to write. In your essay, be honest and be thorough. Try to achieve a better understanding of your impulse to write. Use this understanding to explain to The Judge, and to all the enemies, why you must write, despite blocks or guilt or a hundred other really cool things to do.

The following excerpt is taken from Lee Smith's essay, title "Everything Else Falls Away," which appeared in *Why I Write*. Throughout the essay, she gives a number of reasons for writing, but the reason stands at the core:

For me, writing is a physical joy. It is almost sexual—not the moment of fulfillment, but the moment when you open the door to the room where your lover is waiting, and everything else falls away.

It does fall away, too. For the time of the writing, I am nobody. Nobody at all. I am a conduit, nothing but a way for the story to come to the page. Oh, but I am terribly alive then, though I say I am no one at all; my every sense is keen and quivering.

**PROMPT:** Write a character description or a poem about a person based on you, one struggling to create some type of art but who is bound by family obligations. When you finish, ask yourself how you feel about this person. Are you sympathetic to his struggle? Then ask yourself if you extend such sympathy to yourself.

## THE AUTHOR

Last year, in one of my idea workshops at a writers conference, I guided the conferees through a few prompts to help them generate ideas for essays and articles. When the session was nearly over, a woman in the back shot a vehement arm into the air and asked with barely contained frustration, "So now what do I do with it?" Of course, I hated her on the spot.

But that's beside the point. The true point is that she missed the purpose of the workshop. We were gathered to tap into our creative selves, to generate ideas for pieces that could be developed and completed later. Instead, she was under the spell of The Author, who sees every moment of writing as important and valid only if it leads to publication. Instead of following our own desires to write, we write with the marketplace in mind. We write about what's hot. At nearly every writers conference I attend, I sit on an editor-agent panel, fielding questions about publication. Inevitably, many people want to know what's selling. It's good for any serious writer to understand the marketplace, but writing for the marketplace is usually a bad idea. If you don't feel passionately about a subject, you won't write well about it. If you're writing for a byline or simply to see your name in print, you're probably going to find yourself blocked on a regular basis. This is the curse of The Author.

We all like to be published. It's fun to see our words in print; it's satisfying to reach an audience of readers; it's nice to make a little money for our literary efforts. We feel validated in some way. Publication makes us feel not simply like someone who writes but like A Real Writer. All of these desires are fine. They can help keep us motivated and focused. But in the early stages of a work, you'll be more creative and successful if you send The Author away. Allow her to return at the end of the session to embrace your great work and indulge you in daydreams of glory. When you've finished the project, put The Author to work zipping off your stories to magazines and websites.

But when you're writing, write. Enjoy the work for its own sake. Relish the process itself. If you don't, The Author will become a voracious, nagging mate who is never satisfied. Publishing is a tough business, full of frustrations for even the most successful writers. If you write primarily to be published and to be An Author, you will never be a happy writer. I swear it. Nothing will be good enough. Publications will take far too long to respond; agents and editors will be hated enemies, fickle

in their tastes, cryptic in their responses; less talented writers will get ahead because of the despicably sycophantic sucking up to every well-known writer who comes to town; your work won't receive the praise it deserves; your books will have terrible covers and the publishers will be out to cheat you on your royalties; and no one, no one, no one will ever have the human decency to call you back. In short, no matter how much success you achieve, everything will suck.

As Pema Chödrön says throughout her book *When Things Fall Apart*, give yourself a break. Be kind and compassionate to yourself. Give your creative side the love and respect it deserves. There will be time, if you want, to confront the business of publication. Publication can be a great motivator and is not a bad ambition. But when you're trying to get words on paper, to generate ideas that interest you and fill you with that feeling of elation that making art can inspire, push The Author away.

## **THE CAPRICIOUS GUEST**

The composer Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky called inspiration The Capricious Guest. Wait for him to arrive and you may be waiting for a long time. Write regularly and you will find ideas flowing through you. In his book *The Craft of Fiction*, William Knott makes the point that The Capricious Guest usually arrives when you no longer need him, when you're doing just fine on your own. He makes the point, too, that when you compare pages you've written in moments of inspiration to those you've written when simply doing your daily work, you won't notice much difference.

The key to beating all of the enemies of creativity is to do your daily work. The experience of writing, as you already know, varies greatly, from times of exquisite, nearly sybaritic delight to spiraling, pummeling slogs not unlike the Bataan Death March. Realize that both are part of the process. Some days, the ideas will pour forth. Other days, they won't. Enemies like those we've discussed in this chapter will appear. Know who they are, know where they come from, and keep going.



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