

MAKING IT TO THE END

Defeating Writer's Block and Finishing Your Novel

By E.J. Kitchens

The thing that writers dread more than bad reviews (and probably even more than no reviews) is writer's block, being stuck and unable to write or to write anything worthwhile, to never finish the novel. Some also call it the "resistance" (the term coined by Steven Pressfield in *The War of Art*). This could come in different forms:

"I have no ideas." Or "I have no good ideas."

"I'm not good enough." Or "This scene isn't good enough."

"It's got to be perfect before I move on."

"I may have finished twelve books, but everybody writes a dud. What if I've lost my ability to write?"

"I don't have time."

"I don't have the energy to write."

"I don't want to write today."

What is there to do about writer's block? Many things! There's not a single cause for writer's block, so the solutions vary, but I have found that the most helpful tools for carrying on fall into three categories and fifteen principles:

Mindset

Craft

Persistence

Fifteen Principles to Defeating Writer's Block and Finishing Your Novel

- 1. Fill the creative well.**
- 2. Employ wise distractions.**
- 3. Be humble.**
- 4. Write in layers.**
- 5. Make it fun!**
- 6. Ask smart questions.**
- 7. Remember.**
- 8. Rest.**
- 9. Engage with that dirty word: self-discipline.**
- 10. Talk about your book to others.**
- 11. Follow your character, not your outline.**
- 12. Consider the craft.**
- 13. Set your setting.**
- 14. Don't scare the clock.**
- 15. Find the roots.**

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Overcoming Writer's Block

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1. Fill the creative well (Craft)

You can't give what you don't have. It takes a lot of ideas to write a novel—the original story idea, character ideas, plot point ideas (you'll have a lot of different events in your novel, after all), setting ideas, dialogue ideas, and so on.

If you're not reading, watching movies and documentaries, or studying the people around you, you won't have the "idea water" in your well to draw out and recombine to make your novel. And yes, I did intend to write "documentaries." Nonfiction, especially focused on people or places or events that might be helpful to your novel's setting, details, or characters, are great for inspiration.

When you're stuck, try reading a book you love or watching a movie or show that might be useful for research. Give your brain a rest from thinking about your book, and if that doesn't help, try again but be thinking about storytelling this time. What do I like about this book? Not like? Why? How could I apply this to my novel? Could I use this fact or place in my story? Is that person like one of my characters?

Prime your brain with questions and with information to get answers from. And be patient. If you're really worn out, it may take a while to get back on track.

Consider working on a different project for a while, one with no pressure and no deadline. It might give you a needed break, and while you're having fun and making progress on it, your main work-in-progress might "get jealous" and start inserting itself into your thoughts.

2. Employ wise distractions (Persistence)

Are you tired? You don't really want to write but know you should? Maybe you only have one idea for the next scene—a few lines of dialogue—but no idea about the setting and how to describe the character emotions.

Just write those few lines and call it a day. Rather than just stare at the screen complaining and berating yourself for not having more, just write what you do have.

Chances are, when you write those few lines, another few lines will come up. Then another few.

Yes, you're tricking yourself. When you give yourself permission to only write what you have, you take the pressure off, and your mind is often happy to start supplying more. Now what you get may be more notes than solid prose you won't have to edit, but there will be ink on the page, which is essential.

A second wise distraction is to get up and walk or do the dishes or clean house or something active when you get stuck. There's something incredibly helpful about splitting your focus and giving yourself something easy to accomplish. You can then free your brain to "live in the story" and watch the characters or to develop story ideas.

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3. Be humble (Mindset)

Does it hurt to think that what you're writing will need rewriting? That it's not going to be perfect on your first draft? Does your first draft take way too long because you don't want a rough draft at all but a polished manuscript? Are you terrified that readers won't like your work? That they'll think it cheap or silly or forced in some way? That this one will be the one that ruins your otherwise sterling reputation?

If so, I feel your pain. The same doubts and fears have given me countless hours of grief and put me embarrassingly far behind.

But, from love, I must tell you something I often need telling: Get over yourself.

This sort of perfectionism, from my observations of myself, has two intertwined roots: pride and fear of extra work. We don't like flaws and imperfections, so we take a very, very long time working on our manuscripts or toss them aside as hopeless, instead of admitting our humanness and need for the revisions and editorial help that other people need. We fear what others think about our work and so us. Or, knowing how long and hard we tend to work on things because of the perfectionist tendencies, we fear any extra work revisions could require and so curl up in a protective ball and don't do anything.

It's hard to write when doubts and fear are trying to control our thoughts. What can we do about it?

I don't want to write shoddy first drafts that I will have to toss and rewrite—but that's not what I recommend. Write a great first draft and take your time doing it—but keep control of your time and fears. Plan for some measure of revision—it's not a punishment or a failure. It's part of the process. Remind yourself that rewriting is okay. No one but you expects your first draft to be perfect. It's better to have a finished B-grade novel than nothing to turn in and so fail. I love the B-grade 1930s Westerns. I've read books with mountain-size plot holes and atrocious comma usage that readers rave about. In the end, we have to do our best and give grace to ourselves; most readers are gracious.

Set limits for how long your writing sessions can be and how long you allow yourself to contemplate specific issues. If you find yourself stuck on a word or description, highlight it, tell yourself you can fix it later, and move on. It may not be easy at first, but remember your purpose. And get perspective: "Instead of enjoying that book or getting that thing done or playing with my kids, I spent 10 hours that day worrying about a particular word in a book most people in the world will never read and of those relatively few who do, they're not likely to remember that word anyway but will remember that specific character or how the story made them feel." Is that what you want your life to be life?

When doubts are assailing you about larger things, like character arcs and whole scenes and major plot points, it's good to stop and return to the basics of writing—ask if the character goal is strong enough, if the character is acting in character or if you're forcing things on them, for instance. If you can't pinpoint a specific problem, get feedback.

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And simply choose humility. If you've done your best, move on and realize that many readers are gracious or oblivious toward the things that bother us as writers. There is no such thing as a flawless novel. There is no book that everyone is going to like. Learn to accept the "bad" as part of being human, then do your best in a reasonable amount of time and embrace revision.

And consider the next trick.

4. Write in Layers (Craft)

Writing an entire scene in one sitting is rough. There are so many parts to it—character descriptions and goals and thoughts and emotions and actions, setting descriptions, dialogue and meaningful action beats, and so on. It can be overwhelming to try to get all those down at once.

So don't.

Write your scene in layers. (Think of it like a pearl if you need to—or an oil painting with many layers of paint.)

What do you know about your scene? Stop and visualize it for a moment. Look for the details. What logically is a part of it?

Where is it? What's there? Is there a gun on the mantel? Enemies in the trees? The perfect dress for the ball in the shop window? Who is there? Why are they there? What do they want?

Who's saying what and how are they saying it? What needs to happen to tie this scene into the rest of the novel?

Start jotting down ideas.

Does the dialogue stand out to you the most? Write it. Don't worry about action beats and showing character emotions right now. Just get the bones down.

If a little more comes to you as you write, then keep going. Go bare bones, if you need to, just keep going.

If you run out of dialogue but know some of the action later in the scene, skip down a few lines and write that.

Fill in gaps or jot down notes as they come to you.

When your time or ideas are up, stop.

Layer one is finished.

In your next writing sessions, re-read only a little bit of the preceding scene and edit lightly if needed (I know we perfectionists might be tempted to re-read and tamper with a lot, but resist the urge. Use your writing time to create, not tamper.) Focus on the next layer of your current scene.

Re-read your layer one. Get the big idea for the scene and start working on adding in description. Take a moment to think about the setting or character reactions. Work on filling in the details.

Think about one aspect at a time.

Work on that layer, then repeat until you're out of steam or time.

Layer two is done.

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The next session, go over it again and continue filling in details and doing a bit of editing until you have a good scene. You should have ideas on the next scene, so then start its first layer.

Writing in layers—writing one or two elements at a time rather than trying to write an entire, perfect scene all at once—has been tremendously helpful to me. Because I will spend several writing sessions—several days often—on one scene, my progress toward finishing the first draft is slow, but my first draft is good quality and requires less revision.

5. Make it fun! (Craft)

Does your scene, or your entire book, feel flat or boring? If so, then your readers might find it boring too. I don't have to tell you that that's bad.

But this is actually a really good warning bell to us as writers and is fairly easy to fix.

Start by asking yourself, what would make this scene fun?

Whatever “fun” is to your readers.

The postman can deliver the mail to Harry Potter's hand or dozens of beautiful owls can bombard the house with a letter the uncle always intercepts or blocks. Which is more fun? Owls wouldn't work in a serious historical fiction, however brilliant they are for middle school fantasy, but you get the idea.

This is where you need to know what your readers want out of your novel (or what you want out of your novel). If it's a romance, a cute scene between the couple might be in order. If a romcom, a hilarious moment. If an adventure, something exciting and cool. A fall over a cataract, a lost city, a treasure, a deadly magical weapon.

What makes you love the books you read? Think about that and think about the things like that which should be in your novel. As always ask what would make your readers happy. Also, thinking about the things we like makes us feel better, and when we feel better, our brain is more likely to be forthcoming with ideas.

“But the thing that must happen in the scene is just boring, so I can't cut it or make it less boring.” Can you summarize the scene rather than show it? Can you combine the scene with another? Or give the information briefly in dialogue or internal thoughts in another scene?

Can you increase the tension in some way? Add something new? Maybe another goal with greater obstacles?

If you can make the story fun for yourself, it's much easier to write—and your readers will be much happier too.

6. Ask smart questions. (Craft)

I've given a lot of questions in the previous entries. I won't repeat them all here, but asking questions is the only way to get answers, so learning to ask questions, especially smart questions, is huge to getting over writer's block.

“What do I write now?” is not a smart question. It's too broad. In fact, it could be overwhelming! You might have no ideas or too many ideas to answer that.

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Try these questions instead. These are what have helped me.

What would my character logically do next? Not, what do I want to happen, because that might not be what the character would really do, or it might be something cliché. Ask, what would my character do? What's logical?

If you don't know, which is often my problem, ask the next question.

What is my character's story goal? Scene goal? My goal? There are usually three goals for the character. One is what the character herself wants—save her beloved bookstore from bankruptcy, for instance. Two is what she's doing each scene to work toward that. And three is what the author (or reader) wants—get her a handsome husband and learn not to put her sense of self-worth in her success or failure.

If you aren't clear about your character's goal for herself, that's a big problem you need to stop and work out. I've found that one of the hardest things for me to do is set a clear goal with strong motivation. I know what *I* want for her—a happily-ever-after romance—but unless she is hunting a spouse for herself, which is not the type of story I write, then I'm going to have trouble knowing how she is going to fill her days and so what each scene will be about.

So figure out goal and motivation for all of your characters, even the secondary characters and villains, since they influence what happens as well. Boromir, Faramir, Elrond, Gollum, they were all secondary characters in *Lord of the Rings*, but their wants influenced what happened.

Once you've figured out what your character wants overall, ask what is logical for them to want in your upcoming scene. To eat? Find a clue? Talk with someone? What would move the story forward toward the overall goal? What would other characters want?

What conflict can you throw in the way of the character goals?

How can you increase tension and make the scene more fun?

So write through your characters' perspective with an eye toward scene goal, story goal, tension, and fun.

7. Remember (Mindset)

Why do you want to write a book? Why write *this* book? What excites you about it? Who would you dedicate it to? Pick up a favorite book and remember why you like to read and why you would want to read the book you're writing (if you can't think of any reason you'd want to read the book you're writing, ask what changes it needs to be the kind of book you'd love even if someone else wrote it).

Remember that you're human and that your book won't be perfect and not everyone is going to like every book you write, or any of them. But someone will. Write for those people. If you're a Christian, *Remember who you are writing for. You will always be good enough in his eyes.* (Thanks to Susan D. for that reminder!)

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8. Rest (Persistence)

Take a break. Go for a walk. Do something you enjoy. Take care of your body and mind so they don't give out on you. Try a vertical mouse and a standing desk to help prevent wrist and back issues.

9. Engage with that dirty word: self-discipline (Persistence)

Yes, sometimes you just have to power through. You have to tell yourself to stop doubting and to stop after your set number of editing passes/re-reads of the previous scenes and to just keep writing, even if the writing feels bad or you feel bad.

You might need to turn off your phone and email program to avoid distractions. Tell others you won't be available for a certain time. Or get up early or stay up late or give up that TV show or that hour of game time.

When you're ninety years old, will you miss that rerun or the book you didn't write?

If you need help with self-discipline, ask for it. There's no shame in that. We most of us want someone to help keep us accountable and would be happy to swap the favor! Clinical psychologists and award-winning authors John Townsend and Henry Cloud bring up a critical point about self-discipline in *How People Grow: What the Bible Reveals about Personal Growth*. Self-discipline isn't something you can just will yourself to have. If you don't have the will power to do the thing, then you don't have the will power to will yourself to do the thing. Self-discipline, they state, is something you must be taught, something that must be internalized—by being disciplined. Can't make yourself do the thing you need and want to do? Consider asking some tough friends if you can call them when you are struggling with not writing to get encouragement from them (the “quit whining and do it” type of encouragement), or give them permission to exact consequences (the discipline). You don't meet your (realistic) writing goals and you have to clean their bathroom. Or, as one author did, pay them \$100. Now, that is motivation! The goal is that the external discipline will, over time, help you become self-disciplined. And, of course, just get the book written.

Join a critique group or mastermind group or local writers' group for encouragement and accountability as well. I realize it can be hard to find a good group or find the time for one, but if it's a possibility, consider it.

10. Talk about your book to others (Mindset)

There's something about talking about your book that brings excitement. It reminds us of why we love it and all the fun parts we want to include in it.

It can also highlight that the story premise is weak or the goals unsure. If we can't succinctly describe the book, we might be lost in the details (as many authors are) or the story may not have a solid premise. Stop and consider which is the case and work on refining the “elevator pitch.”

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11. Consider the craft. (Craft)

This one is no shocker given how many references I've made to it already. But it's good to highlight it as a trick of its own for easy remembering. Stopping to consider the principles of good writing is actually one of the biggest helps to me. Sometimes the writer's block and the doubt is my instinct recognizing a problem. My brain then has to figure out what it is. I stop and consider the questions I've mentioned previously, or I read a writing craft book. I find so many ideas popping up while I'm reading craft books that I have a hard time finishing reading them.

12. Follow your character, not your outline. (Craft)

Again, I have already mentioned this, but I wanted to give it its own entry because it's that important. "What would my character do (and what does my character want here)?" is a much smaller, easier-to-answer question than the broad "what now?" query. Ask what would make sense for your character(s) to do now? If you don't know, or know which option is the best, write a scene with them thinking about it or talking it through with others. Something might become clear during the conversation. And you can always delete it later!

Often, when I follow my character's lead, my story doesn't go exactly where I thought when I wrote the outline (based on a few scenes I already knew). It always goes much better.

13. Set your setting. (Mindset)

Does a messy room drive you to distraction? Do other people drive you to distraction? As authors, we spend a lot of time considering where our stories are set. As writers we need to spend some time considering where we should "set." Find a place where you will be comfortable (but not so comfy you want to sleep), that energizes you for work and limits distractions. Do you write better in pjs or character costume? Do you need snacks? Absolute silence or low-level chatter? A place where you can swap between sitting and standing? A browser that blocks emails and other distractions? What music helps you focus? As a fantasy adventure-romance writer *Two Steps from Hell* is a life-saver for my writing.

Whenever we rush into things without setting them up properly, because we're in a hurry, we end up losing time due to not being in the proper, productive frame of mind or by having to hunt down things we need (notepads, wireless mouse, favorite pen or coffee mug, or whatever else helps).

Before your next writing session, figure out where, when, and what you need to help you set yourself up for a productive and enjoyable writing session.

14. Don't scare the clock. (Mindset)

Time management is a scary, uncomfortable, elusive thing to many of us. We admire people who have it and wish we could do it ourselves. In truth, we could "manage" our times if we *really* wanted to. "You have time for what you want to," is a hard, true saying. We tend to think that managing our time means having time for everything we want to do. But that's just not

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possible. We have a limited amount of time, so we choose what is most important—time to sleep, time to watch TV, time for social media, time for children, time for friends, time to earn money. Every minute of the day, we are choosing to spend our time on what is important to us at that moment.

Yes, there are productivity tricks to make tasks faster and easier. Dictation is a great one that some authors use. Learning to write faster and edit later are very beneficial. I highly recommend looking into those. Read *5,000 Words Per Hour: Write Faster, Write Smarter* by Chris Fox.

I also recommend looking into your other time choices. How much time are you spending worrying the word/sentence/scene/book/you aren't good enough? How much time are you spending on social media, on TV? Complaining about your lack of time? Staring off into space? (Because you're overwhelmed or depressed or daydreaming rather than focusing on tasks.) Doing things for other people that you don't want to do but feel obligated to do?

Catalog your time and choose how you want to spend it. Start by making small changes, then work up to what you want. Get help from others if you need it. Remember why you're doing this.

Don't scare the clock by choosing things that you won't remember later or won't be among the good things that flash before your eyes during a near-death experience.

15. Find the roots. (Persistence)

To finish a great novel, writers need great craft, proper mindset, and persistence. But sometimes, knowing what you need to do and doing it are two unjoinable things. It's "never the twain shall meet" with them.

Sometimes writers have to go deeper to actually make the needed changes. If craft is an issue, reading more craft books and getting feedback from professional editors might be what's needed to crack the wall that's stopping you. If depression or perfectionism or poor time management (the inability to say no) are issues preventing you from writing, consider resources like *Changes That Heal* by Henry Cloud, *Boundaries* by Townsend and Cloud, or *Living Forward* by Michael Hyatt. Not only could addressing root issues help your writing, it could help other areas of your life too.

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