



GET INSPIRED, GET CREATIVE, GET WRITING

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Introduction

Who this book is for

We (Tracy and Ali) have written this book for beginners to reasonably experienced writers. We wanted to provide a single resource for dealing with many of the difficulties and challenges writers face in their development.

Even if you've been writing for a while, you'll hopefully find this book helps to round off your skill set or provides you with new options. We hope that, by sharing our knowledge and experience of writing, we can help you tackle any problems and get stuck into your writing – and enjoy it!

What it aims to do

We've covered all the main areas where writers run into difficulty with the writing process. (We haven't included how to get published and what can happen there, simply because that would be a whole other book.)

If you find you are having difficulties writing, it's probably going to be with one of the areas we cover in this book. So, it pays to have a little time out to reflect on what is going on – look underneath your frustrations to see what the real problems are.

Don't spend too much time here though, or you may fall into the clutches of the demon procrastination (if you're currently struggling with this, we cover it in Part One: Inspiration).

Developing your writing process

We both believe that writing is a process. One step follows another, and that getting to your end goal is a matter of accomplishing several smaller tasks.

That doesn't mean we don't value the more inspirational aspect of writing: as you might guess from the title of this book, we know how crucial this is. Instead, it means we believe writers need to value both the practical and inspirational (or if you prefer, spiritual) aspects of their creative process.

It's fine to put the practical aspects first some of the time – they are what keep us moving forward and thus enable us to grow.

Feel free to dip in and out

Remember to use this book for your specific needs. There is no need to read it from cover to cover – though you can if you want to. You'll probably find that you want to dip in and out, depending on what topics you're most interested in at any given moment.

Try to make the best use of it for your current situation. Of course, this will change over time – one week you may be having writer's block, the next you may be wondering if your work is good enough. It's all covered here, so use each section as you need it.

Whether you are new to writing, or a more seasoned pro, we hope you'll find something to inform, enable, or delight you in this book. If you get stuck and can't find answers here, do get in touch and we'll be glad to help. You'll find our contact details at the end of the book.

Part One: Inspiration

Why inspiration matters

Have you ever sat staring at a blank page waiting for a great idea to appear? Do you take notice of what's going on around you or do you just let your mind do its own thing? Do you make sure your own needs (for rest, play, and creative inputs) are catered for?

All these questions have to do with inspiration. For some people, inspiration is everywhere. For others it is a rare and delicate thing, something to be nurtured and cared for. Whichever group you fall into, inspiration is essential.

Inspiration is crucial for the growth and development of your current work. It is necessary for the evolution of new ideas and directions. Without inspiration, we would all be producing work that was indistinguishable and indifferent.

Try it

If you doubt the value of inspiration, take a moment to reflect on your life. Look at the experiences that really mattered to you, the game-changers. Notice how each one had within it the inspiration you needed to make progress, to change, and to grow.

For example, remember your first day in a new job or on a new course – how did it feel? Who spoke to you? How did you cope in a new environment, doing new things?

It's the same with our writing: without inspiration, our work is dull. Inspiration brings colour, energy, and life to us and what we do.

Three key sources of inspiration

A moment ago, we asked you where you get your inspiration from. The three key areas we pointed towards were:

- Your writing
- The world
- Your spirituality or inner life

Let's take a look at these individually:

Writing (yours and other people's)

'One thing leads to another.' This can true of inspiration in our work. You can write an excellent piece one week, and be inspired to write another four great pieces over the following month. All this, because you wrote something so moving or packed with information that it gave you the inspiration to develop it or explore it more.

The same goes for other people's work. Many, many writers can tell you who inspired them to write. It's often a famous author, perhaps of the classics or something modern and edgy. The work they produced resonated with that budding writer and inspired them to want to tell stories of their own.

Try it: Take a look at what you last wrote or read. What does it inspire in you? How does it make you feel? Does it excite you? How could you do something similar, or better?

The world

There is inspiration all around. Whether you believe that because there's so much rich material, or you believe it because you see creation everywhere, the fact is you can be inspired by almost everything.

First, look at life. Consider the events going on in the world, or just in your world. What thoughts or feelings do they trigger in you? Is there something you feel inspired to write about?

Then think about the environment. Whether it's inanimate objects or the living world around you, everything can tell a story. Just let your imagination loose on that cotton reel, or imagine what your neighbour's dog is really thinking – you've already got the germ of a story or article going in your head.

Try it: Choose something in your immediate environment to write about for five minutes – anything from the coffee mug on your desk to the sound of birdsong outside.

Your spirituality or inner life

Whether you believe in a Higher Power or not, it is hard to deny that we all have a spiritual or inner life.

If you believe in God or a Higher Power, look at your relationship with them and what they are teaching you about life. Use this for some deeply purposeful reflection and inspiration for your work. Though it comes from something meaningful (and perhaps even sacred) to you, it is okay to use it in this way. The wisdom you learn from this is meant to be shared with others, used to make a positive difference in the world.

If you prefer a more psychoanalytical approach, this can also hold a great amount of inspiration. Look at the systems involved in having your inner life. Look at the beauty of how things work and how you can affect them. Look at how responsive you are, and record that. All this can inspire a story or a helpful article.

Try it: Set aside some time for deeper reflection, which might come in the form of prayer, meditation, writing in a journal, or talking with a trusted friend.

Tackling writer's block

Does writer's block exist?

Almost every writer has an opinion on this topic, and many have experienced a temporary inability to write at some time. Whether you believe in writer's block or not, know this: *it will pass*.

Some writers believe that what is called writer's block is instead a form of performance anxiety. It may be that you are worried what people will think of the quality of your work. You may be trying something different or more personal and you're afraid of rejection. You may have had negative messages in the past which devalued your creativity and now you're nervous about doing something original.

Whatever the cause, these sorts of anxieties are very real. They can leave you feeling dried up, choked up, and full of emotion you just can't release.

Other writers feel that writer's block is a separate condition, exclusive to writers. It is seen as a hang up in the creative process, a lack of movement, inspiration, and response. (Hence, writers get it but electricians don't get electricians block.)

When it happens, writers become paralysed before a blank page. No matter how hard they try, they can't get the process flowing and end up frustrated, upset and afraid. This isn't a case of not knowing enough: experienced writers can be just as vulnerable to writer's block as beginners (and perhaps more so).

However you view writer's block, you need strategies to overcome it and move on. You need to be able to break the cycle of *worry -> write less -> worry more -> write even less* and so on.

Here are a few ideas of how to break through your block:

Reflective writing

Try reflective writing (also known as therapeutic writing). This works both to get you in the practise of writing again, and also to gradually free up your mind and emotions.

Each stage becomes increasingly more challenging. Each writing session need only be ten minutes:

Stage 1: Write about something seemingly simple, like your favourite breakfast cereal, or sandwich (5 minutes). Then write about something more universal, like the weather today (5 minutes).

Stage 2: Write about something more complex, but enjoyable. Write about your favourite holiday (5 minutes). Then write about your favourite subject at school (5 minutes).

Stage 3: This is the most challenging stage. Write about a difficult relationship (5 minutes). Then, flip it and write about that relationship from the other person's point of view (5 minutes).

You should be able to see how this process will gradually free up your ability to write through working on deeper and more emotional subjects.

Finding and addressing the causes of your block

Try addressing the causes of your block. These will fall into one of three categories:

1. External. Maybe you need to get the boiler fixed, or the kids are pestering you about something. Whatever it is, give yourself permission to stop attempting to write, and go deal with the problem.

Then, re-affirm your boundaries (e.g. tell the kids to leave you to work for the next hour), and settle back down to your writing.

2. Internal. Emotional blocks can seem elusive and tricky. No-one likes to deal with difficult or negative emotions, but ignoring them won't make things easier.

Some useful techniques here include journaling regularly, having a daily writing practise, and bearing in mind that everyone's (including the greats') first drafts are rubbish.

3. The writing itself. If you're having difficulties with something in particular with your work, it's time to sit down and be honest with yourself.

Acknowledge that, for example, you don't like writing about one of the characters in your novel, or you're sick of writing about relationship issues for teens.

Think through your options. You may need to branch out and start writing on another topic. You could even consider co-writing with someone else. If you don't like writing about a particular character but they are essential, consider broadening your cast of characters to help dilute their impact on you. Be willing to experiment to find what works.

Looking beyond the problem

Think about what the way forward for you might be. This usually involves being more open and honest about the difficulty – both with yourself and others.

Try writing about how you are really feeling right now and how things are affecting you. Try admitting how vulnerable you are. Let down the mask for a few moments and spend some time in your own company, without judging yourself or trying to change.

Finally, consider letting others help. This may take the form of a night out with a close friend, talking through what's going on for you right now. It may mean raising the topic at your writers' group and finding out how they deal with writer's block. Or, you may seek professional help like a writing coach, mentor or therapist.

What's important with writer's block is to remember that it doesn't mean you can't write. You know you used to write before so there is every reason to believe you can do it again. You haven't forgotten how to do it; you've just forgotten that you can do it. Using the techniques above should help get you on your way back to a regular writing habit. Remember, though, to give it time, patience, and care.

Staying motivated on longer projects

Motivation can be a bit of a conundrum for many writers. We struggle to keep levels of interest and energy going, even on dearly cherished projects. It can be easy to get disillusioned or even downhearted when motivation is flagging and we don't know what to do.

Two important things to remember about motivation are:

1. Motivation comes and goes. It rises and it falls. This is completely natural for all of us. So, before you envy another writer for seeming to have endless motivation and enthusiasm for what they are doing, stop and think – what strategies are they using to help keep themselves going?
2. Action precedes motivation. This may seem counter-intuitive. After all, don't you have to feel motivated to get started? Not really. What you need is momentum, and that comes from action.

Let's look at some ways to keep your motivation going during a long project, like a novel or non-fiction book.

The writing process

Many experts break down the act of 'writing' into a specific process with these key stages:

- Pre-writing: ideas, research and planning
- Writing: completing your first draft
- Revising: making 'big picture' changes to your draft
- Editing: fine-tuning all the details
- Publishing: sending your work out to publishers, or self-publishing it

It's important to follow this process, even if each stage only takes up a short time (e.g. for a blog post). If you jump straight into writing, for instance, without going through the pre-writing stage, you may find yourself running out of ideas very quickly – or you might get part-way through your project only to realise you've missed out something crucial early on.

Remember, when you're planning and looking ahead to the writing stage, you are not aiming for a final, polished draft. So, you're allowed to make mistakes and you're allowed to have some flexibility or uncertainties in your plan. What's important here is to set out on paper what direction you intend to travel and how you're going to get to your goal.

Once you've got a sequence in mind of how things are going to unfold, write it down. Commit to it, on the understanding that you will deal with what comes up along the way. This will help you navigate the sometimes difficult waters of character development, finding new information, and changing plot twists that didn't work, for example.

Breaking it down

This is about taking a step back and thinking about the different stages you'll need to go through to complete your project. For any writer, the prospect of bashing out 100,000 words is pretty daunting. Focusing on that mammoth task can be counter-productive, leaving you de-motivated, tired and wondering why you started in the first place.

One of the keys to completing any large project is to break it down into smaller chunks. This makes it seem much more approachable and achievable. You'll have milestones you can tick off, and possibly rewards for achieving each of those milestones.

Try it:

A good way to tackle breaking down a large project is to look at the different components of the process. For example, initially, you'll want to make plans. These may include plotting, character development, breaking things down into chapters or sub-topics, or planning what needs to be researched. (See the previous section, 'The writing process', for more on this.)

Before you start any major project, you have to have a plan. If you don't, somewhere along the line you will dry up, grind to a halt, or find yourself with so many loose ends you won't know how to move on.

Pacing yourself

Planning involves setting realistic goals for yourself, including how much work you can do in a given length of time. Ideally, you will have some idea of how many hours you can give to a project each week. This should give you some indication of how long the project should take.

For example, if you're at the writing stage of a project, you might break it down like this:

Hours per week available = 15

Words per hour = 500

Project length = 75,000

Words per week = 7,500

Weeks to first draft = 10

For some people, who might not have the responsibility of a day job or kids, this plan could work well. The important thing here is, be realistic. If you can manage 3,000 words a week

instead of 7,500, that's fine, just allow longer for completing your draft. Alternatively, you could consider working on a shorter project, if the priority for you is to get work done by a particular deadline.

In any case, it is well worth planning your time and pacing your writing before you begin, so that you can relax more into your work and find it a more satisfying process.

Rest and rewards

Nobody can work at full capacity all the time. If you don't get some downtime to rest and recharge, you'll struggle to focus and you will find yourself less able to entertain ideas, develop what you're already working on, and keep up your motivation and momentum.

Taking breaks doesn't just mean stopping for coffee! It's important to plan for different levels of rest. First, you need to include some significant breaks when you initially plan your time on your project. This means resting the work between drafts so you can come to it afresh when it is time to edit.

Next, you need to find something else to do in the day. If you are a full-time writer, this is especially important. Try to find an activity that's engaging but that doesn't involve thinking too much. For example, you could play cards, do a jigsaw, or try some sewing.

Physical exercise is important, too, if you're sitting at your computer screen for several hours a day. This doesn't have to be anything strenuous: a 30 minute walk can be enough to recharge your mental batteries and keep your body healthy.

Finally, take regular breaks during your writing sessions. Many people find the Pomodoro method works for them – work for 25 minutes, rest for 5, then work for 25 and so on.

Try it:

If your project plan and daily plans don't already include space for breaks, then figure out where you'll include these now. If you normally attempt to work for hours without a break, try working for 25–45 minutes then stopping for 5–10 minutes – and see whether you actually produce more overall.

Remember, too, to reward yourself. Sometimes we need to have a little treat at the end of a long session of writing. It may be something small and simple like a cup of your favourite tea, or it may be something more, like an evening out with your spouse or bowling with the kids. Choose something that you know you will enjoy and that you can imagine yourself striving to receive.

Connecting with other writers

Writing can be a solitary business. Obviously, most writers prefer to work in peace, without constant intrusions and interruptions from other people. Solitude, can, though, deplete your

motivation. Like too much work, it can dull your mind and leave you restless, irritable and in need of external stimulation.

One key antidote to spending too much time alone is spending time with other writers. You may be fortunate enough to have a local writers' group who meet regularly (and if not, perhaps you could start one). Or, you might prefer to join an online group. Conferences and courses are also great ways to meet and cultivate connections with fellow writers.

It is important to take your place in the writing community. However inexperienced you are, you can make a valuable contribution to another writer's life. You could be there for each other when it gets tough to keep going. You could offer one another constructive criticism. You could meet up to chat about your progress or what you've learned lately about your craft.

While it is important to keep up your relationships with everyone in your life, it is particularly important to be connected to other writers. They know. They understand. They can help you work things out. They can help you feel you belong, which can be key in keeping going on a longer project, knowing that this is what you should be doing.

What inspires you?

For some of us, this is an easy question to answer. For others, it's not. Inspiration can come from many places.

If you know what inspires you, try keeping a list of those things close at hand. Make it easy to refer to when motivation is flagging. Perhaps keep pictures of your inspirations too. For example, some people are motivated to keep going because they want to provide for their kids or their partner. If that's you, why not keep photos on your desk to remind you of why you're doing this?

Try it:

If you struggle to identify what's motivating you, or it seems a bit abstract, try pinning it down. Think about how you feel when you're inspired. Remember what you were doing or what you were thinking about when inspiration struck. Try not to judge it – inspiration is different for all of us.

What's important here is to keep in touch with your reasons for doing what you are doing. At times of low motivation, this could be just what you need to give you a boost and get you started again.

Remember to stay in touch with what inspires you outside your writing time too. Your inspiration needs your care and attention to stay healthy and thrive.

Staying motivated on shorter projects

It's easy to assume that just because a piece of work doesn't take long, it will be easy to do and easy to keep going. Very often this is not the case.

Every writing project, large or small, has parts we really enjoy and parts we like less. Furthermore, many of us will have to take on writing jobs that may have a low reward, that aren't on a topic that especially interests us, or that don't quite fit into our ideal vision of who we want to be as writers. There is also writer's block, which can crop up just as easily when you're working on a shorter job.

How, then, do you keep going on smaller tasks? First, you can use the methods outlined in the section on staying motivated on longer projects. Even the creation of a short magazine article can be broken down into smaller chunks. Likewise, what motivates you to write in the first place still applies to smaller jobs as well as your bigger ambitions.

One key way to keep going here is to look at the bigger picture. Consider your writing goals and try to imagine how this piece of work fits into the overall scheme of your writing career. Getting this job done will allow you to move onto better things. This may be through getting better clients, getting your name out there, or doing it as a favour for someone else who could help you out later down the line.

Think a bit bigger than that, too. Think about the impact your work has. It may very well be that your work becomes a resource for readers, or for other writers. Consider the usefulness of what you are producing: you'll probably find it motivating to recognise that you are making a positive contribution to the world.

Breaking the procrastination habit

Many people have a habit of procrastination. It can take many forms, like telling yourself, 'I can't get that important task done because I'm busy with all this housekeeping.'

Procrastination means putting off what you know should be done now, in favour of other activities you find more pleasurable and are more comfortable doing. It often arises when there is a significant period of time between when you intend to do the work, and when you actually do it.

Try this three-step process for tackling your procrastination habit. (Remember, it takes time to change a habit.)

1. Recognise it. Some procrastination tactics include focusing on low-priority tasks, re-reading emails before you start to do anything about them, intending to start a project then distracting yourself with something more trivial (e.g. making a cup of tea, or chatting to a colleague about their vacation), or 'waiting for the right time to start'.

2. Work out why you do it. Generally the problem is either with the work itself or with you. If you find some aspect of the task unpleasant or boring, get that over with first. Then,

everything else should flow more easily. If the problem is your own lack of organisation, sit down and make a prioritised to-do list and a schedule – and stick to them.

3. Strategise. Procrastination can be a long-term habit. You'll likely need a range of strategies to deal with it until you have broken the habit. Think about what motivates, encourages, and drives you to get things done and implement strategies accordingly. This may include giving yourself rewards, having a friend check in on you, setting time-bound goals, or breaking the task down into manageable chunks. Do what works for you.

Part Two: Creativity

Would you describe yourself as a ‘creative’ person? Ali still sometimes has trouble thinking of herself as ‘creative’ – and she’s been writing for a living since 2008. Tracy, on the other hand, has been writing for about 20 years and has seen her ideas of what it means to be creative evolve and grow over time.

It’s easy to fall into the trap of thinking that being ‘creative’ is more to do with your personality than your output. Perhaps you have a picture in your head of what a creative person is like – they’re dressed flamboyantly; or they work in lots of different mediums (not only with words); or they’re disorganised and scatterbrained.

While all those *can* be true, they certainly don’t have to be. Plenty of people are incredibly creative, but don’t necessarily conform to a stereotype.

The type of writing we typically describe as ‘creative’ is fiction – but of course you can be highly creative while writing in other forms too. Let’s take a look at some of the different writing contexts in which you might put your own creativity to use.

Fiction

If you write short stories or novels, then it’s not hard to see you’re engaged in a creative activity: you’re inventing characters, a world for them to inhabit, and a plot to drive your story from start to end.

If you’ve never written any fiction, or if it’s something you did a long time ago, we’d really encourage you to give it a try. Even if you’re perfectly happy writing, say, advertising copy and you wouldn’t be interested in completing a full-length novel, fiction-writing can be a fun escape, plus a way to experiment with words – and perhaps also to learn something you can apply to your other writing.

If you are writing fiction already, and you feel that you’re not creative enough, ask yourself whether the problem is with your creativity or with something slightly different. A problem that looks, at first glance, like a creative one can often be caused by a different factor.

Here are a couple of common examples:

Problem: I hardly ever feel inspired to write, so I’m making really slow progress with my novel.

False diagnosis: I’m just not creative enough. Creative people feel inspired all the time.

True solution: You *are* creative enough (and creative people definitely don’t feel inspired all the time). If you set aside regular writing sessions – say, one hour on Saturday mornings and one hour on Wednesday evenings – you’ll find that you *can* write even when you’re not

feeling very inspired. In fact, once you get a few minutes into a writing session, you may well find that rush of excitement returning.

Problem: My characters are flat and uninteresting. I'm bored just writing about them.

False diagnosis: If I had a better imagination, I could create more interesting characters.

True solution: While it's tempting to give your characters a few odd quirks or strange habits, the best way to resolve this one is to increase the stakes. Make life difficult for your characters: force them into corners. Send them running for their lives, if you have to! Characters show their true colours under pressure.

Working with constraints

Generally, when you're writing fiction, you'll be working within the constraints of a particular genre. For instance, if you're writing historical romance, you're probably not going to suddenly throw in some science-fiction elements.

That's not to say that cross-genre books can't work – but if you want a wide audience, and you're early in your career, it's best to stick with something that can be easily categorised for readers (and book shops).

Don't see this as something that hinders creativity. It's often *easier* to be creative when you've got a context to work within.

Try it:

Imagine we told you to 'write a story about anything' – you'd probably go blank. If, instead, we told you to 'write about 23 year old Sophie, who goes into her dull office job one day to find her desk has been cleared and her belongings shoved into a cardboard box,' then you might well instantly find yourself coming up with all sorts of ideas.

Poetry

We might as well admit it – we're definitely no poets (though we've read our share of poetry). But perhaps you love the challenge and distinctive nature of poetry versus prose, where every single word counts, and even a tiny change in punctuation or line breaks can make for a different feel – or even a different meaning – in the poem.

Poets can have a hard time in the writing world. Their craft is definitely seen as 'creative', but it may also be seen as a bit weird, esoteric, and not especially useful. It's very, very hard to make poetry pay, and while poets may achieve literary renown, they're not likely to achieve much commercial success.

Of course, if you're a poet, we're sure you didn't get into it for the money. Poets are people who love words and ideas, and enjoy making every single word and phrase carry a lot of meaning. Poetry is also a discipline that can strengthen your skills for other areas of writing – having a highly tuned ear for nuance and rhythm will serve you well in almost any field.

If you'd like to explore poetry further, try:

- Writing in a highly structured form, especially if you normally write free verse. Try a sonnet, for instance, or a pantoum.
- Entering poetry competitions – there are a lot of these around (as for short stories); one small advantage over some other forms! They'll often give a theme, first line, or other prompt.
- Buy and read contemporary poetry. You'll (hopefully) find it inspiring, plus you'll be helping out fellow poets.

Memoir

Memoir occupies a space between fiction and non-fiction: it's an account of things that have happened, but (inevitably) filtered through your own thoughts and perceptions, and shaped to follow a narrative.

It's not exactly the same as autobiography, which tends to be more fact-based and covers the author's whole life; memoir might deal with a specific time period, or a specific theme, throughout that life.

If you're writing memoir, you can use elements of fiction, like dialogue – you may well have to invent this, based on your recollections. You might decide to go further than this, moving toward the realm of fiction. For instance, some authors write strongly autobiographic novels (where they draw heavily on their own lives), and if you want to include a high level of fictionalisation, this is probably where you'll end up.

Although some of the 'raw material' of your memoir already exists, writing it is still a highly creative act. You'll need to:

- Decide what to keep in and what to leave out – a shaping, refining, focusing process.
- Work out how best to order your memoir – not necessarily from the earliest recollections to the most recent. You may use flashbacks, or develop individual chapters each based on a theme.
- Carefully consider the angle you're giving on events. Are you keen to be 'fair' to all involved, or to present *your* story? (Remember, this is your memoir. You can always change names to protect the less-than-innocent.) Some issues may be quite emotive for you and/or others – how will you cope with this?
- Mine your memories for details, and avoid thinking 'I don't have a very good memory.' Often, if you start writing things down, more will occur to you. You could

also look to cultural references for a given time, such as chart music or television programmes, which could spark off memories.

Non-fiction

We're aware that we're lumping together an awful lot of types of writing here, from biography to travel writing to self-help books. One key thing to remember is that whatever sort of non-fiction you write, you're performing a highly creative act.

Like any author, you'll be engaged in activities like brainstorming and coming up with ideas. You'll probably produce an outline at some stage – a great tool for staying on track while you're writing. Even if the main draw of your book is the fact it contains useful information, you'll still be seeking to present this in an engaging way.

There's no 'right' way to do non-fiction, and some authors add elements like:

- Imaginary characters who serve to illustrate different points.
- Real-life examples (e.g. case studies), which do the same thing.
- Memorable quotes or sayings to help their points 'stick' – not a world away from poetry.

Even if your non-fiction book is part of an established series with a set structure, you'll still have a huge number of creative choices to make as you write. A couple of years ago, Ali wrote *Publishing E-Books For Dummies*, in Wiley's 'For Dummies' series – yes, it was very much a 'Dummies' book but it was also *her* book, with her voice, her anecdotes, and her advice.

Try it:

Even if your main focus is on fiction, it can be very useful to have some experience with non-fiction – not least because it's often easier to make it pay the bills (particularly at the start of your career).

Some of the non-fiction options you might explore include blog posts, magazine articles and fillers, copywriting, content writing for websites, and even writing whole books on areas that you're particularly knowledgeable about.

Exploring your creativity

As we mentioned before, we're *all* creative. (If you don't believe us – just adopt that thought for a bit, and act like it's true. You might surprise yourself!)

Process

Different writers have different ways of being creative. Some need to have a long incubation period where ideas bubble away, not quite consciously, before they're ready to write. Others find that their creativity only seems to 'switch on' when they have a pen in their hand, or their fingers on the keyboard.

Some writers find it easiest to stay inspired and on track when they write 500 words per day, every day. Others have a writing binge every weekend, writing 3,000 - 4,000 words in a single session.

There's no one creative process that works for every writer. What matters is that you:

- Look for ways to make it easier to follow *your* process. If you know you write best in the mornings, try to use that time for writing. (You might not be able to do so on weekdays – but how about weekends?)
- A little paradoxically, don't get *too* set in your ways. Sometimes, what your creativity needs is a bit of a shake-up. Once in a while, try writing by hand instead of straight onto the computer (or vice versa). Write in a different location, or at a different time of day. Plan ahead, if you rarely do – or don't plan at all.

Above all, ignore any advice that tells you this is how all writers 'should' write. Sure, getting up at 5am and writing 1,000 words without fail might be perfect for your friend (or for that speaker who came to talk to your writers' group) – but it might be a complete creativity-killer for you.

Taking care of yourself and your health

One way to think of creativity is as a type of energy. If you're physically exhausted, or emotionally wrung-out, you're unlikely to have any creative energy to spare. This means that, as writers, it's particularly important we take care of ourselves.

Many writers are very caring, giving people. This is a wonderful thing – until it starts interfering with your ability to take care of your own needs. Please don't think that it's in any way 'selfish' to give yourself the same care and consideration that you would give to a friend or family member.

Physical health

Unless you're engaged in some particularly hands-on research for your latest thriller novel, you're almost certainly spending your writing sessions sitting down, probably in front of a computer.

It's really important that you make yourself as comfortable as possible during your writing sessions, and that you also take care of your physical health outside them too.

A lot of this is basic advice – but please use it as an opportunity to ask yourself what changes you might need to make in order to take good care of yourself.

While writing:

- Set your computer monitor at the right height, so it's level with your eyes. If you often feel tension or pain in your neck and shoulders after writing, this may be because you're holding your head awkwardly to look at the screen.

- Find a chair that supports you comfortably. Ali uses an exercise ball (Swiss ball) instead of a regular desk chair. It allows her to stay mobile and keeps her upright.
- Take regular breaks from the screen. This is good for your brain and writing stamina too: working for, say, 30 minutes then taking a five or ten minute break before starting again is often more productive than trying to write for a solid hour.
- Have a drink of water to hand. Most of us don't drink enough water, and being a little dehydrated will affect your concentration. It may also give you a headache. Tea and coffee are fine too, but don't overdo the caffeine.

When you're not writing:

- Get regular exercise. Walking is great – you don't need any special clothes or equipment, and you can do it however fit or unfit you are. It can also be a fantastic opportunity to mull over your work-in-progress, or simply to daydream. (Have paper and a pen with you, just in case ideas crop up.) When you're feeling a little low, exercise can really help lift your mood.
- Eat sensible, regular meals. If you work from home, it's particularly easy to end up constantly snacking. Some writers talk about getting so absorbed they forget to eat lunch – we don't think we've ever had that problem! The issue we both have is staying away from the chocolate...
- Get any medical issues seen to promptly, especially if they involve your eyes, arms, or hands. RSI (repetitive strain injury) is a real risk for writers who work at a computer most of the day. Be proactive about getting any niggles seen to before they become serious.

Try it:

When planning your writing day or week, make sure you include breaks (as we recommend in Part One: Inspiration). In case we've not emphasised it enough yet – your health, mental and physical, really matters.

Mental health

You may already know that writers tend to be more prone to mental health issues than non-writers. We don't believe writing *causes* these difficulties, but it's understandable that writers sometimes feel particular stresses that others might not – such as the strain of fitting in writing around a day job, or alternatively, the anxiety caused by knowing that writing has to pay the bills.

If you've had a mental illness in the past, or if you know you have particular risk factors (e.g. some physical conditions) then take extra care of yourself. Even if you don't have any personal or family history of mental illness, it's still really important to treat your mental health as seriously as you would your physical health.

Here are some practical things you can do:

- As much as possible, make your writing a source of enjoyment rather than stress. Don't tell yourself you're 'lazy' or 'slow' or 'unproductive' if you don't meet your daily or weekly targets. (Ask yourself what advice you'd give a friend in a similar position – perhaps those targets are a bit too ambitious?)
- Say 'no' more often. Most of us want to please people, and end up saying 'yes' to commitments we'd rather not take on. If you feel overloaded and overburdened, it's time to cut back.
- Take small steps toward tackling any problems in your wider life (beyond your writing). For instance, if you're struggling to pay the bills, or anxious about being in debt, face those issues and tackle them – rather than letting them fester.
- Build up a support network of people who can encourage you with your writing. They don't have to be writers themselves (though it's great to get together with fellow writers). Your partner, mum, brother, or best friend may be a fantastic cheerleader for you, without having any desire to write their own novel or blog.
- Don't underestimate the importance of leisure time. You don't have to fill every spare minute with writing-related activity. Make sure you have at least some time every day just to do something that you enjoy.

Boosting your energy levels

Writing takes a lot of creative energy – sometimes a surprising amount. If you've been working or taking care of children during the day, you may well find you simply don't have the energy to write in the evenings.

Most people find that they feel focused and energised at certain times of the day, and unfocused and tired at other times. Maybe you're highly focused from 9am - 12 noon, find the afternoons a bit of a struggle, and have little energy for anything but watching TV in the evenings.

Where possible, work with your natural rhythms. For instance, if you know you write far better at 6am before work than at 6pm after work, it's worth setting your alarm clock a little earlier so you can fit in some writing. For more on this, Charlie Gilkey who blogs at Productive Flourishing has a great resource, [How Heat-Mapping Your Productivity Can Make You More Productive](#).

Your current energy level isn't fixed in stone, however. You're likely to find that the more you write, the easier it gets – just like when you take up exercise, you can only do a bit at first, but quite quickly your muscles get stronger and you build up your stamina.

To help boost your creative energy levels, try:

- Getting more exercise and more sleep. Your physical energy is definitely linked to your creative energy – if you're unfit and you're tired a lot of the time, you'll feel creatively lethargic too.

- Playing music while you write. This doesn't work for everyone, but many people find that something upbeat and energetic makes them feel that way too.
- Having a writing ritual that helps you switch into 'writing mode'. This doesn't need to be anything complicated. It could simply mean making a mug of tea, opening up your preferred writing software, and putting on your writing music.
- Pushing yourself to write for five minutes, even when you don't feel like it. We certainly don't want you to struggle on and on for ages if you're feeling frustrated and exhausted – but sometimes, what feels like a lack of energy is just a bit of initial inertia.
- Finding something in your writing to get excited about. Perhaps there's a great moment coming up in your novel's scene-in-progress, or you know that the blog post you're working on is one that your readers really want.
- Planning out what you're going to write. This might seem like a bit of a dry, mechanical activity – but mapping out the road ahead may well give you the energy to tackle it, as you'll know what's coming up.
- Talking to other writers regularly, whether that's face-to-face or online. Obviously, you don't want talking about writing to replace actually writing ... but the encouragement, support, and enthusiasm of other writers will help spur you on.

Try it:

Pay attention to the times when you feel a surge of creative energy – when you can't wait to get to your keyboard. What's different? Perhaps you're working on a particularly exciting part of your project, or you've had some encouraging feedback. See if there's anything you can build on and use again to help you get back into that highly energetic state.

Different ways to get creative input

When thinking about creativity, it's easy to focus only on what comes *out* of us in the form of words – but what goes *in* also matters.

At a fairly basic level, this means reading work in your chosen genre or area of writing. For instance, if you write a blog about parenting, you'll want to read other parents' blogs too – to find out what they're writing, what's working and what's not, and what readers seem to want more of.

Your inputs can be wide and varied, though. You've probably had the experience of having an idea sparked by an unexpected source – perhaps a conversation overheard on the bus, or an advert in a magazine.

Sources of creative input

Beyond books (or blogs), which you're hopefully already reading, creative inputs you might like to consider include:

Music. Some writers like to listen to music while they write; others prefer silence. But even if you're not listening to music *while* you write, you might have it on when in the car, doing the dishes, etc.

What types of music do you like? Does anything in the music you listen to relate to your work in progress? Could you write something based on a particular song, or even a single line?

Photos. You could collect ones you love, either online on [Pinterest](#), or offline in a shoebox.

If you're looking for a character to write about, try [Humans of New York](#), which has new photos every day of people plus a short snippet about them.

Artwork. When did you last visit a gallery? You don't need to know much about art to enjoy browsing it, and you may stumble across something that really speaks to you.

Art can tell a story, just as words can, and a painting, sculpture or installation may well inspire a new story for you.

People. If you're a fiction writer, you might be inspired by the people you meet in your day to day life – perhaps some aspect of their personality, or a story they told you, could become part of your story-in-progress.

If you write non-fiction, one great way to get input is to run a blog or email list, build an audience, then ask them what they'd like to read more about.

Two quick ways to get ideas flowing

If you want some creative input in a hurry, try:

Writing prompts. You can find thousands of these online, both for fiction and non-fiction writers. They vary from single words to sketched-out scenarios. For longer prompts, see [Writers' Digest](#); for shorter, if occasionally rather zany, writing prompts, try [Awesome Writing Prompts](#).

Competitions. Most short story and poetry competitions will have a clear theme, or some sort of prompt like an opening or closing line. Try not to go with your first idea – it's often worth doing some brainstorming to dig down to more unusual ideas that the judges won't be seeing over and over again.

Exploring non-writing outlets for your creativity

Even if writing is your primary creative activity, you may enjoy finding some other creative outlets too – we mentioned this in Part One: Inspiration. These can help you switch gears from writing, and (depending on what you choose to do) might be either relaxing or invigorating.

Ideally, your alternative outlet will not be obviously related to your writing, or to writing itself. Repetitive activities that are not too challenging often work best to rest your mind and give it an opportunity to process what you are working on.

Some outlets may seem quite mundane such as jigsaw puzzles or playing solitaire. Don't be quick to dismiss these, they may well be just the kind of thing you need to give you some 'down time'. If you worry about doing something productive, maybe you could find some housework that you can get really stuck into.

Some outlets to think about are:

- Drawing and painting. You don't have to be a talented artist to enjoy these!
- Playing (or composing) music.
- Baking and decorating biscuits, cakes, etc.
- Crafts – e.g. sewing or knitting.

Tackling some common (but harmful) writing fears

Many writers won't admit to these fears – but please don't think you're alone if you're struggling with one of them. Any kind of writing can throw up some deep-rooted worries. This might be something you're prepared for if you're writing, say, a very personal memoir, but it can be a surprise if you're writing short stories, blog posts, or a book.

Here are some of the most common fears that writers have, with some suggestions on ways to start working past them.

Fear #1: 'I'm not good enough.'

In many ways, this is the ultimate writing fear: that despite all your efforts, you're just not a very good writer – and you never will be.

This fear can take all sorts of different forms, and it can strike almost any writer. Maybe you think you're not good enough because you haven't had any formal writing education. Or maybe you think you're not good enough because you have a degree in English Literature and you end up comparing yourself to all the critically acclaimed authors you studied.

Here are a few truths you need to know:

- Everyone can improve, whatever position they're in right now. Children don't start school knowing how to write – they gradually learn. The writers whose books, stories, or blogs you love didn't become great at writing overnight.
- Your writing journey itself will give you many of the skills you need. Let's say you're working on your first novel: of course you won't know how to do everything when you start, and you might make mistakes, but the process of writing it will help you learn what you need to know for the rewrite – and for the next novel.

- You're probably not the best judge of your own talent. If someone's paid for your writing (even a small amount), if someone has published your work on a blog or in a magazine (even if you weren't paid), or if someone's complimented your writing ... then trust that you *are* good enough. They certainly think so!

Fear #2: 'I'll never make any money.'

Not every writer wants to make money, but many do. While we wouldn't necessarily say it's *easy* to start making money writing, it's also far from impossible.

Some writers get the idea that it's incredibly difficult to make any money as a writer (perhaps after pursuing one particularly hard-to-break-into market). Others are anxious that 'making money' means they'll no longer be 'making art'.

This is what you should know:

- There are lots and lots of people out there who get paid for their writing. There's no reason why you shouldn't be one of them. You probably have the same skills (you may well be more skilled than many of them), and you have at least most of the same opportunities available.
- You may have to cast a wider net when you start trying to make money. For years, Ali was focused on making money as a traditionally published novelist. After spending a couple of years writing a novel, and another year shipping it to agents, she started blogging and began making money within weeks as a freelance blogger.
- Making money – or wanting to – doesn't mean you're selling out. In fact, getting paid is a wonderful sign that you're writing well: that your stories have compelling characters, that your blog posts are genuinely useful or entertaining, or that your memoir is moving and touching.

Fear #3: 'I won't be able to cope with rejection.'

Every writer knows that, sooner or later, they're going to be rejected. If you're a fiction-writer, you know that once you start sending work out, you'll receive bland 'no thanks' rejection slips. If you're a blogger, you might be anticipating negative comments. If you're an aspiring freelancer, potential clients might turn you down.

You may even fear more personal rejection: perhaps you're worried your hyper-critical mother, or your unsupportive spouse, will read your work and say something disparaging. You may be so worried about people's reactions that you never write (or certainly never try to publish) anything at all.

Try to keep these thoughts in mind:

- Lots of extremely successful writers received multiple rejections when they started out, including J.K. Rowling, Stephen King, and lots of other bestselling authors.

- You have coped with all sorts of upsetting situations in your life already. Rejection will probably be disappointing at first, but you'll overcome it – just as you've overcome other disappointments. In fact, it might be almost a relief to receive your first rejection and get it out of the way.
- The more rejections you get, the easier it'll be to take them in your stride. Before long, they'll become routine: still disappointing at times, but just part of the whole process of writing and submitting or publishing your work.

Becoming a writer – and becoming yourself

For both of us, writing isn't just a job. It's far more than that – it's an essential part of who we are and who we're becoming.

Giving yourself permission to write, and easing into a regular writing practice, can be genuinely life-changing in a number of ways. These can include:

Professional growth

Clearly, if you want a career as a writer, you'll need to write! But there are also many careers that can be supported by writing – whether that means producing magazine pieces, journal articles, blog posts, or even simply crafting stronger emails.

Unlike many forms of work, writing produces an end result. You'll be able to point to the pieces you've written and published – using them as a professional portfolio, or simply as a way to encourage yourself. (You may find it very reassuring to remember that if you did it once, you can do it again!)

Sometimes, you may not take a direct path to your goal. Let's say you want to become a successful fiction writer. Be open to the possibilities of other forms of writing as stepping stones to your goal. If you're just starting out and get the offer of some writing work, think carefully before you turn it down (even if it's not quite a perfect fit).

The other side of the coin is, have a plan. Think about where you want to be in five or ten years' time. Have an idea how you'd like to get there. Now, use the realities of your market(s) and your plan working together to guide you to where you want to be.

Try it:

Write down a vision for how you want your writing life to be in five years. What would you like to achieve by then? Brainstorm things you can do to help you get there. For instance, if you want to make a living writing, there are dozens of different ways you could potentially do so.

Personal and spiritual growth

Writing can give you a deeper insight into yourself. It can be a powerful tool for reflection and for moving forward in your life: simply writing down your goals and journaling regularly

about your progress towards them will get you there a lot faster than occasionally daydreaming about them.

Even if you rarely or never do this more personal sort of writing, anything you write can help you grow. Perhaps you'll come across some profound insights while researching, or you'll conquer that procrastination problem which you've struggled with for years. If you find you want to go deeper, you might want to consider a writing retreat or discovering writing therapy techniques.

Expressing yourself creatively

Having the time, space, and permission to express yourself isn't a luxury – it's a necessity. Many writers find that putting words down on paper (whether in the form of a story, blog post, article, or diary entry) allows them to work through something and clarify their thoughts.

You don't need to force or push this process: it's something that happens naturally. You may like to experiment with giving yourself some dedicated time for playing around with writing: working in a new form (e.g. poetry or fiction or memoir), or writing about a topic well outside your normal range.

Wherever you are now, this is where you begin. It's like going on a journey – you need to know where you're going and have a good idea how to get there. You also need to be flexible enough to make the most of opportunities along the way. Don't say yes to *everything* though – both to protect your health and to keep your momentum going.

Part Three: Writing

Getting the basics in place to make life easy

Before we talk about the practicalities of being a writer, we need to address some basic ideas. Without considering these, your writing practise will flounder, leading to stress and frustration, and possibly de-motivation.

Staying organised

The first consideration is how to stay organised. It's very easy, especially when you're involved in a larger project, to find yourself swamped with bits of paper, sticky notes, reference books, and a zillion tabs open in your browser. This will not make it easier to work!

You will find yourself struggling to find the right page of notes, trying to put your ideas back into a workable order, struggling to understand how your material fits together, and exasperated by the time it takes to make any progress.

So, before you start any new project, ask yourself a few important questions:

- Have I set up a computer folder (or file, for a short project) to keep all relevant material together?
- Have I collated my ideas into a logical flow?
- Is all my research material together in one place? Is it in order?
- Am I going to save each draft separately, or overwrite? (You need to be consistent either way.)
- How am I going to integrate new ideas or pieces of information as they emerge?
- Where can I keep a project spec or outline close to hand for reference?

Once you have these elements in order, it will be much easier to maintain order as you progress through your project. Keep in mind though that staying organised, while essential for everyone, can also be different for each of us.

Try it

Some people like to have hard copies of their research materials. If this is you, make sure you have a large enough file with documents organised into sub-topics.

Others use the Favourites tab on their browser to bookmark information they've found on the net. If you prefer this method, make sure you have a well-structured hierarchy of files in your Favourites so that information is easy to access.

Simplicity

A system of working based on simplicity is one which lends itself most easily to meeting your needs. It need not be rigid and formal – that would be unrealistic and liable to

breakdown. It does need to be flexible enough to cope with different levels of information and work flow, and be able to grow as you progress through your project.

Ideally, you will document the processes you design so that, at any time, you can access them for reference, to update them, to add new elements, or take some redundant parts away.

This may sound like over-complicating things, but it is not. If you think about it, everything we do happens as a sequence of events.

Take making a cup of tea, for example: you fill the kettle, switch it on, take your cup and put a tea bag in it, wait for the kettle to boil, add water to the cup, let it steep, remove the tea bag and add a little milk. (If you're not British like us, you may well have a quite different process!) Even the most mundane tasks follow a set sequence, and that is part of the beauty in everything we do.

Writing is the same. The production of any piece of work, long or short, poetry or prose, has a process. Your job is to discern what your processes are so you can write some simple guidelines that you can follow to ensure you reach your goal.

This is a worthwhile investment of time up-front as it will rescue you when you flounder mid-way through the process of trying to place a magazine article. It will remind you of the need to edit your work, no matter how excited you are about your first draft.

A good system is both a safety net and a source of motivation. It can guide you through your process, helping you to avoid distractions, procrastination, and writer's block.

Try it:

If you haven't already, set aside some time to really look at what you do. Write down, perhaps in list form or a mind map, the exact sequence it takes for you to complete a piece of work. Remember, some stages of the process (like re-drafting) may take several iterations before the process is complete. That's fine; nobody gets it completely right first time.

Once you've identified and written down these stages, add an explanation of exactly how to complete each one. It's at this point that you can start to weed out any redundant or faulty processes.

Finally, you'll have put together a basic operating manual for what you do. This may sound boring, but it will considerably enhance the simplicity and efficacy of your work.

A space to work

Where do you work? Do you have a study at home? Do you go to the coffee shop? Use your dining table? Wherever you work, it is important that you get the conditions right. You need peace, space to spread out, and no interruptions.

Not all of us are lucky enough to have a separate room at home in which to work. You may well have to compete for space at one desk, or share the dining table with other family members. If so, you need to set some clear boundaries around your work.

The first thing to emphasise to other household members is the importance of what you are doing. Make it clear that your writing is your dream. When people understand this, they are usually more open to making concessions for you.

Second, ask for a particular slot of time each and every day in which you can have sole occupancy of the available workspace. This may be easier than you think – if you are an early riser, maybe no-one else wants to use the workstation at 6.00 am. Much as you are asking others to be flexible, be aware you may have to make some small concessions too.

As well as time and space to work, you need somewhere to store all your files and notes. If you store everything digitally, this is much easier for you. However, most writers need some files and boxes to keep documents and records.

Is there a spare corner in the living room you could use? Any space in the cupboard under the stairs? Be creative – it is rare that there really will be no room for you to keep your stuff. Most people find that with perseverance, and some negotiation, they can manage to clear out a little space at least for the essentials.

Interruptions

Halting interruptions can be tricky. On the one hand you want to get your writing time, on the other you may have a key role in the family that means people will be coming to you with all kinds of requests. It can be really hard to get quiet time when you have kids to raise, especially if you're on your own.

Here, again, the first goal is to try to negotiate some time to write. Perhaps your partner could take care of the kids for a few hours a week so you can sit down in peace to work. Alternatively, could a relative or friend take them out for a while?

If all else fails, you're going to have to be more flexible and set aside time to write when the kids aren't around. For example, you could write after they've all gone to bed, or get up an hour early. It sounds tough, and at first it is, but once you get into your new rhythm, you'll appreciate that extra bit of time at the start or the end of the day to get into your own space and do your own thing.

Regular check-ins

Part of your process needs to be regularly checking in to see how you are doing and to keep track of your progress through each project.

If you are working on a larger project, you need to set some milestones to see how you are progressing and to make sure you haven't deviated from your plan.

Try it

Check in with yourself at least twice a week – once mid-week, and once at the end of the week. Ask yourself if you've stuck to your plans. If not, why not? Try to remember the initial value you placed on accomplishing certain tasks. Do you still feel the same way about them? Make clear decisions on where you are going next and make yourself accountable.

The best way to be accountable is with another person. Ideally, you will have a writing mentor or perhaps a writing buddy. This will be someone with some writing experience, who understands what you are trying to achieve.

If you can't get in touch with another writer, an understanding friend or relative might be able to help. You should aim to check in regularly with your mentor, though not as often as you check in with yourself.

Planning tools

There are lots of planning tools on the market. Some help you plan to use chunks of time in an ordered basis. Some help you plan and complete a whole novel or non-fiction book. Others are more familiar to office workers, like flow charts, wall charts, schedules, and personal organisers.

When deciding how to plan your workload and use of time, consider your personal tastes and requirements and weigh up the options. You could ask yourself:

- Do I want to use a computer or manual planner?
- Am I organising one long project or several smaller ones?
- Do I tend to misplace things?
- Do I need visual cues?
- How much can I afford to spend on this?
- What experience do I have of planning projects for others or at work?
- Do I need regular alarms or reminders?

Once you've chosen your preferred method of planning your work and time, you need to be consistent. Remember to add every task that needs completing and always try to be realistic in your estimates of how long things will take you. (Hint: most people under-estimate time, so allow some 'padding' – we suggest at least an extra 20%.)

Try it

At regular intervals, review whether your planning arrangements are actually working, and be prepared to adjust them if not. Remember to update your written processes when you do this, for maximum efficiency.

Paperwork

Whatever kind of writing project you are involved in, chances are that it will create additional paperwork. This may include plans, ideas, research, invoices, or a multitude of details you may wish to keep about what you are doing.

Regardless of how large or small your project is, try to keep to the rule of simplicity. Keep paperwork to a workable minimum. Only keep what you genuinely believe you will need in the future. Don't be a hoarder, tracking every detail and filing every little note – this will hinder you and probably de-motivate you too. Try to keep things fresh by having frequently used documents to hand and everything else filed away in some logical order.

Dealing with the day to day practicalities of being a writer

Making more time for your writing

It can often seem that there aren't enough hours in the day. What with taking the kids to school, your day job, household chores, cooking, or spending time with friends and family, how are you supposed to find the time to write? It doesn't have to be too hard though.

Here are a few steps you can take right now to free up your time:

- Plan your activities. Maybe keep a family calendar in the kitchen, or use a personal organiser. Make sure you and everyone around you knows when you'll be busy and when you're available.
- Schedule chores. Some chores need doing regularly, like washing the dishes. Others need to be done less frequently, like dusting and vacuuming the carpets. Figure out how often things need to be done to keep your home at an acceptable standard, and then schedule in those jobs. Try to get other family members to join in and share the load, or consider paying someone to help out once every week or two.
- Figure out when you can work best on your writing and focus on freeing up time at that stage in the day. Maybe you're an early riser, and tend to just sit reading the newspaper for an hour every morning. Think of the writing you could get done during that time. You can catch up with the news later in the day.
- Keep track of how you spend your time. For one week, keep a diary of where your time goes. Be completely honest with yourself. Use this information to plan a gradual, staged change to having regular time to write. It sounds like a chore to do this, but it pays dividends in terms of insight and awareness of what's going on.
- Do bulk errands. If you have to go to the supermarket, the dry cleaners, and drop off a dress at your sister's house, plan things so you can do all three tasks in one round. It's easy to forget that when we go out, there is travelling time to consider too.

Getting more from your writing time

Okay, so you got yourself an hour a day to write – what do you do with it? Do you dive into your novel, only coming up for air when the alarm tells you it's time to stop? Do you start by

meticulously planning how you'll spend that hour, only to find that half the time is already gone and you haven't begun to write?

Ideally, you'll find a balance somewhere between the two. Planning the coming session could be something that you do at the end of the last session. That way, you won't struggle to remember what needs to be done, how far you've got, and what you want to do next. It also means that you can hit the ground running when you start the next session.

However, don't be tempted to dive in headlong to your work. You'll need to refer to your overall plan for the project which we mentioned earlier. Always keep a sense of where you are in the scheme of things, and you won't go far wrong.

Try it:

Leave time at the end of each session to look back at what you've achieved. Congratulate yourself for getting one step further to your goal. Use this information to make decisions about what you will tackle next and to check whether you are sticking closely to your overall plan (you may decide you need to make some minor changes). You might want to jot down any insights in a writing journal.

Goal setting

Writing goals tend to revolve around how much time you've got, what you want to achieve, and whether you have a deadline (e.g. from an editor). We've already talked about making time for your writing, but how do you make progress?

At the outset, you need a clear idea of both where you are and where you want to be. This may seem obvious, but even experienced writers can fall into the trap of vagueness and idealism. So, be specific – remember to use the SMART goals method (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound). For example, you could set the goal of having five magazine articles accepted for publication within the next six months.

This may seem a bit too business-like if you view yourself as someone practising a creative art, but even artists have to be organised and know what direction they're heading in. Besides, if you want to get published, you need to be professional about your work, and that includes your approach to setting goals.

Having said this, goal setting can be fun! You may find that you quite enjoy figuring out the stages in a process and estimating how long each will take. Try to imagine yourself completing each stage and marking off the milestones. If you like, plan the rewards you'll give yourself when you reach each milestone in your project or series.

Once you've done this, program it all into your time management system (your organiser, wall chart, online calendar, etc). As we said before, keep a regular check on how you're doing. Value this time as an opportunity to learn about yourself and your craft, and hopefully to grow.

Outsourcing to a Virtual Assistant

There's a lot of talk about Virtual Assistants these days – are they worth the money? Is it ethical to use people based in less developed countries? What can I ask a VA to do? Is it really my work if someone else has been helping me?

The fact is, many people simply don't have the time to do all the work it takes to launch and maintain a successful writing business. This is especially the case for those who still have to hold down a day job too. Using a Virtual Assistant is an option, among others, such as using local people, asking friends to help, or cutting down your hours in the day job.

A VA can certainly be very helpful, if you plan things right. First, you need to be clear exactly what you want help with. If it's research, produce a short but exact brief of what information you are looking for, covering what timescale, where etc. This will help your VA locate the information more swiftly, saving you both time and keeping your costs down.

Similarly, if you want help with typing, transcribing, editing, diary management, or any other administrative tasks, be very clear exactly what you want. Don't expect your VA to read your mind, or to know which method suits you best. They are skilled people, but communication is a two way street – the more you give them, the more you can get back.

Second, if you're thinking of outsourcing, be clear on the cost. Have a budget set out before you approach anyone. Ask around and find out what reasonable rates are for the work you are asking to be done. Then, be realistic about your ambitions.

Whilst it might seem a nice idea to give all your admin to someone else because you don't like doing it, ask yourself if you can honestly afford this long term. Be clear where the money will come from to fund this, and whether you can rely on it to be coming in regularly. Try to be positive, though – you could use this decision as a spur to action that encourages you to take on regular paid work to support the work you dream of doing.

Reviewing your progress

When you settle down to review your progress, you need to have your purpose in mind. Progress reviews help you make sure:

- That you are sticking to your plan, in terms of not deviating on content or context for your work. If you find you have gone astray, regular check-ins should show this up quite quickly, giving you the opportunity to adjust before you get too far off course.
- That you are on target with your milestones. If you are roughly on target, that's great! If you are way ahead of schedule, you need to ask whether you are putting enough work in at each stage, and if so, have you been too conservative in your estimates? Maybe you need to re-schedule the timings of your milestones. If you've fallen behind, what happened? Do you need to relax your schedules in future?

Don't assume that being ahead means that everything's going well. Make sure you understand why things aren't going as planned (perhaps you've been very efficient, but you may also have missed something important). If you do have extra time on your hands, invest it in your writing so that you can stay ahead.

Producing high-quality, saleable work

Sooner or later, every writer everywhere will ask themselves, 'Is my work good enough?' It's understandable, and probably necessary, to go through this.

Quality is inevitably somewhat subjective, which means you need to develop both objective and subjective thinking skills to understand where you are in terms of being good enough.

For example, there are written rules for grammar. Editors and agents will expect you to meet those standards. Don't rely on sub-editors to tidy your work up for you. Yes, they do re-work your material, but you will soon get a poor reputation if you keep turning in shoddy work.

You also need to be objective about the overall quality of your work. Pay attention to plot, structure, coherent dialogue, character development, keeping to a theme, complexity, and reader satisfaction.

If you're in doubt about these things, it could be worth hiring a freelance editor to help you understand what kind of mistakes you are making and how to work them out. You also could consider asking friends to read your edited manuscript and give feedback. You need to let them know they can be honest about it without fear of falling out with you.

On the more subjective side of things, you need to think about your market. Consider, before you start, where you want your work to be published. Be realistic about where you can reasonably expect to be published, given your level of experience. If you are just starting out, it may be better to aim for a weekly chat magazine, rather than a high-brow glossy.

Similarly, if you're writing a novel, learn what publishers are looking for, and be flexible about what you're willing to write. A writer, especially a new one, cannot afford to be too precious about what they will and won't do. The market shifts according to styles, tastes and fashions. Tap into this and you'll give yourself a competitive advantage.

On the other side of this coin is being distinctive. It's great to have favourite writers. They may well be a source of inspiration to you. However, editors and agents often want something new and original to publish. Your work needs to be from you, not a facsimile of what has gone before.

It is important to fit within a niche, but it is equally important to bring something new to the table. This means you learn to write using your own voice, looking at things from your own original point of view.

Learn to not be afraid to be heard. If you're nervous about this, you could start by reading your work aloud to yourself, and graduate onto reading to family and friends until you feel more confident.

Making sure your writing will achieve your goals

We all need goals in life. Without them, not very much would get done. However, setting goals can be a bit of an art in itself. We've already mentioned SMART goals, but sometimes you need to know where to begin.

Start thinking now of where you would like to be. Would you like regular work writing magazine articles? Would you like to build up to a published collection of short stories? Are you keen to take on a larger project such as a novel?

The most basic element of goal setting is that you need to be really honest with yourself. If you have a penchant for romantic writing, are you really being fair on yourself by trying to write a sci-fi movie script? You also need to make sure that you are not being too ambitious.

It can be fun to fantasise about your success. But if you're going to realise your dreams of being a writer, you'll need more than a dream. You need a vision that is achievable, and the faith to see it through.

Developing your vision may take you on a journey that is partly spiritual, partly hard facts. Look to what you believe in and rely on in life. Seek inspiration and guidance from that. Let your faith help shape your goals – you're going to need that faith to see things through. Then you can start to commit to that vision, and plan the actualities of how to get there.

Receiving and using feedback

As we mentioned, getting feedback on your work can be useful in building your confidence as a writer. You need to know that what you have produced actually works and people can appreciate and enjoy it. Without this knowledge, it is hard and risky to send work out to editors and agents without expecting a rejection slip a few months down the line.

Who can you go to for feedback, though? You could ask close friends and family to read your work through. You may need to provide them with some guidelines. For example, ask them to be as objective as they can be, ask for any criticism to be constructive, and tell them not to make it personal.

Alternatively, you might prefer to find someone you don't have a close personal connection with: it can be hard for friends and family to be honest, as they may worry about hurting your feelings. Good options are writers you are in touch with on social media, a writers' group you attend, or other writers you may know.

Better still, if you can afford it, ask a freelance editor to take a look. You'll get invaluable professional feedback and advice that you can use on this project and in the future. This

may seem a costly option, but it's a worthwhile investment for both the quality of feedback they give, and the industry contacts they may have.

Revising your work

So, you've written your first or second draft and you've asked a few people to read it. Their comments come back and you realise you've got some major revisions to do. How do you tackle this?

First, remember to not take it personally. They are not critiquing you as an individual, they are commenting on your progress in developing your skills as a writer.

If you take criticism personally, you'll never reach the stage where you can reasonably expect more from yourself, you'll just dwell in the doldrums of dissatisfaction and fear. Instead, use the comments you get to spur you on to nail that technique, or polish your grammar – whatever it takes to get it right.

With the right attitude, you can progress onto producing a more polished next draft. Think objectively about what people have said. If a comment seems fair, and it usually is, you need to think in practical terms what you can do about it.

Do you have the resources you need to make the most of your work? For example, do you have good word processing software, do you have contacts in the industry, do you have a presentable website or blog to use to market your own work?

What skills do you need to practise more often? Maybe you need to work on writing dialogue, or set aside some time each week for planning or keeping your work organised.

How do you solve the problems of making the changes needed to make your piece work? Have you developed a more objective attitude to work needing editing, do you brainstorm new ideas to develop a section, have you tried experimenting with using different words to add a new flavour to your piece?

Try it:

Ask yourself these questions, and be prepared to cut, edit and re-shape your work until it becomes closer to what you initially dreamed of.

Remember, everyone has to edit their work. Nobody ever produces a perfect first draft. Most writers never let anyone see their first draft. They re-work it at least once or twice before letting others loose on it.

Don't make yourself too vulnerable by sharing work in too raw a state. By the same token, don't be a perfectionist about it either. Try to find a place where you feel your work is at an acceptable standard to share.

When is it time to stop revising?

This may seem a difficult question to answer, especially for newer writers. We are all keen to impress our potential publisher (or reader) and it can be tempting to edit and edit forever. Somewhere along the line, though, you've got to call time on the revision process and submit your work.

Here are a few pointers to look out for:

- If you've taken our advice, you'll already have a target market in mind. You should know, from analysing what they publish and what they say about themselves, what they are looking for. When you meet their criteria, stop. Your work doesn't have to be perfect, just good enough. Remember that magazines, blogs, and publishers will be expecting to edit your work to meet their house standards.
- How do you feel about the work? Are you still enjoying working on it, or are you getting jaded and tired? If it's the latter – stop now! It may be that you've already over-worked your piece, or you may just need to rest for a few weeks and come back to it afresh. In either case, hacking away at it in the hope you'll get a revelation doesn't work.
- Are you satisfied with where you've come to with your piece? Are your beta-readers finding it a satisfying, enjoyable read? Does your editor have fewer and fewer suggestions to make? If you're getting to this stage – well done! You're pretty much ready to present your work.

You are the one who has to know when your work is ready. If you have chosen the right people to give feedback, and a good editor – or a fellow writer whose opinion you trust – you can be confident you've done enough.

A final few words

Hopefully, you're feeling inspired and ready to write! If you're a bit stuck, don't forget to have a go at the worksheets that come with this ebook – they're designed to help you put into practice everything you've been reading about. [You can download them from the bonuses page here.](#)

(And do feel free to dip in and out of this book whenever you need to. You may well find that a section which didn't particular apply to you or resonate with you first time round becomes suddenly handy when you're working on a different project, or a different stage of your current project.)

Writing a book, a blog, or even a single short story or magazine article can seem daunting. But writing is a process – one you can follow, step by step, until you reach your goal. That process might look a little different for every writer, but (even if you think you have no process at all), it exists!

Try it:

Pick your most important writing project, or one that you're feeling particularly stuck on. Ask yourself, 'What's the very next step I could take to go further with this?' It might be an administrative task like 'Email John to set up a coffee date, so I can pick his brains,' or it might be a writing task like 'Brainstorm possible chapters for the book.'

Ultimately, you're in control, even on days when it doesn't feel that way. One of the most wonderful things about being a writer is that your success is in your own hands. Working consistently and deliberately on writing projects, and finishing them, is far more important than simply having raw talent, or being in the right place at the right time.

If you want to go further, there's a whole world of resources out there to help you. We suggest starting with the bonuses that came with this ebook: you can find out about those and download them here, along with the worksheets:

www.aliventures.com/get-inspired-bonuses (password: *inspireme*)

You can also check out the 'Further Reading' suggestions on each of the worksheets for advice on specific writing-related topics.

While we'll both admit that being a writer isn't always easy, it's a path that we've never regretted following. We hope you'll continue with your writing journey for many years to come – maybe for the rest of your life – and we hope this book has helped you take a few extra steps on the way.

About the authors

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She has experience of setting up several blogs, and guest blogging for others. She is currently working on developing in specialist copywriting skills, keeping laughing and general survival. (Maybe she'll write about that, too!)

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