

A WRITER'S SUPER- POWER

**Unleash Your Amazing
Ability to Become a Faster,
More Brilliant Writer**

**Jim
Denney**

A Writer's Superpower

*Unleash Your Amazing
Ability to Become a Faster,
More Brilliant Writer*

Jim Denney



Note: This book contains about 19,000 words of new material, plus excerpts from four of the author's previously published books (an additional 10,000 words).

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This book is also available as a [Trade Paperback](#).

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About the Author

Jim Denney is a veteran of both traditional and indie publishing with well over a hundred books to his credit, including the Timebenders science-fantasy series for young readers (*Battle Before Time*, *Doorway to Doom*, *Invasion of the Time Troopers*, and *Lost in Cydonia*). He has co-written books with supermodel Kim Alexis, *Star Trek* actress Grace Lee Whitney, and two Super Bowl champions, Bob Griese and Reggie White. He has also co-written many books with Orlando Magic co-founder and vice president Pat Williams, including *Leadership Excellence*, *21 Great Leaders*, and *Vince Lombardi on Leadership*. Jim is a member of SFWA (Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America).

Also by Jim Denney:

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*Sleep Late, Do What You Enjoy, and
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— **JIM FREY** (*How to Write a Damn Good Novel*)

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Muse of Fire

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*Conquer Fear, Eliminate Self-Doubt,
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*Clear, Straight Answers to 20
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The Timebenders Series

Time travel adventures for young readers

No. 1: Battle Before Time

No. 2: Doorway to Doom

No. 3: Invasion of the Time Troopers

No. 4: Lost in Cydonia

This book is dedicated
to *YOUR* dreams of literary
influence and success.

*“If my doctor told me
I had only six minutes to live,
I wouldn’t brood.
I’d type a little faster.”*

—Isaac Asimov

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Introduction

How I Found My Superpower

"If I could have one superpower, I'd want to have the power of mind over matter. I'd want to be able to move things and people with my mind."

—Shaun Alexander, former NFL running back

I USED TO WRITE SLOWLY. And badly.

In 1989, I quit my day job, took a leap of faith, and became a full-time, self-employed writer. That same year, I contracted to write a nonfiction book for Multnomah Press, then an independent publishing house in Oregon (now an imprint of Random House).

The advance would cover three months of living expenses, so I scheduled three months to write the 80,000-word manuscript. Unfortunately, it took me *four* months to write the book. I was writing slowly and losing money.

But it gets worse.

In those early days of my writing career, cash flow was an acute problem. I desperately needed the second half of my advance. I sent the manuscript to my editor, hoping he would accept it quickly and cut me a check.

No such luck. Instead, the editor called me and said, "Jim, we've got a problem."

My heart plummeted. "How big a problem?"

"I'm flying out to meet with you in person. I'm afraid this book needs a major overhaul."

Not only would my check be held up, but I'd be spending additional weeks getting the manuscript into publishable shape.

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The editor arrived for our all-day meeting. He had prepared flip-charts showing the existing chapter flow, the strengths and weaknesses of the manuscript, and a proposed restructuring plan. As I compared my original manuscript with his vision for the book, I had to agree: His version was much better.

It was a painful learning experience. I trashed about a third of the original manuscript, rearranged the rest, and wrote two new chapters. The rewrite took a full month to complete, but when I turned in the revised manuscript, the editor told me I'd nailed it. As a personal favor, he made sure my check was issued promptly.

In the end, I had spent five months of my life on that book. I couldn't afford to let that happen again. In fact, I seriously considered hanging up my word processor and finding honest work.

Over the next few years, I gradually improved my writing skills. I never turned in another manuscript that needed a complete tear-down and restructuring, but I was still writing far too slowly and I struggled to make ends meet.

Then, in 2001, I had an experience that transformed me as a writer: I discovered my superpower.

I talk about this experience in greater detail in "Part Two: Write Freely," but for now I'll just say that I contracted with a publisher to write a four-book series. The contract specified an insanely short deadline plus a \$100-per-day penalty for late delivery. In the process of writing those four books — *and delivering them all on-time* — I discovered a brand-new approach to writing that has served me well ever since.

Later, I discovered that the writers I admired most — Ray Bradbury, Stephen King, Ursula Le Guin, Michael Moorcock, Greg Benford, Orson Scott Card — were already

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using this same approach. They had discovered the writer's superpower. They had learned the secret of writing quickly, writing freely, and writing brilliantly. Here, in this book (and my other books, such as *Writing in Overdrive* and *Muse of Fire*), I'm sharing this superpower with you. Let me tell you how my own writing life has been transformed by this discovery.

Just prior to writing this book, I wrote a nonfiction book for an independent publishing house. I started writing that book Friday, September 2, 2016. I completed the first draft on Monday, October 3, thirty-one days later (averaging more than 2,500 words per day). I spent less than a week on my second draft, and sent the final manuscript to my editor on Monday, October 10. The manuscript was about 73,000 words long, and was completed in thirty-eight days.

My editor read it, and said it was best of three recent books I had written for her. She was sending it straight to copy-editing — no revisions needed.

You see? A real-life, honest-to-gosh *superpower* — every bit as amazing as the power of mind over matter.

I spent the rest of October and a bit of November working on a forthcoming book about Walt Disney, while also devoting significant time to my new website for writers, WritingInOverdrive.com.

On the morning of Monday, November 7, 2016, I had an inspired idea: I would write a book divided into three sections, to be based on the three-part catchphrase of my website: "Write faster. Write freely. Write brilliantly." And I would call it — what else? — *A Writer's Superpower*.

So I spent the rest of that day organizing the content of the book you are now reading. By the end of the day, I had the entire book laid out as a file of notes, ready to write.

I began writing this book one week later, on Monday, November 14. I wrote "Part One: Write Quickly" on the

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first day, about 6,000 words. On Tuesday, November 15, I wrote “Part Two: Write Freely,” about 7,000 words. On Wednesday, November 16, I wrote “Part Three: Write Brilliantly,” about 6,000 words. And on Thursday, I celebrated by taking my wife to Disneyland. I spent Friday and Saturday on rewriting and editing.

I produced a 19,000-word first draft in four days (one planning day, and three writing days), and spent two additional days on rewrite — six days total. When you read this book, I think you’ll agree: This is not a little pamphlet filled with bullet points and platitudes that I slapped together on a whim. Though I wrote quickly, I put a lot of thought into it, and poured my heart and soul into it.

The reason I tell you this is that I want you to know that I practice what I preach. The little book you are reading is the tangible proof that the principles I share in all my books on writing actually *work*. Whether you write fiction or nonfiction, whether you write for children or adults, whether you write short stories or novels, *you can learn to write quickly, freely, and brilliantly* by practicing the insights I share in these pages.

These truths will revolutionize the way you write. In this book, you’ll discover why writing faster means writing more brilliantly than ever before. And this revolutionary approach to writing will become *your* superpower as well.

Okay, enough introduction. Let’s get to it.

JIM DENNEY
Somewhere in
Southern California
November 20, 2016

Part One

Write Faster

“Until you value yourself, you won’t value your time. Until you value your time, you will not do anything with it.”

—M. Scott Peck (1936-2005), psychiatrist-author

WE ALL WANT THIS SUPERPOWER. We all want to be faster and more productive writers.

But many of us worry that if we increase our speed and productivity, we’ll decrease the quality and brilliance of our writing. Nothing could be further from the truth. I’ll prove it to you.

By 1929, William Faulkner had published four novels, none of them commercially successful (though his latest, *The Sound and the Fury*, had received critical praise). In October of that year, with bills and debts mounting, Faulkner took a job in the power plant at the University of Mississippi. He worked the night shift, from 6:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m., when the building was quiet and empty. Every night during the middle four hours of his shift, from midnight to 4:00 a.m., Faulkner sat at his desk with pen and paper, writing an 85,000-word novel called *As I Lay Dying*.

Faulkner began the novel on October 25 and completed it on December 29, according to the dates in the margin of his manuscript. Assuming he wrote five days a week, he averaged about 1,800 words per day, writing in longhand. He completed the typing of the manuscript on January 12, 1930. Faulkner (who was notoriously loose with the truth about his life and accomplishments) later claimed that he wrote the book in six weeks and his first draft was his final

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draft — he didn't change a word. The truth is that he wrote the first draft in ten weeks, and completed the final draft in an additional two weeks, making edits and changes as he typed. So he wrote it in twelve weeks, not six. Even so, writing an entire novel in twelve weeks is amazing enough.

It's a daringly inventive novel (especially for its time), employing a stream-of-consciousness narrative technique and fifteen distinct first-person points of view. *As I Lay Dying* became Faulkner's first commercially successful novel, and in 1998 it was ranked among the one hundred best novels in English by the editorial board of the Modern Library. *As I Lay Dying* was a key element of the body of work that earned Faulkner the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1949.

Writing quickly, William Faulkner wrote brilliantly.

And then there's Ian Fleming, the creator of spymaster James Bond, Agent 007. Fleming was himself a master spy during World War II. As a Naval Intelligence Division (NID) officer, Fleming coordinated Operation Goldeneye, an Allied effort to sabotage any attempted alliance between fascist Spain and the Axis powers. He also organized two British intelligence units, 30 Assault Unit and T-Force. Fleming's NID experiences provided the background for his Bond novels.

Fleming wrote the first novel in the series, *Casino Royale*, from mid-February through mid-April 1952, at his Goldeneye estate in Jamaica. At the time, he was awaiting his marriage to Ann Charteris, who was pregnant with his son; they were married on March 24. He had no serious plans to publish the novel, but wrote it to keep his mind occupied until the wedding. Upon finishing the novel, he reread it and considered it unpublishable, referring to it as his "dreadful oafish opus."¹

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He hesitantly showed the manuscript to a friend, novelist William Plomer, who told him the novel had merit. Plomer sent it to his friend Jonathan Cape, a London publisher. Cape didn't think the book would succeed, but agreed to pay Fleming a small advance and issue a limited first printing.

Published in April 1953, *Casino Royale* quickly found an enthusiastic audience and the first printing sold out in less than a month. Ian Fleming's career as a novelist was off and running. Over his career, he wrote eleven James Bond novels, two short story collections, a children's book (*Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bang*, later adapted to the big screen), and two works of non-fiction. In all, his books have sold more than 100 million copies worldwide. The Bond novels have spawned numerous screen adaptations.

The London *Times* ranks Ian Fleming number fourteen on its list of the fifty greatest British writers since 1945. And novelist Umberto Eco observed that Ian Fleming's writing "has a rhythm, a polish, a certain sensuous feeling for words. That is not to say that Fleming is an artist; yet he writes with art."²

Ian Fleming wrote *Casino Royale* in about two months. He wrote most of his later Bond novels in even less time, usually six weeks. His work has been hailed by both critics and the reading public.

Writing quickly, Ian Fleming wrote brilliantly.

And then there's Mickey Spillane, whose prose style is as blunt as a snub-nosed revolver. His Mike Hammer series of crime novels has sold well into the millions. Spillane's 1947 debut novel, *I, the Jury*, had already sold 3.5 million copies by the time it was adapted to the screen in 1953. Private investigator Mike Hammer is a loner, a tough guy who administers on-the-spot justice. Spillane's writing is

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raw with violence, sex, and grim irony, delivered at a rapid-fire pace. A brief sample:

The roar of the .45 shook the room. Charlotte staggered back a step. Her eyes were a symphony of incredulity, an unbelieving witness to truth. Slowly, she looked down at the ugly swelling in her naked belly where the bullet went in. . . .

“How c—could you?” She gasped.

I had only a moment before talking to a corpse, but I got it in.

“It was easy,” I said.³

Spillane’s titles tell you exactly what to expect. He followed *I, the Jury* with *My Gun is Quick*, *Vengeance is Mine*, *One Lonely Night*, *The Big Kill*, and more. Mickey Spillane wrote to entertain, to keep the pages turning, and he had no use for artistic snobbery. He once said, “I’m not an author, I’m a writer, that’s all I am. Authors want their names down in history; I want to keep the smoke coming out of the chimney.”

Mickey Spillane wrote for pay, not prestige — yet in the process of writing much and writing quickly, he learned to write well. He understood the importance of having a superpower, because he learned his craft as a writer of superhero tales at Timely Comics in the early 1940s:

I was one of the first guys writing comic books, I wrote *Captain America*, with guys like Stan Lee, who became famous later on with Marvel Comics. Stan could write on three typewriters at once! I wrote the *Human Torch*, *Submariner*. I worked my way down. I started off at the high level, in the slick magazines, but they didn’t use my name, they used

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house names. Anyway, then I went downhill to the pulps, then downhill further to the comics. I went downhill class-wise, but I went uphill, money-wise! I was making more money in the comics.⁴

In a 1986 interview with Jon Winokur, Mickey Spillane discussed his simple approach to making a living as a writer:

If the public likes you, you're good. Shakespeare was a common, down-to-earth writer in his day. . . . I'm a commercial writer, not an author. Margaret Mitchell was an author. She wrote one book. . . .

Nobody reads a mystery to get to the middle. They read it to get to the end. If it's a letdown, they won't buy anymore. The first page sells *that* book. The last page sells your *next* book.⁵

How long did it take Mickey Spillane to write *I, the Jury*? In a 1952 profile in *Life* magazine, he said it took him *nineteen* days to write the book in first draft. But forty-four years later, in a piece called "Night of the Guns," interviewer Lynn F. Meyers, Jr., quoted him as saying it took *nine* days to write it (*Paperback Parade* No. 46, August 1996).⁶ So what's the truth — nine days or nineteen? Maybe Spillane misremembered, or maybe Meyers misheard him. It hardly matters — writing a best-selling novel in nineteen days is amazing enough.

What does matter is this: By writing quickly, Mickey Spillane wrote brilliantly.

And so can you.

Why does writing faster enable you to become a better writer? As you take a close look at the creative process, the answer becomes obvious:

When you write faster, you more easily maintain your initial enthusiasm and passion. You remember events and characters and timelines more accurately, because you wrote those passages days ago, not months or years ago. That means fewer continuity mistakes. You remain immersed in the imaginary world you've created, which helps you to generate more ideas, more plot connections, and a deeper understanding of your characters.

If you want to write brilliantly, then write quickly and freely. Here are some ways to put the pedal to the metal of your imagination:

1. Set goals and quotas, then commit to them.

The first step to writing faster is setting productivity goals — either so many chapters, so many pages, or a quota of so many words for the day. Goals help you overcome your inner resistance and procrastination. Goals focus your mind on a target. Goals help you block out distractions. Goals propel you and keep you moving forward. Whether your daily quota is 500 words or 5,000 words, your goals enable you to measure your progress and, if necessary, step up your intensity. Goals motivate you to persevere and keep writing when you'd rather slack off.

When I was a young writer in my twenties, it never occurred to me to set productivity goals. I would write when I felt like it, quit when I felt like it, and often accomplish very little in a day. Once I realized that all my literary heroes, from John Steinbeck to Ray Bradbury to Stephen King, set daily quotas of around 2,000 words per day, I realized why I was spinning my wheels.

I don't recommend you measure your productivity against the output of other writers. If a quota of 2,000 words a day intimidates you, set your sights lower. Many accomplished writers maintain much lower daily quotas.

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Holly Black is the author of *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, the Newbery honor book *Doll Bones*, and the Andre Norton Award-winning *Valiant: A Modern Tale of Faerie*. Over time, she has found that she works best with a goal of just 500 words per day. Find your word-count sweet spot, and keep shooting for that goal, day by day.

We all have a finite supply of creative energy for each day. Our daily productivity quotas enable us to focus that energy on reaching our long-range goals — and achieving our dreams.

2. Become undistractable, not isolated.

In *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*, Cal Newport observes that working in a state of extreme focus and distraction-free concentration enables you to elevate your performance — no matter what kind of work you are doing. Newport also notes that the ability to perform “deep work” is becoming increasingly rare among people today. We are surrounded by distractions — social media, entertainment media, news and information media, noise pollution, and more. Those who cultivate the ability to work in a deep and undistracted state are becoming increasingly rare — and will be highly valued and well rewarded in the twenty-first century economy.

Newport cites examples of people who have achieved success and have impacted the world through their ability to perform “deep work.” Most of the people Newport writes about have *physically walled themselves off from the world* in order to eliminate distractions. A few examples:

Psychiatrist Carl Jung added a meditation room to his lakeside home in the Swiss village of Bollingen. He explained: “In my retiring room I am by myself. I keep the key with me all the time; no one else is allowed in there except with my permission.” By isolating himself and per-

forming “deep work,” Jung was able to establish an entirely new school of thought called *analytical psychology* and he became, in Newport’s words, “one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century.”⁷

Renaissance philosopher Michel de Montaigne studied and wrote in a book-lined tower of his château in France. Mark Twain isolated himself in a shed at Quarry Farm in New York, where he wrote *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. The creator of Harry Potter, J. K. Rowling, isolates herself from society when she writes, completely avoiding social media. When an assistant created a Twitter account in her name in 2009, she posted a single tweet during the first year and a half: “This is the real me, but you won’t be hearing from me often, I am afraid, as pen and paper are my priority at the moment.”⁸

I agree with Cal Newport that it’s vital to any creative endeavor that we achieve a state of distraction-free concentration. But *I don’t agree* that we should necessarily wall ourselves off from the world. Few writers can afford the luxury of physically isolating ourselves while we write. Most of us have families, jobs, and responsibilities, and we have to write where we can, when we can, often under conditions that are far from ideal.

E. B. White, the author of *Charlotte’s Web*, described his writing environment this way:

My house has a living room that is at the core of everything that goes on: it is a passageway to the cellar, to the kitchen, to the closet where the phone lives. There’s a lot of traffic. But it’s a bright, cheerful room, and I often use it as a room to write in, despite the carnival that is going on all around me. A girl pushing a carpet sweeper under my typewriter table has never annoyed me particularly, nor has it

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taken my mind off my work, unless the girl was unusually pretty or unusually clumsy. My wife, thank God, has never been protective of me, as, I am told, the wives of some writers are. In consequence, the members of my household never pay the slightest attention to my being a writing man — they make all the noise and fuss they want to. If I get sick of it, I have places I can go. A writer who waits for ideal conditions under which to work will die without putting a word on paper.⁹

A writer doesn't need an "ideal" writing environment. A writer just needs the will and the drive to *write*. Stephen King produced his first few novels in a tiny laundry room, little more than a closet, in a rented mobile home. And speculative fiction writer Harlan Ellison wrote some of his most famous short stories in bookstore windows, as crowds looked over his shoulder — how's *that* for a distraction?

Fantasy writer Ray Bradbury wrote his earliest stories surrounded by noise and conversation. He reflected, "I can work anywhere. I wrote in bedrooms and living rooms when I was growing up with my parents and my brother in a small house in Los Angeles. I worked on my typewriter in the living room, with the radio and my mother and dad and brother all talking at the same time."¹⁰

Science-fiction writer Isaac Asimov kept his typewriter behind the counter of his father's candy store in Brooklyn, and he pounded out his early stories between interruptions by customers. "I doubt if I ever had fifteen straight minutes of peace. . . . [I] learned to withstand incredible noise and interruption. . . . I was undistractable."¹¹

So our goal as writers should not be to shut ourselves off from the rest of humanity, but to simply become *undistractable*. This means that when we write, *we write*. We

don't do anything else. We don't think about anything else. We don't take phone calls. We don't answer the doorbell. We don't check our email or social media. We write, *period*.

I have written books in the front seat of my car, waiting to pick up my kids at elementary school. I have written in hotel rooms and kitchens, in the mountains and at the seashore, sitting cross-legged on the floor at LAX or aboard a jetliner at 40,000 feet. I can write anywhere. And so can you. It just takes desire — and practice. If you learn the art of being undistractable, of going deep within yourself and shutting out the world as you write, it will become another superpower in your writer's arsenal.

The worst distractions of all are not noisy or external. In fact, they more often come from within. They are *emotional* distractions — deadline stress, financial stress, health problems, conflict with family and friends, conflict on the job, conflict with editors, and scary head-lines in the news. A sound-proof room can't shut out emotions like anger, worry, bitterness, and fear. Negative emotions consume energy and focus that should be spent on your writing.

Few writers have the luxury of a serene, peaceful writing space. Most of us deal with money worries, relationship problems, and the occasional backed-up sink or a car that won't start. That's life. But the distractions of everyday life don't have to keep us from writing — and the wise writer won't use distracting circumstances as an excuse not to write. The writers who achieve their goals are those who learn to *take refuge in their writing* as a way of blocking out distractions.

While writing *In Search of Lost Time*, Marcel Proust sealed himself inside a windowless, sound-proof room. If you, like Proust, cannot concentrate without total sensory deprivation, then be my guest, sound-proof your *sanctum*

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sanctorum — if you can afford to. Most of us can't. Most writers simply have to find a way to become undistractable amid the normal distractions of life.

“If you are a writer,” said Joyce Carol Oates, “you locate yourself behind a wall of silence and no matter what you are doing, driving a car or doing housework . . . you can still be writing, because you have that space.”¹² And Nathan Englander said, “Turn off your cell phone. . . . Unplug. No texting, no email, no Facebook, no Instagram. Whatever it is you're doing, it needs to stop while you write.”¹³

How can you settle into a focused, undistracted mental space when you are surrounded by distractions? Here are a few suggestions: Promise yourself a reward — a favorite food or beverage, a call to a friend, some entertainment or relaxation time — *after* you reach your quota of words or pages. Remind yourself: “My writing is all-important to me. Momentary distractions are of no importance. I will focus on what truly matters.” Some people, when they find their minds wandering, recite a simple mantra — “Be here now,” or, “I'm working” — until their attention is fully focused.

It may help to have a ritual to get you focused and prepared to enter a state of “flow.” Some writers meditate on photos, paintings, or poetry to focus their thoughts. Some find that an exercise ritual — running, walking, or swimming — prepares their minds. Some relax and breathe deeply. Some pray (if I can be said to have a ritual at all, it is prayer).

My own solution to distractions is to immerse myself in my work. I've always found writing — the creative process itself — to be the supreme solution to distractions. When writing, you're in an altered state of mind. You're mentally sealed off from your present life, with its problems, cares, and concerns, and you are in a state of total concentration.

Whatever helps you to go deep inside yourself, whatever shuts out external noise and silences internal chatter, do it. Quiet your thoughts. Listen to your imagination. Be attentive to the voice of the Muse.

Then get down to business and *work*.

3. Take a break, then get back to work.

In order to write in a sustained and concentrated way, you have to pace yourself. Some people can only maintain intense concentration for twenty minutes or so, while others can easily go for an hour or two without a break. As you write, be aware of your creative rhythms, your attention span, and your energy levels. Plan to take a break — a snack with coffee, a walk outside, an exercise break — and use the expectation of that break as a motivator to keep you going until it's time to stop.

Before stepping away from your computer, make sure you have saved your file and saved at least one backup copy, either to an external hard drive or (better yet) to a data storage site.

Keep your breaks short, five to fifteen minutes, then get right back to work — no procrastinating.

4. Push yourself to write quickly

In his semi-autobiographical novel *Timequake*, Kurt Vonnegut observes:

Tellers of stories with ink on paper . . . have been either *swoopers* or *bashers*. Swoopers write a story quickly, higgledy-piggledy, crinkum-crankum, any which way. Then they go over it again painstakingly, fixing everything that is just plain awful or doesn't work. Bashers go one sentence at a time, getting it

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exactly right before they go on to the next one. When they're done, they're done.¹⁴

Vonnegut confessed to being a “basher,” a writer who plods along at a slow, deliberate pace, polishing each sentence to perfection before going on to the next. The roll call of Vonnegut's fellow “bashers” includes some truly notable and successful writers: George R. R. Martin, Dean Koontz, Samuel R. Delany, and nonfiction writer Timothy Ferriss.

But the list of accomplished “swoopers” is at least as long, and includes such notable writers as Ray Bradbury, Ursula Le Guin, Madeleine L'Engle, Raymond Chandler, C. L. Moore, Stephen King, and Nobel laureate John Steinbeck, whose advice to writers was: “Write freely and as rapidly as possible and throw the whole thing on paper. Never correct or rewrite until the whole thing is down.”¹⁵

What about you? Are you a “swooper” or a “basher”? I'm not saying that one approach is right and the other is wrong. If writing slowly works for you, who am I to tell you to change? Every writer must decide which techniques and approaches work best for him or her.

But I will say this: I'm personally more drawn to the works of fast “swoopers” than the works of slow “bashers.” There's something about the process of painstakingly crafting each individual sentence that seems to produce a style that is pretentious and self-conscious.

Conversely, there's something about the fast, headlong, un-self-conscious creative process of the “swoopers” that carries the reader along on waves of intensity and emotion. “Swoopers” write in a state of emotional excitement, and the reader is swept through the story by rolling, swirling currents of tension, obsession, terror, and desire.

The slow, self-conscious, Vonnegut-style “bashers” are focused on carefully crafted words and sentences. But fast, unconscious, Steinbeck-style “swoopers” are focused on the power of the story and the intense feelings of the characters. When we read a story written by a “swooper,” we don’t read sentence by sentence. We are absorbed into a dream of the imagination, and we experience the story as if we are in a trance.

If you’re a “basher,” and it works for you, I’m pleased to hear it. At the same time, I must point out that this book probably won’t do you any good. Learning to write quickly and freely, without inhibitions, is for “swoopers.” You can’t write quickly and freely while fretting over each word and punctuation mark.

Fast writing comes from the unconscious imagination. Slow writing comes from the intellect. When you write quickly, your inner Muse tells you, “Go for it! Take risks! This is fun!” When you write slowly, your inner critic tells you, “What will the reviewers say? What will my readers think? I’d better not say that. I’d better play it safe.”

To write freely, you must write quickly. You must turn off your inner critic and push yourself to write your story as if it were a dream. Throw the whole thing down on paper. Swoop through your story like a hawk plunging toward its prey. When you become a “swooper,” you will change not only the way you write, but the way your stories are read and experienced.

5. Track your progress.

Keep a running total of your word count. At every break, write down your word count for the session just completed. Be aware of your progress throughout your writing day, then write down your grand total when you finish. Hold yourself accountable for the progress you make each day.

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It often helps to report to a friend. Find a fellow writer (either locally or online), and agree to hold each other accountable for your daily progress. No one likes to admit, “I just goofed off today.” When you know your productivity is being monitored by a friend, your motivation intensifies.

In addition to holding each other accountable, you and your friend can compete with each other in “word sprints” — writing sessions in which you and your partner agree to write as fast as you can for, say, half an hour. Then you compare word counts to see who “won.” You’ll be amazed at the brilliant quality of the writing you produce when you tap into your superpower and “write in overdrive.”

If you want to write brilliantly, if you want to reach your readers at a deep level, then write as fast as you can and track your progress throughout the day.

6. Focus intensely on writing — no “multitasking.”

Many writers try to put more time in their day by multitasking — doing two or more things at once. Based on my own experience and conversations with other writers, I’m convinced that the key to productivity and excellence as a writer is *focus* — intense, undivided, concentrated focus on the task at hand.

I don’t believe “multitasking” exists. Sure, most of us can walk and chew gum at the same time, because neither task requires our full attention. But no one can actually drive a car and send a text message at the same time, because both tasks demand one’s full attention.

If you try to drive and text at the same time, you may get away with it for a while, but you are not truly performing two tasks at the same time. You are simply switching your focus from driving to texting to driving again. During the moments you are texting, you are focused on texting — and you are riding in a driverless car.

In an emergency, you'd be a danger to yourself and others, because you're not focused on driving, you're focused on texting.

(Aside: A close friend of our family, a young man in his twenties, was rear-ended by a texting driver. He has been in constant pain and unable to work ever since the accident. I hope that text message was mighty important, because it devastated a young man's life.)

The point is this: If you're writing, *write*. Concentrate. Focus. Don't divide your attention.

So-called "multitasking" is actually bad for your brain. Stanford University researchers have found that multitasking makes you less productive than focusing on one task at a time. They also found that people who *think* they have a special ability to multitask are simply wrong.

The human brain can only process so much information at a time. Multitaskers have more trouble thinking coherently and distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant information. Overloading the brain increases fatigue and leads to errors. If you have a number of tasks to accomplish, you'll be much more productive devoting a solid block of time to one task, taking a brief break, then switching your focus completely to the next task.

"Multitasking reduces your efficiency and performance because your brain can only focus on one thing at a time," wrote Travis Bradberry in *Forbes*. "When you try to do two things at once, your brain lacks the capacity to perform both tasks successfully. . . . A study at the University of London found that participants who multitasked during cognitive tasks experienced IQ score declines that were similar to what they'd expect if they had smoked marijuana or stayed up all night."

Bradberry noted that MRI scans showed that habitual multitaskers suffered physiological damage to the anterior

cingulate cortex, a region of the brain that regulates cognition, emotion, and empathy.¹⁶ (It's worth pointing out that the ability to empathize with fellow human beings is *essential* to being a good writer.)

Time business writer Issie Lapowsky agrees: "Research has shown again and again that the human mind isn't meant to multitask. . . . Multitasking is a weakness, not a strength."¹⁷

7. Try the Pomodoro Technique.

I have friends who are Pomodoro writers, and they swear by it. I've never used the Pomodoro Technique myself, but if time management and writing discipline are a problem for you, you might want to give it a try.

Pomodoro is a time management strategy pioneered by entrepreneur Francesco Cirillo in the early 1990s. "Pomodoro" means "tomato" in Italian, and the technique is named for the tomato-shaped kitchen timer Cirillo used as his timing device. What differentiates the Pomodoro Technique from other approaches is that it's designed to manage not only your work time, but also your break time and your cognitive energy (i.e., your attention span).

This strategy uses a kitchen timer to divide your workday into intervals called "pomodori" (the plural of pomodoro), each pomodoro being typically twenty-five minutes long. Breaks are short, just three to five minutes. Short breaks between pomodori enable you to focus intensely during each twenty-five-minute session, while keeping you energized and agile enough to complete one pomodoro after another without fatigue.

The Pomodoro Technique seems especially well-suited to focused and creative tasks like writing. The technique consists of five simple steps:

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First, plan. Decide the task or tasks you wish to complete for that day. Write a “Things To Do” list with the priorities and goals you wish to achieve, and an “Activity Inventory” with an estimate of how many pomodori you’ll need to fulfill each task.

Second, set the timer for twenty-five minutes (more or less, depending on your need).

Third, get to work. Focus on the task until the timer sounds. Record the completion of that pomodoro on a sheet, using a checkmark. Once the entire task is completed, cross it off your “Things To Do” list.

Fourth, take a short, relaxing break — three to five minutes. Have coffee or water, listen to music, or simply relax. Then on to your next pomodoro.

Fifth, after completing four pomodori, take a longer break — up to thirty minutes.

If you are interrupted during the pomodoro (by a phone call, for example), postpone the interruption until later. Keep working. Stay focused on the task until the timer sounds. If you interrupt your task to deal with the interruption before the time is up, you cannot count that pomodoro. The key is to eliminate internal distractions and external interruptions so you can stay focused and reach your goals.

When the twenty-five minutes are up, stop. At the end of the day, if you didn’t achieve your goals within the number of pomodori you allotted at the beginning, figure out why your estimate was off. Learn how to estimate tasks more accurately in the future.

Some people like the hands-on feel of a mechanical timer, while recording goals and results with pen and paper. But there are also apps — ClearFocus, Simple Pomodoro, Focus Booster, Clockwork Tomato, Marinara

Timer — that substitute for these physical implements. Use whatever works for you.

For a more detailed explanation, read *The Pomodoro Technique* by Francesco Cirillo, available in hardcover and ebook editions.

8. Prepare today to be extra-productive tomorrow.

At the end of your writing session, take a few moments to prepare yourself for tomorrow's writing session. Think back over what you have written. Ask yourself, "What happens next? What are some of the story possibilities I've uncovered in today's session? What can I do tomorrow to surprise and delight my readers?"

Daydream a little. Picture some possibilities in your mind. Imagine scenes and scenarios as vividly as you can, with bright colors, contrasts of light and darkness, drenched in moods and emotions. This will give your Muse, your unconscious creative mind, something to play with while you sleep. Expect to wake up in the morning with a mind that is bursting with ideas.

Stephen King calls the unconscious mind "the boys in the basement." The "boys" (or, if you prefer, "girls") are always down there in the dark, working out story angles and character relationships, choreographing scenes and rehearsing patches of dialogue. Give them something to work with at the end of each day, and see how they surprise you the next morning.

As you think about your story, take a few moments to tidy up your workspace. An uncluttered desk aids uncluttered creativity. Make sure you've saved your story file — and save a backup file to the cloud or a backup hard drive.

The next morning, turn off your phone and close your Internet browser. If you have important email to deal with,

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get it out of the way as quickly as possible, or save it until after your writing session. Say no to any requests that would keep you from your writing.

Then take a deep breath, say a prayer for inspiration—
And *write*.

Part Two

Write Freely

“There were times when the mood of creation returned, or seemed to return. It returned tonight, for just a little while. . . . He abstracted himself from the mean and actual world. He drove his mind into the abyss where poetry is written. The gas-jet sang soothingly overhead. Words became vivid and momentous things.”

—George Orwell (1903-1950), novelist¹⁸

EGLISH NOVELIST GRAHAM GREENE established a reputation as one of the most acclaimed writers of the twentieth century. He achieved that rare and highly prized status of an author who is both lauded by critics and cheered by the public. The author of more than two dozen novels, his works won many awards. In 1967 he was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Greene’s works fall into two distinct categories, which he labeled “novels” and “entertainments.” The “novels” were weightier, philosophically themed works such as *The Power and the Glory* and *Brighton Rock*. These books would often take a year (if not several years) to complete, and he believed his literary reputation would rest on these serious “novels.” Greene had less regard for the works he called “entertainments” — plot-driven thrillers that reflected his personal experience with political intrigue and international espionage. These “entertainments” included such popular works as *The Confidential Agent*, *The Third Man*, and *Our Man in Havana*.

During World War II, Greene was recruited by his sister Elisabeth into the British intelligence agency known as

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MI6 (Military Intelligence, Section 6) — an agency so secret that its existence was not acknowledged until 1994. Greene was stationed in the West African nation of Sierra Leone, and his supervisor was British master spy Kim Philby (who later turned out to be serving the Soviet KGB as a double agent).

Greene became acquainted with Cuban revolutionary Fidel Castro in the late 1950s, around the time Castro toppled the Batista regime in Cuba. Greene later expressed deep disappointment that both Philby and Castro turned out to be agents of the Communist International. Greene utilized the people he had known and the places he had lived as grist for his thrilling “entertainments.”

Graham Greene maintained a consistent writing ritual. He'd begin each morning by opening a black leather-bound notebook. Using a fountain pen filled with black ink, he'd write five hundred words — then stop. Once he was done, he was done. He'd close the notebook, put the pen away, and would not take them up again until the next morning.

One of his most successful “entertainments” was *The Confidential Agent*, published in 1939. Greene didn't write it for fame or critical praise. He wrote it because he was desperate for money. Once he finished the book, he was so unhappy with the result that he told his publisher he wanted it published under a pseudonym. The publisher refused to allow it. *The Confidential Agent* was Greene's ninth book, and the publisher wanted to build on the author's growing reputation.

Though Greene considered the book a mere potboiler, the critics raved. Katherine Woods of the *New York Times Book Review* called it an “even better novel” than his highly acclaimed *Brighton Rock* and “a magnificent tour-de-force among tales of international intrigue,” a story that induced

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“a more intimate disturbance of the spirit, in the echoing fantasia of an imaginative nightmare.”¹⁹

To Greene, *The Confidential Agent* was an “entertainment,” nothing more. He had written it in far less time than most of his books, dashing it off in *just six weeks*. That’s an amazing feat by itself — but as Greene recounted in his memoir, *Ways of Escape*, he was writing two books at the same time. He sprinted through *The Confidential Agent* in his morning writing sessions, and devoted his afternoons to his masterpiece, *The Power and the Glory*. He explained:

I was struggling then through *The Power and the Glory*, but there was no money in the book as far as I could foresee. Certainly, my wife and two children would not be able to live on one unsaleable book. . . . So I determined to write another “entertainment” [*The Confidential Agent*] as quickly as possible in the mornings, while I ground on slowly with *The Power and the Glory* in the afternoons. . . .

Each day I sat down to work with no idea of what turn the plot might take and each morning I wrote, with the automatism of a planchette, two thousand words instead of my usual stint of five hundred words. In the afternoons, *The Power and the Glory* proceeded towards its end at the same leaden pace, unaffected by the sprightly young thing who was so quickly overtaking it.²⁰

Initially, Greene was embarrassed to admit he was the author of *The Confidential Agent*. But the book had something special about it that Greene didn’t recognize at first. The story reached the reader at a very deep level. It disturbed the spirit and created a sense of nightmarish menace. Eventually, Greene came to realize that the critics

were right — *The Confidential Agent* was a book of exceptional power and brilliance. Decades later, he reflected:

The Confidential Agent is one of the few books of mine which I have cared to reread — perhaps because it is not really one of mine. It was as though I were ghosting for another man. The book moved rapidly because I was not struggling with my own technical problems: I was to all intents ghosting a novel by . . . [another] writer.²¹

That's one of the most amazing statements ever made by an author. I know a lot of writers, and from my conversations with them, I know that very few like to reread their own books. Graham Greene admitted that he truly *enjoyed* rereading a novel that had once embarrassed him. Why? Greene suggests it's because he wrote it quickly, freely, in a state of creative flow, under the influence of the unconscious Muse — so that it was seemingly the work of another writer.

Greene had accidentally stumbled onto the hidden superpower of great writers: To write brilliantly, you must write *quickly* and — above all — write *freely*. You must discard your inhibitions, let go of your worries about what the reviewers and readers will think, and write with carefree exuberance, enthusiasm, and complete abandon.

That's what Greene meant when he said he wrote the book “with the automatism of a planchette” (referring to a device used by mediums for automatic writing). That's what he meant when he said the writing “moved rapidly because I was not struggling with my own technical problems.” Greene didn't have a word to describe the creative state he experienced at the time, but we now call that state being “in flow” or “in the zone.”

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When you are “in flow,” it can often feel (as Greene describes) that someone else is writing the book, not you. Why? Because the creative process is taking place primarily in your unconscious mind, not your conscious intellect. Your intellect is practically a bystander, an onlooker, while your unconscious (which I call the Muse) does all the heavy lifting. And because you’re writing freely, without inhibition, riding waves of passion and emotion, you’re not struggling with technical problems. You’re simply telling a story as you watch it play out on the inner viewscreen of your unconscious mind.

Transformed as a writer

Graham Greene discovered his writer’s superpower during a six-week period in the late 1930s. I discovered my own writer’s superpower in late 2001 and early 2002. I had contracted to write a four-book series — and the publisher had given me an absurdly short deadline. To make matters worse, the publisher inserted a \$100-per-day penalty for late delivery in my contract. I didn’t think it would be humanly possible to meet the publisher’s deadline — yet I wanted that contract so badly, I eagerly took the gamble.

I wrote the four books, and not only met my deadline (and avoided the late delivery penalty), but I made a profound discovery about the writing process: By writing more quickly than I had ever written before, I was able to shed my inhibitions, take greater risks with my stories, and write more brilliantly than I had ever written before.

Before I made that discovery, I had always thought of writing as a process that takes place in the intellect: You think, you ponder, you push words together, you analyze what you’ve written, you keep tinkering until you get it just-so, then you go on to the next sentence. Well, a lot of writers *do* write that way. Some are even successful at it.

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But after I discovered how to write quickly and freely in a state of creative flow, I knew I could never go back to my old, slow way of writing. Equally important, I began to discover that many of my favorite writers had been using these principles for years.

Dorothea Brande described this uninhibited approach to writing in her 1934 book *Becoming a Writer*. Ray Bradbury discovered Brande's book and used that same approach to produce brilliant works of fantasy and science fiction — and he shared the principles of writing freely in his 1990 book *Zen In the Art of Writing*. Anne Lamott refers to this approach as swimming in “the river of the story, the river of the unconscious.” Michael Moorcock calls it writing “at white heat.” Novelist John Gardner calls it “the fictive dream.” Ursula K. Le Guin says she produces her best work in “a pure trance state” in which she allows her “unconscious mind to control the course of the story.”

The more I studied the creative processes of various writers, the more I realized that *most* of the writers I admired wrote in a state of uninhibited creative flow. In fact, the unconscious approach to writing brilliantly has been around for centuries.

For example, Robert Louis Stevenson sat in his sickbed, burning with fever, and churned out the first draft of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in a mere three days. He showed it to his wife, and she offered one small criticism about the point of view. Stevenson agreed that the point of view was all wrong, so he burned his manuscript in the fireplace — then he completely rewrote the book from scratch, again in just three days. It was published in 1886.

Washington Irving (*The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*) was another early writer who discovered his superpower, learning to write quickly and freely in order to write

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brilliantly. He approached writing as a daily job, and disciplined himself by setting high productivity goals for each day. According to his biographer, Brian Jay Jones, Irving normally began writing at 5:00 a.m., maintaining an “intense work schedule” and “producing a certain number of pages daily.” Jones noted that Irving’s writing, “when it flowed, energized him.”

Irving kept a journal when he was writing. Jones gives us a glimpse into Irving’s writing journal during 1826, when the author was in Spain, researching and writing his biography of Christopher Columbus. In a journal entry from May 6, Irving says he completed twenty-nine pages by the end of his writing day. Assuming he averaged 200 words per page, that would add up to 5,800 words for that day — an amazingly high word count, produced entirely in longhand.²² No question, Washington Irving wrote quickly — and his stories have stood the test of time.

In an 1819 essay called “The Mutability of Literature,” Irving described his creative process this way: “There are certain half-dreaming moods of mind, in which we naturally steal away from noise and glare, and seek some quiet haunt, where we may indulge our reveries and build our air castles undisturbed.”²³ In these words, Irving is describing nothing less than a writer’s superpower — the ability to enter “the zone” of the creative unconscious, the place dreams and great stories come from.

But a writer’s superpower — the ability to “write in overdrive” — is even older than the tales of Robert Louis Stevenson and Washington Irving. More than seventeen centuries ago, Lu Chi, a writer of the Western Jin Dynasty of China, wrote in *Wen Fu (Rhyme-Prose On Literature)*, “[The writer] floats on the heavenly lake; he steep himself in the nether spring. . . . He gathers words untouched by a hundred generations; he plucks rhythms unsung for a

thousand years. He sees past and present in a moment; he reaches for the four seas in the twinkling of an eye.”²⁴

Believe it or not, you *can* write with the same free, uninhibited, sparkling creativity exhibited by great writers from Lu Chi to Robert Louis Stevenson to Ursula Le Guin. You *can* discover your writer’s superpower, release your creative inhibitions, and learn to write freely and brilliantly. In fact, by applying these simple, transformative principles, you may discover for the first time what it *truly* means to be a *writer*:

1. Learn to see your work as play.

Writing is work, and we need to approach our work with a certain seriousness of intention and commitment. We need to discipline ourselves to write every day.

But at the same time, let’s not take the work of writing too seriously. When you write, don’t think of your writing as “work” or “an artistic statement.” Think of it as *play*. As you imagine and create your story, the last thing you need is pretentiousness or pompous thoughts of the “artistic importance” of your work. Nor should you think about money or fame. Instead, think about—

FUN!

That’s right, while you are in the throes of creation, writing should be *fun*, no more, no less. Your unconscious mind doesn’t want to work — it wants to *play*. Give the unconscious what it wants.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who teaches at Claremont Graduate University in Southern California, was the first to recognize and label the highly focused creative state as “flow.” He observed that the most successful writers he studied enjoyed *playing* at their writing, even while treating their writing with utmost seriousness:

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They have an almost religious respect for their domain and believe with the Gospel of St. John that “In the beginning was the Word.” At the same time, they know that the power of words depends on how they are used; so they enjoy playing with them, stretching their meanings, stringing them in novel combinations, and polishing them until they shine. Playful as they are with words, all of them are also deadly in earnest. They are all involved in creating imaginary worlds that are as necessary for them as the physical world they inhabit.²⁵

The best way to treat your work with the seriousness it deserves is to not take it too seriously. Writing is a child's game of make-believe.

If you read and listen to enough writers talking about writing, you'll encounter a lot of people griping and moaning about how hard it is to be a writer, what a difficult job it is, how they don't enjoy writing itself, but only enjoy “having written.” Anyone who feels that way should stop writing and go get a real job. Personally, I don't love “having written.” I love *writing*. I love playing with words. It's *fun*. It's *exciting*. I *can't wait* to start writing every day.

But there some people who have good reason to feel inhibited as writers. They are people afflicted with “art scars.” I recently encountered this term for the first time. Art scars are childhood traumas that block or handicap our creativity. It's the inner voice that says, “You're not talented, you're not good enough, and your creations are not wanted.” Children sometimes hear these messages from parents, teachers, or peers. They grow up feeling hindered or ashamed of their creative expressions. They have much to offer — but they lack the confidence to put their work on

display. Many people with art scars feel they need permission to express their creativity.

If you struggle with art scars from your past, I hope you'll work up the courage to share your creativity with the world. You are a creative human being, made in the image of the Creator. You don't need anyone's permission to do what you were meant to do.

Tell your stories. Write your truth. Stop worrying about what others think. Those ideas are burning brightly within you — unleash them. Cut out words with scissors and color them with crayons. Play with them as a child would.

Heed the exuberant wisdom of Ray Bradbury: “The first thing a writer should be is — excited. He should be a thing of fevers and enthusiasms.”²⁶ Write freely by writing for your own pleasure. Have fun. *Play*.

2. Write what you *don't* know.

To write freely, you have to shed a lot of bad writing advice. One of the worst “rules” of writing ever inflicted on us — and we've all heard it countless times — is “Write what you know.” That little poison pill has stifled more imaginations and ruined more writers than all the rejection slips in the history of literature.

Here's *better* advice: Write what you *don't* know. Write what you are curious about, passionate about, and always thinking about. Write from your imagination. Write from your wonder. Write from your desire to explore and create and discover.

Science fiction writer Joe Haldeman (*The Forever War*) offers one of the best perspectives I've ever heard: “Bad books on writing tell you to ‘WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW,’ a solemn and totally false adage that is the reason there exist so many mediocre novels about English professors contemplating adultery.”²⁷

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And Ursula Le Guin impales this bad writing advice on a skewer of irony:

As for “write what you know,” I was regularly told this as a beginner. I think it’s a very good rule and have always obeyed it. I write about imaginary countries, alien societies on other planets, dragons, wizards, the Napa Valley in 22002. I know these things. I know them better than anybody else possibly could, so it’s my duty to testify about them. I got my knowledge of them, as I got whatever knowledge I have of the hearts and minds of human beings, through imagination working on observation. Like any other novelist.²⁸

The best way to write what you *truly* know is to let go of rules and the fear that you are “doing it wrong.” Shed your inhibitions, plunge into the depths of your imagination, and create a fictional reality that is known only to you. Then write everything you know about that fictional reality. You don’t have to write about the experiences and memories of your everyday life. Instead, dream up new experiences, imagine unremembered memories, and explore unexplored realities.

Uruguayan writer Felisberto Hernández (1902-1964; author of *Piano Stories*) observed, “*Pero no creo que solamente deba escribir lo que sé, sino también lo otro.*” (“Yet I do not think I should write only about what I know, but also of the other.”)²⁹ The *other*, the unknown, the undiscovered country — that, too, is the rightful province of every writer. We must write what we *don’t* know.

So write freely — and in the process of *writing what you don’t know*, you’ll come to know so much more than you ever thought possible.

3. Slay perfectionism.

“Perfectionism,” wrote Anne Lamott, “is the voice of the oppressor.”³⁰ Resist the obsessive-compulsive need for a perfect first draft. Your first draft is *supposed* to be messy and energetic, like a child’s finger-painting. Free yourself of perfectionism, and you’ll finally know what it means to be a *writer*.

Many perfectionists get stalled at the opening line. While it’s true that a great first line is often a writer’s best way into a story, it isn’t the only way in. If the challenge of crafting the perfect opening line has you blocked, then go around it.

Write a bad first sentence and keep going, or start someplace else in your story. Often, the first line is the last line the writer writes. Sometimes, you must write the entire story to find out not only how it ends, but how it should begin. Don’t let the elusiveness of the “perfect” first line get in your way. Just *write*.

Learn to accept ugly first efforts. Learn to accept notes in your manuscript that read, “Brilliant scene goes here” or “Fix this in rewrite.” Your first draft isn’t your final draft, and it need not be pretty.

Your first draft contains the raw material of your story. It brims with energy and brilliance and power, but it is also too long, it’s floridly overwritten in places, it’s awkwardly and amateurishly written in others — and that’s okay. Trust yourself to turn this energetic-yet-ugly first effort into a polished and beautiful final draft that will win you many fans and readers.

Perfectionists write stiff, lifeless, self-conscious prose. Those who slay perfectionism write bold, uninhibited, energetic prose that wows readers and reviewers alike. Write freely and write brilliantly.

4. Write in a state of relaxation.

Great writing involves hard work — yet paradoxically, we do our best writing when we are relaxed. Great writing flows naturally — it's rarely forced. The harder we try to write, the more difficult the task becomes.

Writing becomes stressful when we inflict too much pressure on ourselves. Sometimes, we try too hard to be artsy, or to impress readers and reviewers. The moment we realize we're trying too hard and becoming self-conscious, we need to relax. That doesn't mean we take a nap. It means we learn to write in a calm, unstressed state.

You can be in a state of focused concentration, yet still be relaxed. Instead of being driven and stressed, ease up on yourself. Pour yourself another cup of coffee. Send up a prayer. Take a short walk or a quick shower. Turn on some music. Then go back to your writing in a more relaxed and easy-going state of mind. Have fun — and just write.

Ray Bradbury said that there are three keys to the creative process: "Work. . . . Relaxation. . . . Don't think!"³¹ In other words, first show up and do the work of a writer. Second, do that work in a state of relaxation; don't force the words — *play* with words. Enjoy your work. Third, let your unconscious imagination do the work, not your conscious intellect. Let the story flow from your unconscious Muse — don't try to *think* it into existence.

John Steinbeck used to write with soft-lead Blackwing pencils. When he was feeling most creative, he'd hold the pencil loosely, with a relaxed grip, and the words would flow effortlessly from his pencil lead. When he was tense and coiled like a spring, he'd clutch the pencil tightly, and his handwriting would take on a jagged, irregular shape.

While writing *East of Eden*, Steinbeck recorded in his journal, "This morning I am clutching the pencil very tight and this is not a good thing. It means I am not relaxed. And

in this book I want to be just as relaxed as possible. . . . I want that calmness to settle on me that feels so good — almost like a robe of cashmere.”³²

Take it from Steinbeck. To write brilliantly, to write freely, be as relaxed as possible. Let a cashmere-soft sense of calm settle over you as you begin your day’s work.

5. Write fearlessly.

You cannot write freely when you are afraid. Fear shuts down the imagination and frightens away the Muse. Fear causes us to lock up. We need a quality of fearlessness to unleash our creativity and enable us to *soar*. If you want to write quickly, freely, and brilliantly, you must conquer your fears.

In 1956, novelist Carson McCullers (*The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*) published a short story about a writer’s fear. It was entitled “Who Has Seen the Wind?” (she later adapted it as a play, *The Square Root of Wonderful*). She based the story on scenes from her marriage to a failed writer, Reeves McCullers, who committed suicide in 1953.

She later said that after that story was published, her friend, playwright Tennessee Williams, said to her, “How could you dare write that story? It’s the most frightening work I have ever read.” And it truly is a frightening story for writers, because it’s the story of a writer whose one successful novel is followed by years and years of writer’s block. It begins:

All afternoon Ken Harris had been sitting before a blank page of the typewriter. It was winter and snowing. The snow muted traffic and the Village apartment was so quiet that the alarm clock bothered him. . . .

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His prelunch drink (or was it an eye opener?) had been dulled by the can of chili con carne he had eaten alone in the kitchen. At four o'clock he put the clock in the clothes hamper, then returned to the typewriter. The paper was still blank and the white page blanched his spirit. Yet there was a time (how long ago?) . . . when the empty page summoned and sorted memory and he felt that ghostly mastery of his art. A time, in short, when he was a writer and writing almost every day. . . .

Now he sat there, hunched and somehow fearful.³³

Carson McCullers had seen that fear in her husband's eyes. She had felt that fear clutching her own heart. It's the fear of a writer who has lost faith in her own creativity. In her unfinished autobiography, published after her death, she confessed that she often feared she would never write again: "This fear is one of the horrors of an author's life."³⁴

The fear that terrified Carson McCullers does not have to keep you from writing. Let me share with you the solutions to the eight most common fears we writers face (for a more in-depth exploration of these fears and how to conquer them, read my book *Write Fearlessly!*, available in print and ebook editions):

Fear No. 1: "I'm Afraid I Have No Talent."

Solution: Write anyway. All writers suspect they have no talent. All writers deal with self-doubt. *All*. In 1938, when John Steinbeck was writing his most enduring novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, he confessed in his journal, "Demoralization complete and seemingly unbeatable. . . . My many weaknesses are beginning to show their heads. . . . I'm not a writer. I've been fooling myself and other people."³⁵

Self-doubt is not always a bad thing. Novelist Paul Tremblay said, “I struggle with self-doubt every time I sit down to write. . . . I think it’s healthy. . . . Doubt, at times, drives me, and makes me want to get better.”³⁶

All the great writers struggle with doubt, and they write anyway. Self-doubt can be your ally. It drives you to master your craft and become a better writer. Don’t worry about whether or not you have talent. If you can learn, if you can grow, if you can sit down at your keyboard and begin, you can write.

Fear No. 2: “I’m Afraid to Begin.”

Solution: Begin anyway. Just start writing. Just start typing, “I don’t know what to write,” again and again until something clicks. Or start writing a scene from the middle of your story. Or write whatever comes to mind and keep going. Just begin writing, and soon your random typing will transmute into writing. Your fears will melt and you’ll be on your way.

Fear No. 3: “I’m Afraid I Can’t Finish.”

Solution: Write anyway. Maybe you can’t finish, but there’s only one way to find out, and that is to write. It’s a sure bet that you won’t finish unless you start, so get started. Along the way, you’ll learn a lot about yourself as a writer, and as a human being.

Fear No. 4: “I Fear the Risks of the Writer’s Life.”

Solution: Start taking small risks, then keep ratcheting up your tolerance for increasingly greater risks. What are the risks of the writer’s life? “I might be wasting my time.” “I might suffer financial setbacks and uncertainties.” “I might face rejection.” “People might laugh at my writing.” All true, but so what? Non-writers waste their time, suffer

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financial uncertainty, face rejection, and get laughed at, too. But the rewards of writing are *amazing*, so why not give it a go? There are no guarantees in writing, just as there are no guarantees in life. Accept it that life is risky, and with great risk comes the possibility of great rewards. Accept the risks. *Write*.

Fear No. 5: "I'm Afraid to Reveal Who I Am."

Solution: Accept it that the primary reason for writing is to reveal yourself on some level — your ideas, your beliefs, your dreams, your wounds, and your hopes for the human race.

Isabel Allende said, "My worst flaw is that I tell secrets, my own and everybody else's."³⁷ Is that a flaw? Or is her courage to reveal herself her *greatest strength* as a writer? After all, if you don't want to reveal who you are, why write?

Don't hide behind your writing. *Declare yourself* through your writing. Be boldly and unapologetically *who you are*.

Fear No. 6: "I'm Afraid of Rejection."

Solution: Keep writing and keep submitting anyway. Everyone who writes for professional publication gets rejected. Ray Bradbury submitted hundreds of stories to *The New Yorker*, only one of which sold. He sometimes had stories rejected by low-paying markets like *Weird Tales*, then turned around and sold the same story to a slick, high-paying magazine like *Harper's*.

Rejection isn't personal, it's nothing to be afraid of, it's just a part of the writing business. As novelist John Scalzi said, "Take this now and engrave this in your brain: *EVERY WRITER GETS REJECTED. You will be no different.*"³⁸

Fear No. 7: "I'm Afraid I Might Fail."

Solution: Write anyway — and if you fail, try again. And again. And again. Ernest Hemingway struggled intensely with the fear of failure. His cure: he made a promise to himself: “Do not worry. You have always written before and you will write now. All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence you know.’ So finally I would write one true sentence, and then go on from there.”³⁹

Fear No. 8: "I'm Afraid I Might Succeed."

The fear of success is the most paradoxical of all fears. We all *want* to succeed — yet many of us fear the changes success might bring. Will my life be disrupted? What if I can't sustain my success? Will success make me lose my creative edge?

Many aspiring authors would rather type away in obscurity than actually achieve success. Don't be like them. Take a moment to imagine your success, to picture how you would respond to fame and wealth. Picture yourself handling your success gracefully, using your newfound influence to help others. Instead of dreading success, start planning for it and working toward it. And when it comes, *enjoy* it.

Whatever your fear may be, face it, dive into the center of it — and you *will* conquer it. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Do the thing you fear, and the death of fear is certain.”

Whatever it takes to write quickly and write freely, do it and be blessed. Next, we'll see how all these principles come together to make your writing sparkle with brilliance.

Part Three

Write Brilliantly

“Sometimes when I am writing, I am aware of a rhythm, a dance, a fury, which is as yet empty of words.”

—Stephen Spender (1909-1995), poet-novelist

FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY WAS IN DEEP TROUBLE.

In 1865, Dostoyevsky was in the throes of writing his masterpiece, *Crime and Punishment*. But he needed money — fast. His gambling addiction had left him deep in debt. His wife and brother had both died the year before, leaving Dostoyevsky as the sole provider for his stepson and his late brother’s family. He had tried to raise money at the roulette table, but had only succeeded in gambling away his meager savings.

Dostoyevsky had sold *Crime and Punishment* for a modest advance to *The Russian Messenger*. He was writing the novel in monthly installments, and he was barely finishing each installment in time for publication. Even with the advance for *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoyevsky saw bankruptcy looming.

To raise some quick cash, he signed a contract with a disreputable book publisher, F. T. Stellovsky. The contract gave Dostoyevsky a modest advance in exchange for the rights to two books — a reprint edition of Dostoyevsky’s collected works and a future book — a semiautobiographical novel titled *The Gambler*.

The deadline for *The Gambler* was November 1, 1866 — an almost impossible deadline, given how much work it would take to complete *Crime and Punishment*. Even

worse, the contract with Stellovsky contained a huge penalty for late delivery. If Dostoyevsky failed to deliver *The Gambler* on time, Stellovsky would acquire the rights to all of Dostoyevsky's works for the next nine years — and Stellovsky would not have to pay him a single ruble.

It was the biggest gamble of Dostoyevsky's career — and the odds were against him. But he was desperate. He initially planned to write the two books simultaneously — *Crime and Punishment* in the morning, *The Gambler* in the afternoon. But it quickly became clear that he would fall behind on *Crime and Punishment* if he didn't focus all his time and energy on that book. So he set *The Gambler* aside until he could complete *Crime and Punishment*, which he finished on October 1, 1866.

When he was finally free to write *The Gambler*, he only had one month until the deadline. If he failed to deliver the manuscript on time, the unthinkable would happen. But could he write an entire novel in just one month?

A friend referred him to a stenographer, eighteen-year-old Anna Grigorevna Snitkina. She happened to be the first Russian citizen trained in a new European method of shorthand. Dostoyevsky was amazed to find that she could accurately transcribe his words as quickly as he spoke them.

Dostoyevsky hired Anna on October 4, and they immediately went to work. She took down every word as he dictated for the next three and a half weeks. With her help, Dostoyevsky completed a first draft of *The Gambler* on October 29. He spent October 30 and 31 correcting and editing the manuscript. On November 1, right on deadline, Dostoyevsky hand-delivered the manuscript to Stellovsky's office.

But is *The Gambler* a worthy addition to the canon of the distinguished author's fiction? Or is it just a hack job

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— a piece of tripe Dostoyevsky churned out in a hurry to make a fast buck?

Though it was *Crime and Punishment* that became the cornerstone of Dostoyevsky's reputation, *The Gambler* — a novel written with amazing speed, under incredible deadline pressure — was praised by critics and readers in its own time, and its legacy endures today. Composer Sergei Prokofiev adapted *The Gambler* as an opera, first performed in 1929. The first of several screen adaptations, *The Great Sinner* (1949), starred Gregory Peck in the title role. BBC Radio adapted the novel in 2010.

The Gambler is a tale of intense emotion and romance. It tells the story of Alexei, a poor teacher, who falls in love with Polina, the stepdaughter of his employer, a Russian general. Alexei swears an oath of love to her, vowing that he would throw himself off a cliff if she would say the word. Yet Polina treats Alexei with indifference, seeming to prefer an English nobleman instead of the poor teacher. Late in the novel, Alexei (the first-person narrator of the tale) discovers Polina's true feelings for him:

Her eyes flashed fire.

“What? *You yourself* wish me to leave you for him?” she cried with a scornful look and a proud smile. Never before had she addressed me thus.

Then her head must have turned dizzy with emotion, for suddenly she seated herself upon the sofa, as though she were powerless any longer to stand.

A flash of lightning seemed to strike me as I stood there. I could scarcely believe my eyes or my ears. She *did* love me, then! It *was* to me, and not to Mr. Astley, that she had turned! Although she, an unprotected girl, had come to me in my room — in a

hotel room — and had probably compromised herself thereby, I had not understood!

Then a second mad idea flashed into my brain.

“Polina,” I said, “give me but an hour. Wait here just one hour until I return. Yes, you *must* do so. Do you not see what I mean? Just stay here for that time.”

And I rushed from the room without so much as answering her look of inquiry. She called something after me, but I did not return.⁴⁰

The Gambler was a slender book by Dostoevskian standards — a mere 60,000 words compared with 200,000 words for *Crime and Punishment* — but the author had fulfilled the terms of the contract. Fyodor Dostoyevsky married Anna in 1867, and a couple of years later, she gave birth to a daughter, Lyubov. Fyodor is said to have quit gambling altogether after his daughter’s birth.

Can a novel that was written so quickly earn the right to be called “brilliant”? Absolutely. In fact, I’m *convinced* that the surest way to produce brilliant writing is to write quickly and freely.

Writing at the speed of imagination

Irish novelist John Boyne has written fourteen novels and numerous short stories during a sixteen-year career. In 2015, Boyne chaired the jury for the prestigious Scotiabank Giller literary prize and was also awarded an honorary doctorate of letters from the University of East Anglia.

Boyne is perhaps best known for a 2006 YA novel about the Holocaust, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. The book has sold more than five million copies worldwide, and was adapted for the big screen in 2008. The success of the novel

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is truly amazing — but even more amazing is the story of how *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* came to be written.

“I wrote the entire first draft of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* in two and a half days,” Boyne told an interviewer. “I barely slept, I just kept writing until I got to the end. The story just came to me, I have no idea where it came from. As I was writing it I thought, *Just keep going and don't think about it too much*. With the other books, I plan them all out. I think about them for months before writing anything down. But with this one, on Tuesday night I had the idea. On Wednesday morning I started writing, and by Friday lunchtime I had the first draft.”⁴¹

Two and a half days? Seriously? *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is a 50,000-word novel. Can a book of that length, written in such a short period of time, be a work of literary value, of literary brilliance? Obviously, millions of readers think so. And so do the leading literati around the world. Boyne's novel garnered a mantel-load of honors, including the Irish Book Awards Children's Book of the Year, Spain's Qué Leer Award Best International Novel of the Year, the Orange Prize Readers Group Book of the Year, the Border's New Voices Award, Italy's Paolo Ungari Literary Award, and many other prizes and awards. Not a bad showing for two and a half days' work.

The late social critic Christopher Hitchens (1949-2011) was famed for his devastating wit, searing honesty, and soaring intellect. He wrote exactly as he spoke: incisively, caustically, and without fear or inhibition. Like his literary heroes George Orwell and Thomas Paine, Hitchens regularly attacked the people and institutions that were most respected in society. His targets ranged from Bill and Hillary Clinton to Henry Kissinger to the British monarchy to Mother Teresa to God. His love of tobacco and alcohol

proved to be his undoing. Hitchens died in December 2011 of complications from esophageal cancer.

Those closest to Hitchens knew him as one of the fastest writers on the planet. Following his death, his ability to write brilliantly and with amazing speed was noted in numerous eulogies. His friend and colleague Peter Wilby observed in *The Guardian*, “Technically, he was probably an alcoholic but, he pointed out, he never missed deadlines or appointments. Regardless of condition, he wrote fast and fluently, if with erratic punctuation.”⁴²

Another longtime friend and colleague of Christopher Hitchens, *Vanity Fair* editor Graydon Carter, reflected:

You’d be hard-pressed to find a writer who could match the volume of exquisitely crafted columns, essays, articles, and books he produced over the past four decades. He wrote often — constantly, in fact, and right up to the end — and he wrote fast; frequently without the benefit of a second draft or even corrections. I can recall a lunch in 1991, when I was editing *The New York Observer*, and he and Aimée Bell, his longtime editor, and I got together for a quick bite at a restaurant. . . .

[Returning to the office after lunch and drinks], we set him up at a rickety table and with an old Olivetti, and in a symphony of clacking he produced a 1,000-word column of near perfection in under half an hour.”⁴³

June Thomas, an editor and culture critic for the online magazine *Slate*, said that editing Christopher Hitchens’ columns was “the easiest job in journalism” because he “never filed late — in fact, he was usually early, even when he was clearly very sick — and he managed to make his work seem like a great lark.” Thomas added that one of

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Hitchens' friends, political satirist Christopher Buckley, said he had watched Hitchens "bash out a *Slate* column in thirty minutes at the end of a tiring weekend."⁴⁴

Hitchens' friend Matt Labash, a senior writer at the *Weekly Standard*, may have hyperbolized a bit when he said Hitchens' typical workday might include "liberating oppressed peoples of the world" and "knocking out his 10,000 words" and "starting fights with God"⁴⁵ — but then again, that really does sound like all-in-a-day's-work for Christopher Hitchens.

A few weeks before Hitchens died, Charles McGrath, former editor of the *New York Times Book Review*, noted that Hitchens' battle with cancer did little to diminish his speed or brilliance as a writer. Even while suffering the ravages of the disease itself and the debilitating chemotherapy treatments, Hitchens saw himself, McGrath said, as "living with cancer, not dying from it. He still holds forth in dazzlingly clever and erudite paragraphs, pausing only to catch a breath or let a punch line resonate, and though he says his legendary productivity has fallen off a little since his illness, he still writes faster than most people talk."⁴⁶

Belgian novelist Georges Simenon (1903-1989) wrote almost five hundred novels and countless short works, with more than half a billion copies of his novel-length work in print. He is best known for the seventy-five novels and twenty-eight short stories featuring the fictional detective, *le commissaire* Jules Maigret. Simenon was honored with the Mystery Writers of America Grand Master Award in 1966.

On a good day, Simenon would write sixty to eighty pages per day. When beginning a new novel or story, he always focused on character instead of plot. He employed a method-acting approach to writing, and would mentally

become his protagonist while writing the book. During that time, he would not socialize or take phone calls. He ceased to be Georges Simenon, and became instead the hero of a novel.

Simenon allocated a specific amount of time for the novel-writing process: eleven days, no more, no less. Why eleven days? Was he superstitious about that number? Did he have a limited attention span? I don't know. To my knowledge, he never explained.

But Simenon did give a revealing interview to Carvel Collins of *The Paris Review* in 1955. Before beginning a novel, he'd have several themes floating around in his unconscious — ideas or issues that he worried about or was excited about. Two days before he began writing, he'd focus on a theme, then imagine a setting, “a small world . . . with a few characters” drawn partly from people he knew, partly from his imagination. Once the setting, the characters, and the theme began to take form in his mind, he knew he had to begin. He couldn't bear having the beginnings of a story occupying his thoughts without getting down to work.

“The beginning will be always the same,” Simenon explained. “It is almost a geometrical problem: I have such a man, such a woman, in such surroundings. What can happen to them to oblige them to go to their limit? That's the question. It will be sometimes a very simple incident, anything which will change their lives. Then I write my novel chapter by chapter. . . .

“I know nothing whatever about the events that will occur later. Otherwise it would not be interesting. . . . Day after day, chapter after chapter, I find what comes later. After I have started a novel I write a chapter each day, without ever missing a day. . . . I don't see anybody, I don't speak to anybody, I don't take a phone call — I live just like a monk. All the day I am one of my characters. I feel what

he feels. . . . The other characters are always seen by him. So it is in this character's skin I have to be. And it's almost unbearable after five or six days. . . . After eleven days I can't [continue] — it's impossible. . . . I am too tired.”⁴⁷

John Boyle, Christopher Hitchens, and Georges Simenon each wrote brilliantly by writing quickly and freely. There are many other examples I could cite, but the facts are undeniable: Some of the most compelling and memorable writing ever produced was written quickly and freely, in an amazingly short span of time.

Don't let anyone tell you that fast writing is for hacks. In fact, I'm convinced that the slower you write, the more stiff, leaden, and self-conscious your writing is likely to become. By writing at the speed of imagination you will produce pages that sparkle with power and emotion — and you'll build a rewarding career as a writer.

Words like lightning bolts

We writers, some say, are doomed to fail. William Faulkner once observed, “The work never matches the dream of perfection the artist has to start with.”⁴⁸ And Isaac Bashevis Singer agreed: “Every creator painfully experiences the chasm between his inner vision and its ultimate expression.”⁴⁹ And Robert Harris, in *The Ghost*, said, “A book unwritten is a delightful universe of infinite possibilities. Set down one word, however, and it immediately becomes earthbound. Set down one sentence and it's halfway to being just like every other bloody book that's ever been written.”⁵⁰

I call this view “The Myth of the Unattainable Vision” — and I say Faulkner, Singer, and Harris are wrong. I'm convinced that we writers have the ability to not only *attain* our vision, but to *transcend* our vision. In *Walking*

Jim Denney

on Water, Madeleine L'Engle described her own view of creative transcendence:

When the artist is truly the servant of the work, the work is better than the artist; Shakespeare knew how to listen to his work, and so he often wrote better than he could write; Bach composed more deeply, more truly, than he knew; Rembrandt's brush put more of the human spirit on canvas than Rembrandt could comprehend.

When the work takes over, the artist is enabled to get out of the way, not to interfere. When the work takes over, then the artist listens.

But before he can listen, paradoxically, he must work.⁵¹

What Madeleine L'Engle calls "the work," I call "the Muse" or "the creative unconscious." She is referring to the mysterious inner workings of our unconscious mind — the source of our dreams, our imagination, our visions, and our creativity. How do we become "the servant of the work"? How do we "listen" for what the Muse, the creative unconscious mind, is saying to us?

We achieve this state by writing quickly and freely, without interference from the conscious intellect. When the work takes over and the Muse inspires us, we shatter the Myth of the Unattainable Vision. We write better than we are consciously capable of writing. Our scenes, characters, images, and metaphors take on a mysterious power that transcends our intellectual limitations — and exceeds the limits of our original vision.

In those moments, the work is truly in charge of the creative process. We are merely servants of the work, servants of the Muse. And it is in those moments that we

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can achieve infinitely more than we ever dreamed possible. As evidence that this is so, I submit to you one book from the enormous output of (arguably) the greatest novelist in the English language, Charles Dickens.

One of Dickens' most enduring achievements was a 29,000-word novella, *A Christmas Carol*, which he wrote in just six weeks. First published in London by Chapman & Hall on December 19, 1843, *A Christmas Carol* was greeted with critical acclaim and phenomenal sales. When it was published, many old English Christmas traditions, such as the singing of carols, were on the wane. This was because most forms of Yuletide celebration had been suppressed by the Puritans.

A Christmas Carol revived many of the old traditions and popularized some new ones. The story of Ebenezer Scrooge's night of transformation has exemplified the spirit of Christmas ever since. Even "Merry Christmas," which is a popular Christmas greeting today, was rare until *A Christmas Carol* made it go viral. The traditional Victorian style of celebrating Christmas — trees and wreaths, holly and mistletoe, eggnog and plum pudding, turkey and mince pie — can be traced directly to the phenomenal popularity of *A Christmas Carol*.

Not only did Dickens manage to shape the Christmas traditions of our culture with a single slim book, but he also invented a subgenre of science fiction: the time-travel novel. When the Ghosts of Christmas Past and Christmas Future conducted Ebenezer Scrooge back and forth along the time continuum, Dickens employed literary imagery that had never existed before.

These are no small accomplishments for a mere six weeks' work. Dickens maximized his superpower and wrote in overdrive. He wrote quickly, freely, and brilliantly. That's how we were meant to write — not plodding along,

obsessing over the syntax and punctuation of each individual phrase, but soaring through heights of magic and meaning, using words like lightning bolts to illuminate the landscape of the imagination.

Let me share with you some principles for maximizing your writer's superpower so that you, too, can produce brilliant, luminous works that will define your career and impact your world.

1. Study your craft.

Many aspiring writers assume that, because they've done a lot of reading, they know how to write. This is almost never true. Writing is a craft that must be mastered through intensive study and practice. The problem is that most beginning writers don't realize how much they don't know.

Novelist Charles Bukowski once said, "The problem is that bad writers tend to have the self-confidence, while the good ones tend to have self-doubt."⁵² He was describing a principle called the Dunning-Kruger effect — a cognitive bias that leads incompetent people to think they have superior ability. If you've ever been in a writing class or a local writers group, you've probably met a few glaring examples of the Dunning-Kruger effect — wannabe writers whose work is atrocious on every level, yet who behave in a smug, condescending, know-it-all way toward others in the group. The problem with incompetent writers is that they lack sufficient understanding of the craft to recognize their own incompetence.

The Dunning-Kruger phenomenon was identified in a series of experiments by psychologists David Dunning and Justin Kruger at Cornell University in 1999. Their research was focused on the case of a bank robber who smeared lemon juice on his face during his robberies. Why

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lemon juice? Well, lemon juice can be used as an invisible ink. So, this robber reasoned, by smearing lemon juice on his face, he would make his face invisible to the surveillance cameras. Brilliant, eh?

Many beginning writers approach the craft in a similar way. Thinking they know it all, they publish their clumsy early efforts, fully expecting the world to applaud their brilliance — then they sulk and seethe over their non-existent sales and their scathing Amazon reviews. They don't realize they have lemon juice on their faces.

Herewith a confession: In my early writing career, I had a touch of the Dunning-Kruger affliction. I was a young writer in my twenties, I was getting work published, and I thought I knew all I needed to know about writing. I rarely read a book on the craft of writing, and I never attended a writer's conference or workshop. In my youthful arrogance, I didn't know I had lemon juice on my face.

Today I have more than a hundred books to my credit (having worked with many publishers including Simon & Schuster, St. Martin's Press, Thomas Nelson, Hachette, and more). I've been making my living as a full-time writer since 1989. But I no longer think I know it all. Not even close. In fact, I now read thirty or more books on writing every year. Though I know so much more about writing than I did when I was in my twenties, I'm driven by a constant hunger to know *more*.

Hemingway understood. Shortly before his death in 1961, he told an interviewer, "We are all apprentices in a craft where no one ever becomes a master."⁵³ If Hemingway considered himself an "apprentice" after earning the Nobel Prize for Literature, then you and I have even more reason for a humble attitude and a hunger to learn.

Study the elements of writing — character, viewpoint, milieu, plot, structure, and more. Learn the principles and

technical aspects of the writing craft. Read books by the great teachers of the craft — James Scott Bell, Lawrence Block, James N. Frey, John Gardner, Stephen King, Anne Lamott, Randy Ingermanson, Jeff Gerke, Donald Maass, and Sol Stein. Attend writers' conferences and workshops. Build a knowledge and awareness of the writing craft into your thinking and habits, so that when you are writing "in flow," under the influence of the Muse, you'll have all the tools you need to write quickly, freely, and brilliantly.

Don't get caught with lemon juice on your face. Master your craft.

2. Write a lot and write every day.

Writer-activist Jennifer Finney Boylan once said, "I believe that every writer probably has a thousand pages of bad fiction — or nonfiction — in him or her. So the first thing you have to do is just write your bad thousand pages. . . . Then, when you get to page one-thousand-and-one, you can say, *Today I begin.*"⁵⁴

There's wisdom in those words. Once you have begun to learn your craft, practice it daily by writing page after page after page. But remember: writing practice won't do you any good if you simply repeat and reinforce bad writing habits. If you keep acquiring new insights, and you keep applying those insights to real-life writing challenges, you'll grow and mature as a writer. Make sure that when you begin writing your thousand-and-first page, you've learned something about your craft from the preceding one thousand pages.

All the successful writers I know write daily, and most write for hours at a stretch. Writing is their habit, their addiction, their drug, their passion. They pursue it intensely. I have never met a successful writer who writes only when inspired.

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Therapist and screenwriter Dennis Palumbo observes, “The idea of ‘inspiration,’ as it is commonly understood, does a great deal of damage to writers. . . . [It] reinforces the notion that the writer himself or herself is somehow not enough. That some special talent or knowledge or divine gift — something outside of the writer — is necessary.”⁵⁵

Palumbo has nailed a major flaw in the thinking of “by-inspiration-only” writers. They have the superstitious notion that “inspiration” is a magical infusion of creative power from somewhere outside themselves. They seem to think that the god Dionysus will shoot a novel into their brains like a bolt of lightning, and they will effortlessly write reams of scintillating prose.

But inspiration doesn’t come from without. It comes from within. Inspiration comes when the writer sits down to work — and it comes whether the writer “feels” like writing or not. Tom Wolfe (*The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test, Bonfire of the Vanities*) said, “Sometimes, if things are going badly, I will force myself to write a page in half an hour. I find that can be done. I find that what I write when I force myself is generally just as good as what I write when I’m feeling inspired. It’s mainly a matter of forcing yourself to write.”⁵⁶

Successful writers don’t wait for inspiration. They know that inspiration comes from working, not from some elusive spark of genius. Octavia Butler put it this way: “Forget inspiration. Habit is more dependable. Habit will sustain you whether you’re inspired or not. Habit will help you finish and polish your stories. Inspiration won’t. Habit is persistence in practice.”⁵⁷ And Steven Pressfield observed in *The War of Art*, “This is the other secret that real artists know and wannabe writers don’t. When we sit down each day and do our work, power concentrates around us. The Muse takes note of our dedication. She approves. We have

earned favor in her sight. When we sit down and work, we become like a magnetized rod that attracts iron filings. Ideas come. Insights accrete.”⁵⁸

The Muse, of course, is a metaphor for the unconscious mind — the creative, imaginative part of us somewhere beneath the level of or conscious awareness. If we sit down to work every day on a regular basis, ready to step into that magical state of being called “in flow” or “in the zone,” then the Muse — the creative unconscious — will meet us and inspire us whenever we need ideas.

3. Never give up.

The most important factors for a successful writing career are toughness, determination, and perseverance. Yes, it’s important to know our craft, to possess good habits, and to be able to write quickly and freely. But none of these qualities can save us if we are not determined to finish strong, no matter what.

Writing is the best job in the world. It’s challenging. It’s fun. It’s emotionally and intellectually stimulating. But writing is also difficult, time-consuming work. It takes patience and perseverance to write a novel. It takes patience and perseverance to publish and market your novel (whether you are traditionally published or indie published). It takes patience and perseverance to build a writing career.

Sometimes we need patience and perseverance just to get through the scene we’re writing, or to endure the next hour of a writing session. We’re tempted to quit, to take an early break, to set aside a novel that’s not going well in favor of some glittery new idea. Sometimes, we hit a rough patch in a book or in our everyday lives and we’re tempted to give up. Resist that temptation. Press on. I promise, you’ll be glad you finished what you started.

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Many aspiring writers start dozens of stories and novels, and abandon them all. They never seem to finish anything. Often this is because they encounter a problem they don't know how to solve. Instead of figuring out the solution, they shelve that project and start something new. Don't be one of those writers. Remember: every time you face a writing problem *and solve it*, you learn and grow as a writer. But if you always give up when it gets too hard, you'll never learn and grow.

Successful writers are tough people. You can't stop them, you can't defeat them, you can't keep them from their goals, because they refuse to surrender. There's no "quit" in them. If you refuse to give up, there's a good chance you've got what it takes to succeed as a writer.

4. Beware of obsessive behavior.

Many writers defeat themselves with bad habits and self-destructive obsessions. Anything that takes time and attention away from the imaginative, creative *fun* of writing is harmful to you as a writer. Examples:

Obsessing about negative reviews. Don't worry about negative reviews; everyone gets them. A few won't hurt you, and some may even help you. Readers often consider the source, and will actually buy a book because it was trashed by a bad reviewer.

Obsessing over trolls, jerks, and morons who attack you on social media. Don't waste your time arguing with idiots. The best revenge is living well — and writing well. Nothing is more frustrating to a troll than being ignored.

Obsessing over your Amazon.com sales rank. The best way to improve your sales rank is by writing brilliantly. You know what you need to do. If you write quickly, write freely, and write brilliantly, your numbers on Amazon will take care of themselves.

Comparing yourself to other writers and envying their success. Define what success means to you, then pursue your vision for all it's worth. Be content with the fact that you are a writer, and you are living your dreams. Keep working patiently toward your goals, and celebrate every success that comes your way.

Getting caught up in online arguments or flame wars. Most of us as writers are members of at least one or two online communities. These communities can be extremely helpful if the people in those communities are mutually supportive. But beware of toxic personalities and stupid controversies that waste your time. Stay focused on your goals and don't let other people manipulate your emotions.

Obsessing over minutia in your manuscript that keeps you from moving forward. Don't edit sentence by sentence as you write. Don't obsess over punctuation and grammar as you write. Don't stop to research as you write. Stay focused, stay in flow, be productive, and be brilliant.

In an afterword to one of his mystery stories in *Puzzles of the Black Widowers*, Isaac Asimov notes that one of the tales dealt extensively with the novelty business. "You may have admired the neatness of my research into the matter," he adds, "but please don't. I am far too lazy (and far too busy writing a million other things) to waste time on research. When I need details on the novelty business, I just make them up out of my ever-fevered imagination."⁵⁹

Accurate research is more important in some genres than others. If you absolutely *must* get the historical or procedural details of your story right, then by all means, do your homework. But do it before or after you write, in your planning or rewriting stages. When you are fast-drafting and writing "in flow," don't let anything, not even fact-checking, get in your way.

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Obsessing over self-doubt and self-criticism. Don't worry about whether you have enough talent. Don't worry about what other people will think of your writing. Don't worry about whether the ideas will come or whether you can finish or not. Trust your imagination. Trust the Muse. Tell yourself, "I can do this." Then write your stories, line by line, one step at a time.

Procrastinating, and pretending that your stalling is just another form of "writing." I'll grant you, sometimes staring out of the window while imagining a scene is, indeed, writing. But all too often, we sit and procrastinate, we read or watch a movie or go shopping, and we tell ourselves, "It's all writing. It's all unconscious processing." But we're not writing at all. We're putting off the *real* work of writing, which is *writing*. Hands-on-keyboard, posterior-in-the-chair *writing*. It's okay to sit and think and imagine — that's all part of the creative process. Just don't fool yourself into thinking you're writing when you're not.

5. Expect misunderstanding.

Writing, observed business writer Carol Tice, "is lonely work, and your family and friends won't understand the particular challenges that you are grappling with."⁶⁰ There will always be people who won't understand why you write, and won't respect your writing time. This may even include your spouse, children, parents, extended family, friends, and co-workers. Even after you are making serious money as a writer, they may think of writing as your "hobby," and they may wonder why you don't have a "real job."

Non-writers don't understand what you do or why you do it. They don't understand why writing takes so much time and discipline. They get offended when you can't attend a family birthday party or help Cousin Edna move the

piano because you're on deadline. In their minds, you don't have a *real* job — you have *plenty* of free time.

You can't change their minds. I recommend you don't try. Ignore their criticism and rude comments. Stay focused on your goals.

Novelist Anne Tyler was short-listed for the Pulitzer and had won the National Book Critics Circle Award for *The Accidental Tourist* when a woman at her daughter's school asked her, "So, have you found a job yet — or are you still just writing?"⁶¹

A writer's life, said Haruki Murakami, offers very little free time, "and sometimes your relationships with other people become problematic. Some people even get mad at you, because they invite you to go somewhere or do something with them and you keep turning them down."⁶²

What's the solution? If I knew, I'd tell you. I've lost friends and angered extended family members because I had deadlines to meet. I've been misunderstood and criticized. People have gossiped behind my back, accusing me of being selfish and arrogant (I was actually desperate and needed a paycheck, but they didn't understand that).

Don't defend yourself. Don't try to live up to their expectations. Just keep doing what God created you to do. Keep writing.

6. Be in love with writing.

Do you *love* to write? Or do you have to *force* yourself to begin each writing session? In his novel *The Ghost*, Robert Harris observes:

I took the manuscript from its box and placed it on the table. . . . There wasn't a lot of room to work, but that didn't bother me. Of all human activities, writing is the one for which it is easiest to find

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excuses not to begin — the desk's too big, the desk's too small, there's too much noise, there's too much quiet, it's too hot, too cold, too early, too late. I had learned over the years to ignore them all, and simply to start.⁶³

We are writers. We've always wanted to write. Why, when it's time to write, do so many writers procrastinate, make excuses, and avoid getting to work? I don't know. But I do know this: The best motivation for writing is *love*.

Love of writing.

Love of books.

Love for our readers.

Love for our ideas.

Love for the act of creation.

Gloria Steinem once said, "I do not like to write. I like to have written." I don't get that. I love writing *far* more — *infinitely* more — than I love "having written." How can any writer not *love* to write?

Listen to the love of writing in the words of Virginia Woolf: "Writing is the profound pleasure and being read the superficial." Yes! That's it! That's the spirit of a writer who is in love with the act of creation! If you are going to be a writer, then *love* the adventure of writing — or don't write.

I believe *every* writer can learn to love the writing process. All you have to do is learn to write freely, without inhibition, without self-censoring and self-criticism. Learn to simply *have fun* writing. Learn to write *purely to please yourself*. If you are writing well, writing quickly, writing "in the zone," writing under the influence of the Muse, you'll love it. You'll be eager and excited, and grateful you have the pleasure and privilege of being a writer. You'll never procrastinate again.

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I think that's what Ray Bradbury meant when he said that *love* is the key to being a writer. "Fall in love and stay in love," he said. "Write only what you love, and love what you write. The key word is *love*. You have to get up in the morning and write something you love, something to live for."⁶⁴

So if you're procrastinating and avoiding the work of writing, ask yourself, "Am I in love with writing? Do I love the process of writing? Do I live for that thrilling surge of creative energy? Am I eager to bring my beloved characters to life through words alone?" If the answer is yes, then jettison your excuses and *write* — joyously and lovingly.

It doesn't matter whether you scribble on a yellow legal pad, type at a keyboard, or dictate into a microphone, tell yourself, "I love this! I love to write! I can't wait to write!" And as you fill your thoughts with the love of writing, something will stir within your unconscious mind. Inspiration, images, scenes, and words will come. Sparks of brilliance will leap like a fountain from your unconscious mind, shoot out from your fingertips, and light up your screen.

And you will know, as you've never known it before, that you are a *writer*.

P.S.

WHEN YOU BECOME SUCCESSFUL, when you achieve your dreams and reap your rewards (as I'm sure you will), please drop me a note at my website. I'd enjoy celebrating your success with you.

All I ask is that you enjoy your success with a deep sense of humility. Use your success and influence to serve God and serve others. Take the lessons you've learned through your writing career, and pass them along to some younger version of yourself, to some aspiring, eager writer.

Write quickly. Write freely. Be brilliant, my friend.
God bless and inspire you on your journey.

—JIM DENNEY

Jim Denney

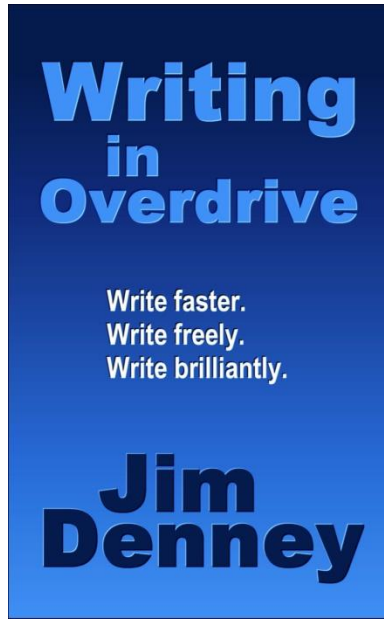
**Excerpts from Books
by Jim Denney**

A Writer's Superpower

From

WRITING IN OVERDRIVE

Write Faster. Write Freely. Write Brilliantly



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1

Write Fast, Be Brilliant

“Infatuated, half through conceit, half through love of my art, I achieve the impossible working as no one else ever works.”

— Alexandre Dumas, *père*

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Ray Bradbury used to prowl the library in search of inspiration. He'd stroll through the stacks, pull random books from the shelves, and read a few lines of poetry, sample a few paragraphs of fiction — and something would click. Soon he'd be scribbling story ideas on any piece of paper he could find.

Once, while rummaging for inspiration at UCLA's Powell Library, he heard the clacking of typewriter keys in the library basement. He followed the sound and discovered a typing room filled with shiny new typewriters, each with a coin-operated timer. The typewriters could be rented for ten cents per half hour.

So, one day in 1950, Bradbury descended into the library basement with a pocketful of dimes and began writing an expanded version of his 1947 short story, "Bright Phoenix." Over the next nine days, he pounded out a 25,000-word novella called "The Fireman." He averaged about five and a half typing hours per day, totaling 49 hours of typewriter time at a cost of about \$9.80 in dimes. His daily output averaged about 2,800 words. "It was a passionate and exciting time for me," he recalled in an article for *UCLA Magazine*. "Imagine what it was like to be writing a book about book burning and doing it in a library where the passions of all those authors, living and dead, surrounded me."¹

Bradbury's agent, Don Congdon, tried to sell "The Fireman" to such upscale publications as *Esquire* and *Harper's*. In the end, the only taker was Horace Gold's *Galaxy* science fiction magazine — certainly a fine publication, but not as prestigious as Bradbury had hoped. *Galaxy* paid him \$300 for the novella, and it was published in the February 1951 issue.

Two years later, publisher Ian Ballantine urged Bradbury to rewrite "The Fireman" and expand it into a novel.

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In January 1953, Bradbury contracted with Ballantine to deliver a 50,000-word version of “The Fireman,” with a title to be determined later. The deadline was March 15, 1953 — but Bradbury was afflicted with writer’s block, and missed the deadline. Ballantine gave him an extension to April 15, but that date came and went. Bradbury was so blocked that he hadn’t written a word.

Ballantine gave Bradbury one more extension to June 15 — his last chance. After procrastinating through May, Bradbury knew he needed to *force* himself to write. He decided to do again what had worked before. So, in early June 1953, he returned to the basement of the UCLA library, his pockets jingling with dimes.

As Jonathan Eller recounts in *Becoming Ray Bradbury*, the author’s second stint in the library basement “mirrored his 1951 creation of the original novella” by also lasting nine days and producing an additional 25,000 words. Bradbury gave a new title to the 50,000-word version of “The Fireman,” calling it *Fahrenheit 451*, after the ignition-point of book paper.²

Bradbury enjoyed the pressure of having to rent his typing machine by the half hour, because it forced him to write quickly and remain in a creative flow. If his writing process ever slowed down, it meant he was thinking too much. The constant pressure of the typewriter meter enabled him to punch his way through writer’s block and create one of the great dystopian novels of our time.

“I am a passionate, not intellectual, writer,” he later observed, “which means my characters must plunge ahead of me to live the story. If my intellect caught up with them too swiftly, the whole adventure might mire down in self-doubt and endless mind play.”³

Since its initial publication in 1953, *Fahrenheit 451* has sold more than 10 million copies and has been translated

into 33 languages. The book is assigned reading for millions of high school and college students, and is recognized as a masterpiece of American literature. This masterpiece was written in two intense nine-day writing stints, the first one in 1951, the second in 1953.

On numerous occasions, Bradbury has observed that great writing is fast writing. In a 1987 essay, he wrote, “In quickness is truth. . . . The more swiftly you write, the more honest you are. In hesitation is thought. In delay comes the effort for a style, instead of leaping upon truth which is the only style worth deadfalling or tiger-trapping.”⁴

The moral to the story of Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*: If you want to write brilliantly, write quickly.

The opinions of literary mossbacks

At this point, let me issue a caveat: I’m not going to give you any practical writing tips in this first chapter. If you are really itching to get to the practical steps for writing quickly, you have my permission to skip the rest of Chapter 1 and go straight to Chapter 2. My feelings won’t be hurt. In fact, I probably won’t even know.

But permit me to point out that I *did* write this chapter for a reason. I wrote it because a lot of people don’t believe me when I say that writing faster actually *improves* the quality, power, intensity, honesty, cohesion, structural integrity, and emotional appeal of your writing.

I have an acquaintance, a multi-published novelist, who insists that “writing quickly” means writing poorly, sloppily, and lazily. He is convinced that the only *good* writing is slow, plodding, meticulous writing — and he dismisses all arguments to the contrary.

To be sure, there are some truly great writers who write with painstaking slowness, polishing each sentence to perfection before proceeding to the next. Kurt Vonnegut,

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Dean Koontz, Samuel R. Delany, and George R. R. Martin are exemplars of this approach. Writing slowly definitely works for some writers. If it works for you, who am I to tell you to change? I'm not saying that writing in overdrive is the only way to write. Every writer must decide which techniques and approaches work best for him or her.

Where my slow-writing friend and I part company is that he stubbornly asserts that fast, uninhibited writing produces nothing but dreck. "Only hacks write fast," he once said. Why does he say that? Because he's a dogmatic old fossil who believes there's only one right way to do anything — *his way*.

However he chooses to write is fine with me. He has won awards with his plodding, analytical approach to writing. I've read his work, and it doesn't appeal to me, but he has his own following of fans, so his approach works for him. That's fine. He's just wrong in stubbornly insisting that the *only* good writing is glacially slow writing.

If you are a plodding, slow-writing dogmatist like my novelist friend, then I'm sorry, this book isn't for you. It won't help you. You wasted the modest amount of money you paid for it. And no, I won't give you your money back.

But if you are an open-minded, creative, unrepressed individual with reasonably good mental health, you're probably going to love this book. It's going to help you immensely. It's going to make you enormously more productive than you ever dreamed possible. And you'll be amazed at how beautifully and brilliantly you write as a result.

Let's face it — there are a lot of dogmatists in the world who steadfastly refuse to acknowledge that writing faster means writing brilliantly. One writer who has dealt with this kind of prejudice from colleagues and critics is novelist Fay Weldon. Over a career stretching from 1967 to the

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present, she has written thirty-six novels, plus numerous screenplays, teleplays, stage plays, and other works — and she was awarded the Order of the British Empire for her achievements. She writes quickly — but she doesn't like to admit it. "If you say you write books quickly," she laments, "nobody believes that you are serious."⁵

If you worry about being taken seriously as a writer, then you can certainly talk about all the years you have labored over your manuscript. You don't have to tell anyone that you produced your magnum opus in a matter of weeks or months. It'll be our secret.

Personally, I couldn't care less about the narrow-minded opinions of literary mossbacks. The writers I most admire, the writers whose stories and characters and metaphors ring true to me, are overwhelmingly those who write quickly, passionately, in a state of creative flow.

Take, for example, John Steinbeck. Fueled by moral outrage at the mistreatment of migrant farm workers during the Great Depression, he wrote about people he had met in the San Joaquin Valley labor camps. From June through October 1938, he produced the first draft of a 500-page novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. It became the best-selling novel of 1939 and an Oscar-nominated film in 1940. The book was awarded the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize, and helped Steinbeck garner the 1962 Nobel Prize for Literature. Today, *The Grapes of Wrath* is required reading in high schools and universities across the nation. And it was first-drafted in a mere five months.

Do you like a good mystery? Agatha Christie produced seventy-two novels and a number of short story collections and plays. A fast writer from the outset, she wrote her debut novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, in just two weeks. The book was praised by *The Times Literary Supplement* of London and the *New York Times Book Review*.

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She became the best-selling novelist of all time, with roughly 4 billion copies of her works in print.

Ed McBain was born Salvatore Lombino, but he also wrote under the name Evan Hunter and half a dozen other pen names. He produced so many works in so many genres under so many pseudonyms that even the Library of Congress doesn't have an exact count of his works. His 1954 novel *The Blackboard Jungle* (written under the Evan Hunter pen name) was a landmark examination of the social problem of juvenile delinquency. He also wrote the screenplay for Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*. McBain is acclaimed for his 87th Precinct series of police procedural novels — more than sixty titles in all, from *Cop Hater* in 1956 to *Fiddlers* in 2005. Each of the 87th Precinct novels was written in about a month.

Award-winning crime writer John Creasey wrote more than six hundred novels under assorted pseudonyms. In 1939 — his most productive year — he published *thirty-eight novels*. Asked about his daily word quota, he said, "Between six and seven thousand." On a good day, he added, he could reach his quota in three hours, and then he'd take the rest of the day off. At other times, he might spend the entire day in pursuit of his word-count goal. But he never called it a day until he had produced the required number of words.

Romance novelist Barbara Cartland was one of the most prolific authors of the twentieth century, having produced more than seven hundred books with estimated sales of over a billion. During her most prolific year, 1983, she wrote twenty-three novels.

Charles Dickens was arguably the greatest novelist in the English language — and one of the most prolific. At the height of his popularity, Dickens' novels were a cultural phenomenon, much like the Harry Potter craze in our own

time. Published in serial installments, Dickens' works were followed by audiences of devoted fans in Great Britain and the United States.

In 1841, readers on both sides of the Atlantic hung on the fate of Dickens' heroine, Little Nell, in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. As the ship carrying copies of the final installment approached the dock in New York City, thousands lined the wharf and shouted to the ship's crew, "Does Little Nell die?"

Dickens published twenty-three novels and numerous short stories from 1836 until his death in 1870, but his output was far greater than those numbers suggest. Many of his novels were as long as four or five popular novels today. *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House*, and *Dombey and Son* were each more than 350,000 words long. During his thirty-four-year career, Dickens produced more than six million published words — an average of 175,000 words per year, working in longhand, without a computer.

If you want to join the ranks of writers who write freely, quickly, and brilliantly, I think you're going to like this book. The principles I'm about to share with you are going to change the way you write.

Write fast enough to stay ahead of the doubts

Stephen King, in *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, talked about his own need for speed as a writer. He set a daily goal of ten pages per day, or about 2,000 words. This adds up to about 180,000 words over three months — and three months, he said, was the longest anyone should spend on the first draft of a novel. Any longer than that, and the story goes stale in the writer's imagination. "Only under dire circumstances," he observed, "do I allow myself to shut down before I get my 2,000 words."⁶

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A pace of 2,000 words per day is a fairly fast clip — but at times King has pushed himself to write much faster than that. Between 1977 and 1982, he produced four novels under the pseudonym “Richard Bachman.” The last of the four Bachman novels was a dystopian science fiction novel, *The Running Man*. Even without the Stephen King byline, the book quickly became a bestseller, and was made into a 1987 movie starring Arnold Schwarzenegger. And get this: King wrote *The Running Man* in *one week*.

Stephen King once described the euphoric sensation of being in a creative flow and writing quickly:

With the door shut, downloading what's in my head directly to the page, I write as fast as I can and still remain comfortable. Writing fiction, especially a long work of fiction, can be a difficult, lonely job. It's like crossing the Atlantic Ocean in a bathtub. There is plenty of opportunity for self-doubt. If I write rapidly, putting down my story exactly as it comes into my mind, only looking back to check the names of my characters and the relevant parts of their back stories, I find that I can keep up with my original enthusiasm and at the same time outrun the self-doubt that's always waiting to settle in.⁷

The faster you write, the more confidently you write. You must write fast enough to stay ahead of the doubts. When you write quickly, when you enter that inspired state of creative flow, you'll find yourself writing brilliantly — and you'll be enjoying the journey.

Noir crime novelist Raymond Chandler described his creative process in a 1945 interview with Irving Wallace. Chandler's fast-writing approach, he said, was a quest for quality:

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I work very fast but I work for the waste basket. I never revise phrase by phrase and line by line. Instead I rewrite things I don't like [after completing the first draft]. . . . I've written 5,000 words at one sitting. . . . The faster I write, the better my output. If I'm going slow, I'm in trouble. It means I'm pushing the words instead of being pulled by them.⁸

Ray Bradbury, in his 1990 Hollywood mystery *A Graveyard for Lunatics*, writes a scene in which the unnamed narrator-protagonist (a fictionalized version of Bradbury himself) hands a movie script to Fritz the movie director. The shocked director takes the script, gulps his glass of wine, and can't believe the writer has produced so many pages in less than a day.

"Cut the comedy!" Fritz says. "You couldn't have written that in a few hours!"

"Sorry," the narrator replies. "Only the fast stuff is good. Slow down, you think what you're doing and it gets bad."⁹

By the way, this is not just an invented scene in a Bradbury novel. This is almost a word-for-word account of a conversation between Bradbury and director John Houston when Bradbury completed the final pages of his script for the motion picture *Moby Dick*.

This scene captures the essence of Bradbury's philosophy of writing, and it's the way he approached every story, novel, and screenplay he ever wrote. As he told *Writer's Digest* in a February 1976 interview, "The only good writing is intuitive writing. It would be a big bore if you knew where it was going. It has to be exciting, instantaneous and it has to be a surprise. Then it all comes blurting out and it's beautiful."¹⁰

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Bradbury believed in writing quickly, intuitively, explosively, and passionately. So do I. And so will you.

Let your words pull you. Let your creativity and confidence flow through you. Write brilliantly. Write fast. In the coming pages, I'll show you how.

Notes

1. Ray Bradbury, "First Spark: Ray Bradbury Turns 90; The Universe and UCLA Celebrate," *UCLA Magazine*, August 2010, <http://www.spotlight.ucla.edu/ray-bradbury/hot-topic/>.

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3. Sam Weller, *The Bradbury Chronicles* (New York: Morrow, 2005), 205.

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5. Bryony Gordon, "Fay Weldon: 'It's Easier to Pick up Your Husband's Socks and Clean the Loo,'" *The Telegraph*, August 26, 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/authorinterviews/6089253/Fay-Weldon-Its-easier-to-pick-up-your-husbands-socks-and-clean-the-loo.html>.

6. Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (10th Anniversary Edition: New York: Pocket Books, 2000), 149.

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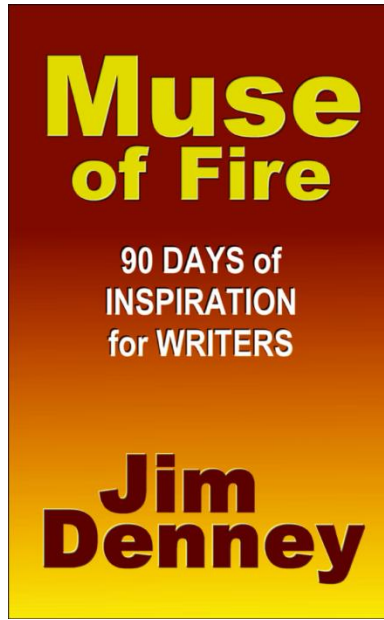
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10. Zachary Petit, "21 Ray Bradbury Quotes: Your Moment of Friday Writing Zen," *WritersDigest.com*, February 17, 2012, <http://www.writersdigest.com/editor-blogs/there-are-no-rules/21-ray-bradbury-quotes-your-moment-of-friday-writing-zen>.

Jim Denney

From
MUSE OF FIRE
90 Days of Inspiration for Writers



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Reading No. 1
A Prayer for the Blank Page

“Blank pages inspire me with terror.”

— Margaret Atwood

“The scariest moment,” warned frightmaster Stephen King, “is always just before you start.” And John Steinbeck

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once confessed in his journal, “I suffer as always from the fear of putting down the first line. It is amazing the terrors, the magics, the prayers, the straightening shyness that assails one.”¹

Terror of the blank page is as old as literature itself. In 1295, Dante Alighieri wrote in *Vita Nuova* (*The New Life*), “It seemed to me that I had undertaken a theme too lofty for myself, so that I did not dare to begin writing, and I remained for several days with the desire to write and the fear of beginning.”²

Anne Lamott, in *Bird by Bird*, reveals her solution to the fear of the blank page: Prayer. She writes, “I sit for a moment and then say a small prayer — ‘Please help me get out of the way so I can write what wants to be written.’ Sometimes ritual quiets the racket. Try it.”³

Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874-1936) was famed for his theological essays and his mystery tales featuring the priest-detective Father Brown. Chesterton approached his writing with an attitude of prayer. He once wrote:

You say grace before meals.
All right.
But I say grace before the concert and the opera,
And grace before the play and pantomime,
And grace before I open a book,
And grace before sketching, painting,
Swimming, fencing, boxing,
Walking, playing, dancing
And grace before I dip the pen in the ink.⁴

What should *you* pray for? Pray for inspiration. Pray for a mind that is open and receptive to new ideas. Pray for a heart that is sensitive to the hurts and hopes of your readers. (I prayed for you — my reader — as I was writing these words.)

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Pray for wisdom and courage to write truthfully. Pray for an opening line. Pray for the determination to continue writing, even if the opening line doesn't come. Pray for the courage to begin. Then, after you have prayed — *begin*.

A story is told about Sir Winston Churchill, who was not only England's greatest prime minister, but also an author and artist. I can't vouch for the authenticity of the anecdote, but the point it makes is unimpeachably true.

Churchill was in his garden, confronting an easel and a blank canvas — and he found himself blocked and unable to begin painting. He was afraid to put the first brushstroke on the virgin canvas. He would daub his brush with paint — raise it — pause — then lower the brush without leaving a mark.

A neighbor lady watched Churchill go through these motions several times. Finally, in exasperation, she strode into his garden, took the brush from his hand, and flung a splotch of paint onto the canvas.

“Now, paint!” she said.

And Churchill began to paint.

As you face the blank page of your story or novel, don't let the virgin whiteness of the screen or page intimidate you. Don't be afraid to make your mark. Breathe a prayer to the Author of Creation, the Source of Creativity. Ask for inspiration. Then fling some words onto the blankness. Write! Create!

Once you've begun, don't stop. Keep swimming in the creative flow.

Let the words you write, the work you perform, be God's answer to your own prayer.

“Almighty God, bestow upon us the meaning of words, the light of understanding, the nobility of diction, and the

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faith of the true nature. And grant that what we believe, we may also speak.”

— Hilary of Poitiers (A.D. 315-368)

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Reading No. 2 **Write Now!**

“The pages are still blank, but there is a miraculous feeling of the words being there, written in invisible ink and clamoring to become visible.”

— Vladimir Nabokov

I’ve found that the best way to jump-start my writing day is to soak up writing wisdom from people who have experienced success along the way. The insights of other writers not only instruct us, but encourage us. We feel less alone when we know that great writers — from Steinbeck and Hemingway to Stephen King and J.K. Rowling — have experienced the same struggles and doubts we face.

So here’s some writerly wisdom to charge you up and speed you on your way . . .

“Beginning a novel is always hard. It feels like going nowhere. I always have to write at least a hundred pages that go into the trashcan before it finally begins to work. It’s discouraging, but necessary to write those pages. I try to consider them pages minus-one-hundred to zero of the novel.”

— Novelist and poet Barbara Kingsolver⁵

“If you haven’t got an idea, start a story anyway. You can always throw it away, and maybe by the time you get to the fourth page you will have an idea, and you’ll only have to throw away the first three pages.”

— Pulp fiction writer William Campbell Gault⁶

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“If you’re going to be a writer, the first essential is just to write. Do not wait for an idea. Start writing something and the ideas will come. You have to turn the faucet on before the water starts to flow.”

— Frontier novelist Louis L’Amour⁷

“The secret of getting ahead is getting started.”

— Anonymous

Often misattributed to Mark Twain or Agatha Christie.

“Write a lot. And finish what you write. Don’t join writer’s clubs and go sit around having coffee reading pieces of your manuscript to people. Write it. Finish it. I set those rules up years ago, and nothing’s changed.”

— SF writer Jerry Pournelle⁸

“What goals would you be setting for yourself if you knew you could not fail?”

— Religious author Robert H. Schuller⁹

“I hope that in this year to come, you make mistakes. Because if you are making mistakes, then you are making new things, trying new things, learning, living, pushing yourself, changing yourself, changing your world. You’re doing things you’ve never done before, and more importantly, you’re Doing Something. . . .

“Make glorious, amazing mistakes. Make mistakes nobody’s ever made before. Don’t freeze, don’t stop, don’t worry that it isn’t good enough, or it isn’t perfect, whatever it is: art, or love, or work, or family, or life.

“Whatever it is you’re scared of doing, Do it.”

— Fantasy novelist Neil Gaiman¹⁰

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“You might never fail on the scale I did, but some failure in life is inevitable. It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all — in which case, you fail by default.

“Failure gave me an inner security that I had never attained by passing examinations. Failure taught me things about myself that I could have learned no other way.”

— Fantasy novelist J. K. Rowling¹¹

“If you’re afraid you can’t write, the answer is to write. Every sentence you construct adds weight to the balance pan. If you’re afraid of what other people will think of your efforts, don’t show them until you write your way beyond your fear. If writing a book is impossible, write a chapter. If writing a chapter is impossible, write a page. If writing a page is impossible, write a paragraph. If writing a paragraph is impossible, write a sentence. If writing even a sentence is impossible, write a word and teach yourself everything there is to know about that word and then write another, connected word and see where their connection leads. A page a day is a book a year.”

— Pulitzer-winning writer Richard Rhodes¹²

“So okay — there you are in your room with the shade down and the door shut and the plug pulled out of the base of the telephone. You’ve blown up your TV and committed yourself to a thousand words a day, come hell or high water. Now comes the big question: What are you going to write about? And the equally big answer: Anything you damn well want.”

— Horror writer Stephen King¹³

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“Of all human activities, writing is the one for which it is easiest to find excuses not to begin — the desk’s too big, the desk’s too small, there’s too much noise, there’s too much quiet, it’s too hot, too cold, too early, too late. I had learned over the years to ignore them all, and simply to start.”

— Historical novelist Robert Harris¹⁴

“Stop aspiring and start writing. If you’re writing, you’re a writer. . . . Write like you’re clinging to the edge of a cliff, white knuckles, on your last breath, and you’ve got just one last thing to say, like you’re a bird flying over us and you can see everything, and please, for God’s sake, tell us something that will save us from ourselves. Take a deep breath and tell us your deepest, darkest secret, so we can wipe our brow and know that we’re not alone.”

— Screenwriter-novelist Alan Watt¹⁵

“I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of hunger for life that gnaws in us all.”

— Fiction and non-fiction writer Richard Wright¹⁶

Charged up? Ready to write? Excellent! Now *write* . . . write *now!*

“If you can quit, then quit. If you can’t quit, you’re a writer.”

— R.A. Salvatore

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Reading No. 3 **O For a Muse of Fire!**

“I’m not in control of my Muse. My Muse does all the work.”

— Ray Bradbury

Ray Bradbury used “the Muse” as a metaphor for the unconscious mind. In *Zen in the Art of Writing*, he calls the Muse “that most terrified of all the virgins. She starts if she hears a sound, pales if you ask her questions, spins and vanishes if you disturb her dress.” To keep the Muse healthy and happy, Bradbury says, we must feed her: “sounds, sights, smells, tastes, and textures of people, animals, landscapes, events, large and small. . . . I have fed my Muse on equal parts of trash and treasure.”¹⁷

The Muse, the personification of the unconscious source of creative inspiration, derives from the Greek goddesses of inspiration, the Muses. The Greeks identified various Muses with specific creative arts: Calliope with her writing tablet was the Muse of epic poetry; Erato with her lyre was the Muse of love poetry; Melpomene with her tragic mask was the Muse of drama; Thalia with her comic mask was the comedic Muse; and so forth.

Homer, in Book I of *The Odyssey*, wrote, “Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns / driven time and again off course, once he had plundered / the hallowed heights of Troy.”

In the prologue to *Henry V*, Shakespeare implores the Muse, the Goddess of Creativity, to give him the ability to adequately convey both the horror and epic spectacle of the Battle of Agincourt:

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O for a Muse of Fire, that would ascend
The brightest heaven of invention,
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!

This is what you and I need as writers — a Muse of Fire, a Muse to inspire us to write our own St Crispin's Day Speech, our own sonnets, histories, tragedies, comedies, and romances. If Shakespeare needed a Muse of Fire, how much more do we!

Some of us need a swift kick from the Muse to get us seated in front of our keyboards, ready to create. Australian mystery writer Kerry Greenwood imagines her Muse to be “an old woman with a tight bun and spectacles poking me in the middle of the back and growling, ‘Wake up and write the book!’ “

Thrill-master Harlan Coben claims to be haunted by a particularly unappealing Muse: “The Muse is not an angelic voice that sits on your shoulder and sings sweetly. The Muse is the most annoying whine. The Muse isn't hard to find, just hard to like — she follows you everywhere, tapping you on the shoulder, demanding that you stop doing whatever else you might be doing and pay attention to her.”¹⁸ (Between you and me, I'm glad I don't have Harlan Coben's Muse.)

Fantasy and science fiction writer Piers Anthony pictures his Muse as a guardian angel who defends him against *creatus interruptus*: “One reason I don't suffer writer's block is that I don't wait on the Muse. I summon her at need.”

To summon your Muse, you don't need to sacrifice a goat or burn incense. Simply show up on time for your daily appointment with her, and she'll almost always meet you there. As German novelist Peter Prange said, “I step into

my office every day at nine sharp, open the window and politely ask the Muse to enter and kiss me. . . . She can never claim that she hasn't found me waiting in the right place."¹⁹

Elizabeth Gilbert, author of *Eat, Pray, Love*, reminds us that neither the writer nor the Muse is in complete control of the creative process. It is a collaboration. "You're not the puppet of the Muse," she says, "but you're not its master, either. It's a relationship, it's a conversation."²⁰

Invite the Muse of Fire. Invoke her blessing on your work. Her kiss will burn you. Her touch will set you ablaze with white-hot inspiration.

To write freely and brilliantly, let go of your fears and inhibitions. Dance in the fire with the Muse.

"The Muse whispers to you when she chooses, and you can't tell her to come back later, because you quickly learn in this business that she might not come back at all."

— Terry Brooks

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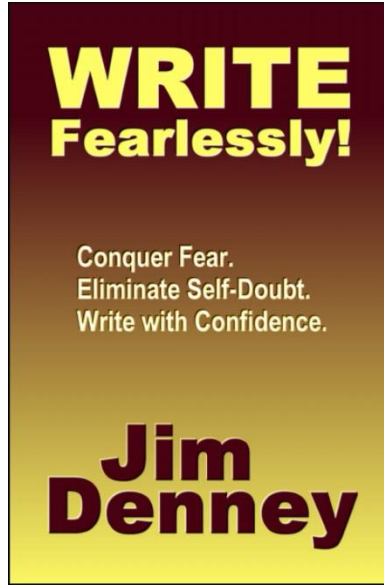
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Jim Denney

From
WRITE FEARLESSLY!
Conquer Fear. Eliminate Self-Doubt.
Write with Confidence.



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Fear No. 1
“I’m Afraid I Have No Talent”

Anne Sexton was the prototype of the confessional poet. She wrote candidly about such themes as sexuality, abortion, addiction, and incest. She was also one of the most honored poets in America, winning the Pulitzer Prize in

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1967, less than a dozen years after writing her first sonnet. Yet her fear nearly kept her from becoming a poet.

Diagnosed as bipolar when she was in her early twenties, Sexton was subject to depression and anxiety throughout her life. Her psychiatrist encouraged her to write poetry as a way of venting her feelings. When Sexton learned of an upcoming workshop conducted by the renowned poet John Holmes, she desperately wanted to attend — yet the thought of taking part in the workshop also terrified her. She feared exposing her poems to critiques from Holmes and from fellow students.

Unable to bring herself to register for the workshop, Anne Sexton asked a friend to register for her and to go with her to the first session. Soon after attending the workshop, Sexton began selling poems to some of the top magazines in the country, including *Harper's*, *The New Yorker*, and *Saturday Review*. She quickly became one of the most widely acclaimed poets in the world. But none of this acclaim would have come her way if she had not learned to master her fear.

The fear that afflicted Anne Sexton is common to most writers, though it is often expressed in different ways: “I’m afraid of letting other people read and critique my work,” or, “I’m afraid I don’t have what it takes to be a published author,” or, “I’m afraid I have no talent.” This fear is often referred to simply as *self-doubt*.

This fear afflicts writers on an epidemic scale. Self-doubt causes more suffering to writers than eyestrain, carpal tunnel syndrome, and writer’s block combined. “The worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt,” Sylvia Plath wrote in her journal during her student days at Smith College.

Self-doubt is the nagging, cruel voice in your head that says, “Why do you waste so many hours alone at this keyboard? You can’t do this. No one will ever read what you

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write. You'll never be a published author. You're just fooling yourself."

Does this sound familiar? Am I describing the fear that holds *you* back? Are you afraid of finding out you don't have the talent to be a writer? Are you afraid of having your work seen and judged by others?

The voice of self-doubt can keep you from taking the risk of writing. And the tragic, ironic truth is that when you avoid the risk of writing, you risk everything. You risk your dreams. You risk your future. You risk the rewards of a lifetime. You risk your one and only irreplaceable self. As Erica Jong, author of *Witches*, once admitted:

I went for years not finishing anything. Because, of course, when you finish something you can be judged. My poems used to go through 360 drafts. I had columns which were rewritten so many times that I suspect it was just a way of avoiding sending them out. . . . When I look at some of those drafts, I realize that beyond a certain point I wasn't improving anything. I was obsessing. I was afraid to take risks.¹

Speaking through one of her characters in her novel *How to Save Your Own Life*, Jong warns that when we allow fear to paralyze us, we risk throwing everything away. "The risk is your life," she wrote. "Wasting it, I mean. It's a pretty big risk. . . . And the trouble is, if you don't risk anything, you risk even *more*. Life doesn't leave that many choices. It's really very harsh."²

How do you conquer the fear that you're not good enough? *You write*. You do the work. Even if you don't believe in yourself, even if you are fearful, even if you think

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your writing is so wretched that even your own mother would give it a one-star review on Amazon.com, you *write*.

Novelist Ayn Rand said that writers must adopt a mindset of relentless professionalism, regardless of self-doubts, in order to continue writing:

The secret of writing is to be professional about it. You can be professional before you publish anything — *if* you approach writing as a job. If you apply to writing the same standards and methods that people regularly apply to other professions, you will take a lot of weight off your subconscious and increase your productive capacity.

If you do not regard writing as a job, self-doubt will necessarily enter your mind, and you will be paralyzed. You will be putting yourself on trial every time you attempt to write. . . . It will be a miracle if you ever connect two sentences. . . .

I regard the piece of paper as my employer. I have to fill that piece of paper. How I feel — whether it is difficult or not, whether I am stuck or not — is irrelevant. It is as irrelevant as it would be if I were an employee of Hank Rearden [the ruthless industrialist in her novel *Atlas Shrugged*]. He would not tolerate it if I told him, “I can’t work today because I have self-doubt” or “I have a self-esteem crisis.” Yet that is what most people do, in effect, when it comes to writing.³

One of the worst side-effects of fear is the loneliness it inflicts on us. We think we’re the only ones who feel these fears. We picture our favorite authors, our literary heroes, the ones who make writing look so easy and effortless, and

we think, “I wish I was fearless like him,” or, “I wish I had her courage and self-confidence.”

If you’ve ever had such thoughts, I have news for you. *All* writers experience self-doubt. Some manage to overcome their insecurities over time, but many extremely successful, multi-published authors wrestle with fear and self-doubt throughout their careers.

Detective fiction author Sara Paretsky is the creator of the hard-drinking, opera-loving woman private investigator V. I. Warshawski. Paretsky also co-founded Sisters in Crime and was named the 2011 Grand Master by Mystery Writers of America. With more than a dozen novels in print, you’d think she’d have nothing to fear as a writer, yet she once confessed, “Sometimes I panic and think I can’t really write.”

All writers, without exception, struggle with self-doubt. The great writers, the successful writers, are the ones who listen to their courage, not their doubts. They accept their fear, and keep writing anyway.

Unfortunately, many talented writers allow their fears to silence them. They possess a capacity for greatness, but can’t bring themselves to express their dreams on the page. As the nineteenth-century English writer Sydney Smith observed, “A great deal of talent is lost to the world for want of a little courage.” Don’t let your talent be lost to the world. Write fearlessly by applying these principles:

1. Write fast enough to stay ahead of your doubts.

Horror master Stephen King observed, “Writing fiction, especially a long work of fiction, can be a difficult, lonely job. It’s like crossing the Atlantic Ocean in a bathtub. There is plenty of opportunity for self-doubt.” King’s solution: *Write quickly*. He explains:

With the door shut, downloading what's in my head directly to the page, I write as fast as I can and still remain comfortable. . . . If I write rapidly, putting down my story exactly as it comes into my mind . . . I find that I can keep up with my original enthusiasm and at the same time outrun the self-doubt that's always waiting to settle in.⁴

Detective fiction writer Raymond Chandler put it this way: "The faster I write the better my output. If I'm going slow, I'm in trouble. It means I'm pushing the words instead of being pulled by them."

So the first step in eliminating self-doubt is to write fast enough to stay ahead of your doubts. Don't stop to edit, fact-check, or dawdle lazily over your page. If you pause for even a moment, your doubts may catch up to you. Don't hesitate, don't look back — keep writing! And write quickly.

2. Put an end to perfectionism

Some writers have an obsessive-compulsive need to polish and perfect each sentence before moving on to the next. All obsessive-compulsive perfectionist tendencies are rooted in fear. Perfectionists fear that someone might see one of their first-draft sentences and judge them for their imperfection. They are unable to simply write and have fun with words. They are tormented by the obsessive, dysfunctional demands of their perfectionism.

They type a sentence — and immediately begin editing that sentence. They fuss over it and fiddle with it until they're sure it's perfect. Then, reluctantly, they type another sentence, and they edit that. Another sentence, another edit. And after an incredibly long time, they have assembled row upon row of neat little sentences, each one individually sculpted and painstakingly perfected.

But as you read through those sentences, there is no flow to them. The writing is passionless, stiff, and self-conscious. The words are lifeless and just lie there on the page without any sense of rhythm and exhilaration. Why? Because when you write from your fear and your obsessive-compulsive perfectionism, you are writing from your critical and analytical intellect, not from your uninhibited imagination, your Muse, your soul.

If you want to write brilliantly, you must put an end to perfectionism. You must shed your obsessive-compulsive urge to clean up after each sentence. Give yourself permission to make a beautiful, creative, uninhibited mess — and you'll write brilliantly, passionately, and fearlessly. Anne Lamott put it this way in *Bird by Bird*:

Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor. . . . It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life. . . . Perfectionism is based on the obsessive belief that if you run carefully enough, hitting each stepping-stone just right, you won't have to die. The truth is that you will die anyway. . . .

Perfectionism will ruin your writing, blocking inventiveness and playfulness. . . . Perfectionism means that you try desperately not to leave so much mess to clean up. But clutter and mess show us that life is being lived. Clutter is wonderfully fertile ground.⁵

So loosen up! Have fun! Give yourself permission to write badly. Play with your words like a child playing with her Cheerios. Write a fast, messy, exuberant first draft. Sure, it will be filled with typos and grammatical errors and bad sentences — but you'll clean it all up in rewrite. The most important task of writing in first draft is to

capture lightning on the page, to be passionate and joyfully imperfect.

Giving yourself permission to write badly is one of the keys to writing brilliantly and fearlessly.

3. Don't beat yourself up or talk yourself down.

Be your own best encourager. Keep telling yourself, "I can do this." Don't get a swelled head. Don't get down on yourself. Keep an even keel.

Gail Carson Levine writes young adult fantasy novels such as *Ella Enchanted*, which received a Newbery Honor in 1998. She is noted for retelling classic fairy tales for today's readers. "Do not beat up on yourself," she says. "Do not criticize your writing as lousy, inadequate, stupid, or any of the evil epithets that you are used to heaping on yourself. Such self-bashing is never useful. If you indulge in it, your writing doesn't stand a chance. So when your mind turns on you, turn it back, stamp it down, shut it up, and keep writing."⁶

Freelance fiction editor and novel doctor Stephen Parolini has worked with some of the top novelists in the business, including Ted Dekker, Kristen Heitzmann, and Tosca Lee. He observes: "Writers are notorious self-talkers. We have to be. All of our employees live in our head. Self-talk is our way of motivating them to do their jobs. But not all our self-talk is helping. . . . Negativity (and also just plain wrongful thinking) leaves a residue that can poison your writing life."

Parolini notes that even some of what we might call "positive" self-talk can actually have a negative impact on our writing. Those who tell themselves, "I'm going to write a bestseller" or "I'm going to be the next J.K. Rowling" are setting themselves up for disappointment and depression

if they fail to achieve that lofty goal. Instead, Parolini says, tell yourself, “I’m going to write the best damn book I can.”

Avoid extreme self-talk, Parolini says, such as “I’m brilliant” or “I suck as a writer.” Instead, tell yourself, “I have a long way to go as a writer.” Every writer has much to learn. As Hemingway once said, “We are all apprentices in a craft where no one ever becomes a master.”

Finally, Parolini warns that we should not say, “I’m ten times a better writer than [insert bestselling author here].” Such a statement, he says, is a “dangerous motivator.” It might propel you for a while, but it doesn’t produce long-term healthy results. If you were to say such words out loud in front of other people, they’d think you are smug, delusional, and narcissistic. And if you never achieve the acclaim and sales figures of [insert bestselling author here], you set yourself up for disappointment and bitterness.

Instead of comparing ourselves to other writers, Parolini says, we should simply say, “I am a writer.” He concludes: “Those four words are magic. Say them often. . . . ‘I am a writer.’ Say it again. ‘I am a writer.’ Yes. You are. So write.”⁷

4. Write daily, whether you feel like it or not.

John Steinbeck battled self-doubt while writing *The Grapes of Wrath*, even though he had been a successful author for nearly a decade, having published six previous novels and two story collections. In a journal entry for August 16, 1938, midway through his first draft of *The Grapes of Wrath*, he wrote: “I feel like letting everything go. . . . My many weaknesses are beginning to show their heads. . . . I’m not a writer. I’ve been fooling myself.”

If Steinbeck felt that way, then who is immune to such fears? After recording his doubts in his journal, he turned

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a deaf ear to them, adding, "I'll try to go on with work now. Just a stint every day does it."⁸

The book he was writing at the time, the novel that made him say "I'm not a writer," is the same novel that won the Pulitzer Prize and helped secure the Nobel Prize for Literature. So if your doubts are telling you you're not a writer, you just might be in for a life-changing surprise.

Another Pulitzer-winning writer, Richard Rhodes, offers this advice to writers who struggle with self-doubt:

If you're afraid you can't write, the answer is to write. . . . If you're afraid of what other people will think of your efforts, don't show them until you write your way beyond your fear. If writing a book is impossible, write a chapter. If writing a chapter is impossible, write a page. If writing a page is impossible, write a paragraph. If writing a paragraph is impossible, write a sentence. If writing even a sentence is impossible, write a word and teach yourself everything there is to know about that word and then write another connected word and see where their connection leads. A page a day is a book a year.⁹

So get on with your daily work. Just a stint every day does it. Whether you feel like it or not, *write*.

5. Write confidently by writing "in the zone."

Great fiction writing is not primarily an act of the intellect but the product of a creative state called being "in flow" or "in the zone." This experience is much like self-hypnosis. When you write "in the zone," you experience a passionate, emotional involvement in your work combined with intense concentration and a state of relaxation. Your

creative energies are at their peak, and you feel uninhibited and free to enter an experience of pure imagination.

The ancient Greeks and Romans were well aware of this state. The Greeks identified the “zone” with the activity of goddesses of inspiration called “the Muses.” The Romans referred to this state as *furor poeticus*, the poetic frenzy.

The person in “flow” loses self-awareness and seems to merge with the writing process. Writing becomes spontaneous, and the words, images, and metaphors seem to come from outside oneself. The writer is able to focus totally on the work, blocking out all distractions. In this state, the writer feels masterful and in control, yet also feels mastered and controlled by the work itself. The writer’s fictional characters seem to come alive and take on a life of their own.

One of the most intriguing features of the “in the zone” experience is that the passage of time becomes an elastic experience. Hours can seem to pass in minutes, and minutes can seem to expand into hours. In “the zone” we are shut off from the external distractions of the outside world and the internal distractions of our mental chatter. We do not think analytically. We are immersed in the dreamlike state of the creative act.

By shutting off our mental noise, we silence the voice of our fears. While writing “in the zone,” we experience no self-doubt, no self-criticism, no self-awareness at all. We are not worried about whether our writing is good or not, whether we have talent or not, whether we can finish or not, whether editors and readers will like our work or not, or whether we will succeed or fail. All that matters “in the zone” is the story, the characters, the images, the work.

In “the zone,” we become fearless. As Susan Johnson describes in her novel *A Better Woman*, “In my writing life

I was totally fearless and everything cloudy was magically rendered transparent. I was intoxicated by writing.”¹⁰

6. Whether you write well or write badly, *just write*.

The only way to learn writing is by writing. Susan Sontag said, “By writing much one learns to write well.” The only way to improve is to write and write and write. Practice and persistence are much more important than so-called “natural talent.” A lot of people who appear “naturally talented” have simply put the time and practice in, driving themselves to keep writing even though they suffered from the same fears and doubts you feel right now.

Before Canadian-born writer David Rakoff died in 2012 at age forty-seven, he left this wise insight to us: “Before I sat down and became a writer, before I began to do it habitually and for my living, there was a decades-long stretch when I was terrified that it would suck, so I didn’t write. I think that marks a lot of people, a real terror at being bad at something, and unfortunately you are always bad before you can get a little better.”¹¹

When you write, don’t worry about whether or not you have talent. There are many talented people who will never accomplish anything because they lack the courage to write. And there are people of modest talent who have set the literary world on fire through their courageous writing.

If you didn’t have the courage to be a writer, you wouldn’t be reading this book. You’d be making excuses for not writing. But here you are, mustering your courage and looking for that one little motivational nudge to get you going.

Well, here’s that nudge, courtesy of novelist Jessamyn West, author of *The Friendly Persuasion*: “Talent is helpful in writing, but guts are absolutely essential.”

Jim Denney

I believe you've got the guts. Prove me right. *Start writing.*

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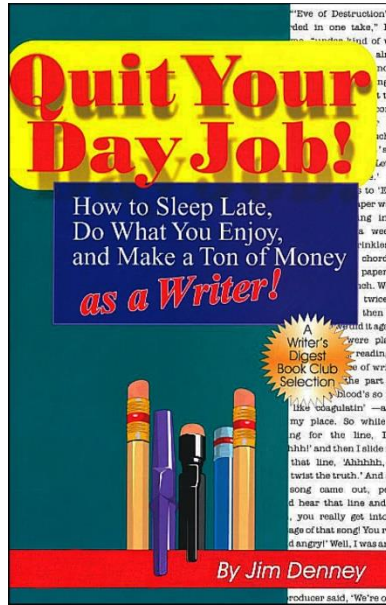
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A Writer's Superpower

From

QUIT YOUR DAY JOB!

*How to Sleep Late, Do What You Enjoy,
and Make a Ton of Money as a Writer*



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*“Follow Jim Denney’s suggestions and you will be well on
your way to making the dream a reality.”*

James Scott Bell

*“Most career-bent writers are destined to struggle.
Read Jim Denney’s book and save yourself
much of the anguish.”*

James N. Frey

Jim Denney

1

A Holy Calling

“If a young writer can refrain from writing he should not hesitate to do so.”

Dramatist **André Gide**

“If you *can* be discouraged, you *will* be discouraged. Quit now and you’ll save a lot of time.”

Novelist **David Gerrold**

I was nine years old when I wrote my first short story as a class assignment. It was a three-page suspense story about an innocent man escaping from prison. My teacher read it to the class. Later that same school year, I wrote a story about a rocketship crashing on Mars — and at that point I *knew* I wanted to write for a living.

At age eleven, all I wanted for Christmas was a toy printing press I had seen on TV. I had big plans. I’d write my own books, set them up in type, staple them together, and become an eleven-year-old author-publisher. On Christmas morning, there it was — my own printing press, made of red and yellow plastic, with a bag of rubber letters you positioned by hand. Problem was, there was only enough type for five or six sentences (in ALL CAPS yet). I could scarcely set one complete thought in rubber type before I was out of E’s and O’s.

My favorite haunt was the public library. I even loved the *smell* of a library. Some would say it’s a musty odor, a whiff of old vellum and bindery glue. But to me, it’s the scent of adventure, discovery, and endless pleasures on

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long summer afternoons between the fifth and sixth grades.

I've always loved the feel of a book in my hands. The weight of a book is the substance of an author's thoughts pressing against your flesh. Old books are the best — books printed by the antique letterpress method, from type cast in hot metal on Linotype machines. Run your fingers over the page and you can feel the indentations made by the metal letters as they pressed the ink into the paper. Those books always held a holy fascination for me. They were filled with words so important and so powerful they were cast in metal and assembled on the page in soldierly rows.

I started writing for pay as soon as I left college. Throughout my twenties and early thirties, I pursued my craft as a sideline on evenings and weekends, writing for magazines and newsletters. By age thirty-six, I had six published books to my credit. When people asked me what I did for a living, I'd hesitate, then say, "I have a graphic arts business — typesetting, illustrating, advertising—"

Notice, I did *not* say, "I'm a writer." Even after six published books, I didn't see myself as a writer, but as someone who wanted to be a writer *someday*.

But that was the year I was forced to either become a writer or let go of the dream. It was 1989, and I saw that our graphic arts business would soon be put out of business by emerging desktop publishing technology. My choices were clear: I could either jump into writing with both feet, or I could take a day job in an ad agency somewhere. I had already been self-employed for ten years, so the insecurity of self-employment didn't trouble my sleep. But I also had a wife, two small children, and a mortgage, so I knew it wasn't going to be easy.

While pondering my decision, I called a couple of writers I knew. Both had been freelancing for more than ten years,

so I asked their advice. The first one, Al, had over thirty books to his credit, both as a ghostwriter and a sole author. He had no encouragement to offer me. “You called me just as I’m quitting the freelance life and going in-house as an editor,” he said. “I’m still writing on the side, but I need a steady paycheck. I just can’t take the uncertainty anymore. You want my advice? Don’t even *think* of fulltime writing unless you have at least a year’s worth of living expenses saved up. Better yet, two years’ worth.”

The second writer I called was Bob, a veteran freelancer with over five million copies of his various titles in print. Despite his success, he wrote in his spare time, evenings and weekends, and he urged me to do the same. “Don’t quit your day job,” he told me. “Write in your spare time and make sure you have a regular paycheck.” Not much encouragement there either.

Around the same time, I exchanged emails with an award-winning science-fiction writer. “You’re going full-time?” he wrote. “Hope you have a high tolerance for insecurity.” He told me that the bank had taken back his house during his second year as a fulltime writer — but he wished me luck nonetheless.

Each of those writers had given me sound advice which could be summarized as, *Don’t even think about writing for a living*. They’d been there. They knew. I knew they were right — but I didn’t follow their advice. I couldn’t. I had come to the realization that I *had* to write. So I did. Years later, I’m still here, still pounding out books for a living — and I haven’t missed a house payment yet.

But it hasn’t been easy.

Right up front, I want to give you the same advice those other writers gave me when I first set out on this journey: If you can live without being a writer, if you can be happy and satisfied doing something else for a living — *then do*

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something else. I mean that sincerely. Don't quit your day job if you can do anything else with your life and still be happy. You shouldn't write for a living unless you simply can't do anything *but* write.

Since I was a boy, I have known that I *have to* write. If you're nodding your head, if you know what I'm talking about, if you, too, *have to* write, then this book will speed you on your journey.

END OF EXCERPTS

Jim Denney

May I ask a favor?

If *A Writer's Superpower* has been encouraging and helpful to you, I would be extremely grateful if you would:

1. Visit my website, WritingInOverdrive.com. From time to time, I'll post news, insights, interviews and writing tips you can use to build a successful and rewarding career as a writer.

2. Tell a friend about my books and my website, WritingInOverdrive.com. Tell them they can get this book as a FREE PDF ebook at my website. Word-of-mouth is the best advertising.

3. Please consider buying and reading some of my other books, as listed on the preceding pages. And please leave a review on Amazon.com — one star to five stars, whatever you think is fair.

A million thanks. I wish you joy and success on your journey. Write boldly. Live forever!

— Jim Denney

Endnotes for A Writer's Superpower

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