

WRITING EXERCISES TO HELP YOU WRITE BADLY

© By Ela Thier

The writers in this picture were asked: who isn't writing as much as they'd like to? I may have overlooked someone, but I recall every person in the room having their hand up, including myself. The reason we don't write is because we have the mistaken notion that we need to write well. No professional writer sets out to write well. Certainly no prolific writer considers writing well. We know that writing well is not our job. Our job is to write.



Writing well is easy: the fingers are racing, smoke comes up from the page, your eyes fill with tears, you're laughing out loud, you're in love with your characters and every witty and perfect thing that comes out of their mouth, you're in heaven. And for a few moments of grace you're thinking: damn. I'm good.

Writing badly, on the other hand, is exceedingly difficult. The dialogue is contrived, you have no beat on the characters, you don't know what the story is about, every word is pain. If you can keep writing when you're writing badly, you have a shot in hell of becoming a pro. If you refuse to write unless you're writing well, you probably haven't been writing in a while. Perhaps a long while. Perhaps ever. A prolific writer knows that if you continue to write *through* the block, magical things will happen.

So what can we do to get ourselves to write badly?

People often make the mistake of thinking that writing is something you do *after* you've done some thinking. You sit there. You think. You come up with a few ideas. You commit the best one to paper. This mode of writing, the think-then-write mode, includes walks in the park, gazing out the window, at a window, at a page, at a laptop. It often ends up in reading the paper, playing Tetris, watching TV, and taking naps. I would know. The benefit of this method is that Tetris is pretty fun and hey, maybe a big famous producer sent you an email in the last thirty seconds since you last checked your inbox. Better check...

You sit there. You think. You check your email. And at some point, if the stars line up right, you come up with the right idea. The benefit of this method is that you will never write badly. The downside is: you will never write, period.

I don't mean to make fun. I employ this method in my writing life often. There is a time and place for gazing out that window. But I'm of the opinion that it should comprise of a tiny fraction of your writing life. By approaching the task of writing in this way, you are too vulnerable to constantly doubting your ideas, editing when you should be brainstorming, judging when you need to be playful. You want to write a *great* script, as well you should. The fear level freezes you in your tracks and the day-dreaming mode of generating ideas quickly turns into every type of procrastination known to man. Three years lapse, you still haven't written a word, and at this point the amount of self-chastisement is at such a high level that no

one, not even you, could possibly write a word. You sit there with your hands tied into a knot and yell at yourself for not having "discipline."

The only discipline you really need is the discipline to write badly. You do that by free-writing: The difference between free-writing and "thinking" about your screenplay is the difference between writing and not writing.

What is free-writing exactly: Free-writing is defined as not lifting the pen off the page for a pre-determined amount of time. It doesn't mean blocking out four hours in the afternoon and writing, that will result in Tetris-playing. Free-writing is best done in 10 minute blocks of time.

Turn your computer off. You will need it for roughly five percent of your writing life. (OK, slight exaggeration, but only slight.) A computer makes everything look like a final product and this freezes us up. Not to mention the fact that it's got Tetris on it. And emails. Free-writing needs to look like a scribbled mess. It should not be in screenplay format or any format.

Get an 8 ½ X 10 1-subject spiral notebook. (99¢ at your local store.) Smaller sheets are too small. Thicker notebooks are not portable enough. Make it 8 ½ x 10 1-subject spiral notebook. Next, make a ceremonious trip to the stationary store and buy a fast pen. A fast pen is one that requires minimal pressure when you write with it. It flows without leaking. Buy an egg-timer. Avoid cell phones, alarm clocks, or timers that count up. You need something that you can set and forget about because it's going to count down and BEEP when the time is up.



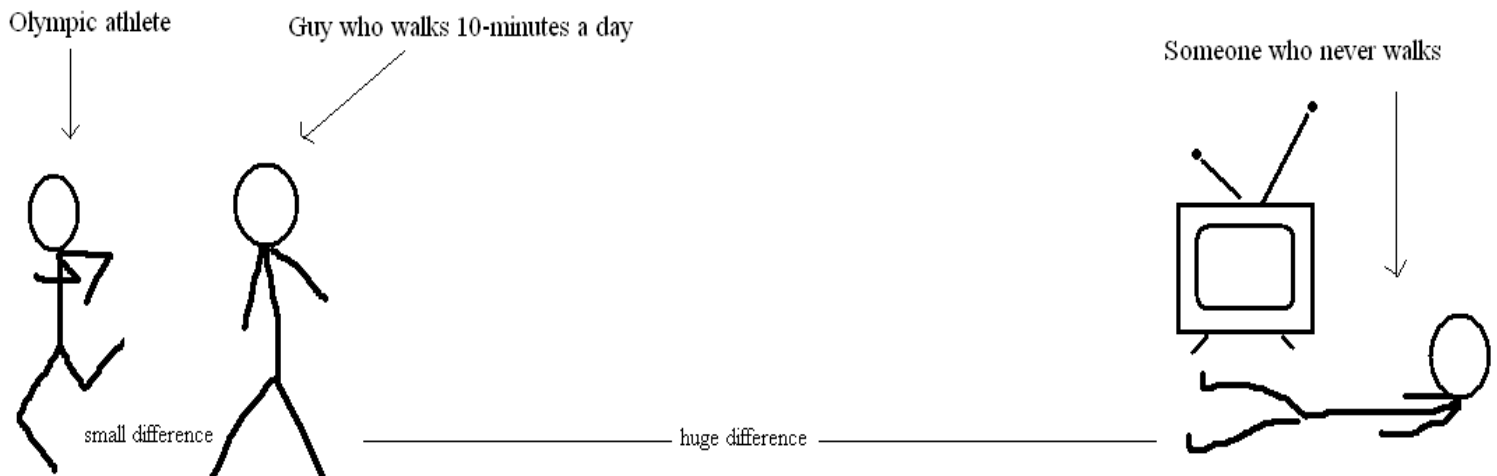
Egg-timers are a writer's second best-friend. You can buy them for ten bucks or less at any RadioShack, hardware store, or drugstore.

Set your timer for 10 minutes and start putting words on the page. Sit back, relax, enjoy the ride. Your only job here is to put down words. Put down anything. You may write "blah blah blah I have nothing to write I suck and this sucks and I just remembered Tanya's birthday is it time yet" Just write. Forget spelling. Forget punctuations. Forget story structure. Forget delectable dialogues. Forget conflict. Forget thinking. Just put the words down. Julia Cameron in "The Right to Write" describes it as the ability to *rest on the page*. Free-writing is your time to stop working. It's your time to rest. Rest on the page. Let lots of nonsense come out. When the beeper goes off you may stop – but not before then. If you care to, you may keep going.

What you'll discover is that the *act of writing* is the very thing that moves your mind to generate ideas. Characters, situations, stories will hatch that never would have come into existence if you tried to think of

them in advance. Ideas will come *as you write*, not before then. For some reason, the physical act of putting words on the page seems to spring forth ideas that you would never access if you weren't doing actual writing. This has been true of every writer I've come into contact with.

I once had an athletic roommate who swam laps at a near Olympic-record speed. I asked him to give me advice on getting in shape. He told me that the difference between someone who does nothing and someone who walks 10 minutes a day, is *much greater* than the difference between someone who walks 10 minutes a day and an Olympic athlete.



I find free-writing to be the essential tool at every stage of the writing process: from generating story ideas to figuring out a last little detail on a polished draft. Even outlining can't really happen without it. Outlining is an editing process not a writing process. Once you've free-written your heart out, then you look back at what you have and shape it into some sort of an outline. Incidentally, I like to outline the sequences in my film before I write the script, but I don't work from a detailed scene outline, at least not while writing the first draft. The first draft is a big whopping free-write extravaganza, with a sequence outline in place in case I need it for guidance.

So write 10 minutes a day. Write badly. Write anything. Write your to-do-list for the day. But don't lift the pen off the page till the timer goes off. And while we're on the topic, may I suggest a daily 10-minute walk as well.

On the next page are specific free-writing exercises that you can use. Alternatively, you can free-write a list of possible free-writing exercises. If you come up with good ones and are willing to share, I'm all ears!

Extra tip:

If the egg timer is a writer's second best-friend, what is a writer's best friend? A writer's best friend is always going to be *another writer*.

If you schedule a time to meet with another writer, set a timer for the both of you, and write with company, you'll discover new writing steam that you never knew you had. In my next article I'll discuss specific ways to build long-lasting and productive support networks with other writers.

Free-Writing Exercises

The only rule of free-writing is not lifting the pen off the page until the beeper goes off. Write anything at all, even if you have to just repeat the same word over and over again. Ten minute blocks of time are best for free-writes. Do not share free-writes with anyone, and best not to go back and read them. If you wish, you can skim over them and highlight portions that you may be able to use.

Character interview

Write a scene in which you interview your main character. Some questions you might ask are:

- What do you most want in life?
- What do you most fear in life?
- What was the best thing about your childhood?
- What was the hardest thing about your childhood?

There are endless variations to this exercise and you can come up with an endless array of questions. Alternatively, have your character interview you. You can also interview supporting characters to get to know them better, or have them interview each other.

Your main character under duress

Choose one of the following scenarios:

- X and Y are stuck in a broken elevator with a bomb in it
- X and Y are in a mall where they find an abandoned baby left in a dumpster
- X and Y find a brief case with a million dollars in cash
- X and Y are in a forest and an angry bear approaches

X is your main character. Y could be your secondary character (your main character's key buddy.) Alternatively, Y could be you.

Come up with other scenarios in which your characters are under duress. Subject of scene doesn't need to have anything to do with your story or even genre. If you know for a fact that a scene won't end up in your script, it'll free you to write.

Brainstorm a list of possible scenes

Make a list of scenes in your script; they can be ones you've already written, thought to write, and you can come up with new ones as you go. They don't need to be listed in chronological order, and you can describe them briefly in sentence fragments, or elaborate on them if you feel moved.

List as many scenes as you can come up with in 10 minutes. If you get stuck, keep free-writing anything at all. Later you can go over the free-write with a highlighter and find the possible scenes you came up. You can also interview your main character and discuss possible scenes with them.

Improvise random scenes

It's always useful to write out favorite scenes as they come up. For now, don't worry about order, structure, screenplay format, or anything else. Just pick out the vivid scenes and write them. Keep writing until you get stuck.

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