



HarperCollins e-books



How Writers Work

Ralph Fletcher

HOW WRITER WORK

Finding a Process That Works for You

Ralph Fletcher

 HarperCollins e-books
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Dedication

*To Artie Voigt,
who has always walked with me*

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The Secret of Writing

Recently I visited a fourth grade classroom. When I walked in, one girl stared at me, totally star-struck.

“I’ve never met a real live author before,” she said.

“Have you met any dead ones?” I joked. But I understood what she meant. When I was in school, I had no idea how books came into the world. Maybe the librarian wrote them! Authors were just names on the spine of a book. I never thought that writers might be real, live, buttered-toast-for-breakfast kind of people like you or me.

It’s misleading to think of writers as special creatures, word sorcerers who possess some sort of magic knowledge hidden from everyone else. Writers are ordinary people who like to write. They feel the urge to write, and scratch that itch every chance they have. Writers get their ideas down on paper using particular strategies that seem to work for them. These strategies are available to anyone who wants to be a writer.

While I was visiting that same classroom, one boy raised his hand to ask me a question.

“I read your book *Fig Pudding*,” he said. “It was sad when Brad died.” He paused and gave me a hard look. “But then I realized: You wrote the book. You made him die. Why did you make him die?”

An important moment! For the first time, it had occurred to him that books don’t get hatched out of thin air. Books are written by people who make hundreds of decisions about how to shape their texts. When you write, you, too, will have countless decisions to make: what subject to choose, how to plan and begin, which words to choose, what changes to make, etc.

Readers should prepare themselves for another important moment, for in the introduction to this book I intend to reveal The Secret Of Writing. I hope you are reading carefully because The Secret Of Writing may surprise you: There is no secret. But there *is* a process. If you like to write, there are definite steps you can take to help you reach your goals.

Certain people talk about the “writing process” as if there is one, and only one, process for writing. Wrong! In one fifth grade class I visited, the students all brainstormed on Monday, rough drafted on Tuesday, revised on Wednesday, edited on Thursday, published on Friday. Writing doesn’t work that way. Some people need less time to prewrite, more time to rough draft. I believe that the idea of a one-size-fits-all writing process has turned off some talented young writers.

True, there are interesting similarities in how various writers work, but each writer uses a process slightly different from that of other writers. I have listened to hundreds of writers describe how they work, and I’ve been amazed by how many different ways they do it Some writers draw heavily on their actual experiences; others rely on their imaginations. Some make

elaborate outlines before they start a book; others simply start writing. Many writers do a rough draft first and go back to revise later. Others revise as they go. (A few lucky ones claim that they don't have to revise at all, but I'm not sure I believe them.) For every writer who works one way, you'll find a writer who works in another.

So where does that leave you? Free to find your own way of writing, custom-made, a process that works for you. Sometimes you can only find your process through trial and error. If you're like me, your writing process will probably be a messy one.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

While every writer is different, I believe we can learn a lot from exploring the various ways writers work. But here's the problem: We write like we read—in private. The process used by most writers is hidden from view. In this book we're going to uncloak that process and make it visible. We're going to take a close look at how writers go about shaping and reshaping their texts. We're going to talk about prewriting, getting started, going with the flow, rereading, revising, proofreading, and publishing. I'm including several interviews from professional writers whose work you may know, so you can learn exactly how they work.

Think of this book as a buffet line filled with all kinds of food, all you can eat. You probably won't eat everything. Go through the chapters and decide for yourself which strategies or ideas you want to put on your plate. You may not know which ones to choose unless you try each of them at least once.

Good writing isn't forged by magic or hatched out of thin air. Good writing happens when human beings take particular steps to take control of their sentences, to make their words do what they want them to do. It's my hope that this book helps you to find a process that fits your personal style, one that will help you move your writing up to the next level.



ONE

A Place Where Words Can Grow

I keep pens and pencils within reach wherever I am. My favorite writing spot is in my bed.

—Jerdine Nolan

Lately I've been feeling unsettled. Shook up. Discombobulated. I'm smack in the midst of moving myself and my family from Alabama to New Hampshire. We are renting a home while our new house is being built. Most of our furniture, books, and clothes are still packed in boxes.

In some ways I don't have much to complain about. I'm writing in a large, airy office with windows on three sides that look out into the forest. It's a nice room, a great office, except for one small thing—it's not my space. The books on all the bookshelves are someone else's books. The desk, light, rug, easy chair, photos on the wall belong to someone else. Right now all my personal belongings are packed up in boxes. I'm writing here, but I'm counting the days until I can write in my own space, surrounded by my own stuff.

Walk into a restaurant and your stomach starts to growl. Walk into a gym and your body prepares to sweat while you exercise. Our brains are conditioned to know what to expect in particular spaces.

The same thing is true about writing.

Your writing place doesn't have to be a spacious office with windows looking out at the forest. It could be an easy chair in a corner of a room or a breakfast nook in the kitchen. It could be a place in the woods where you can lean back against a tree or rock. You may have to try out several different writing places before you settle on one that feels right.

Many people write best when they are away from all the distractions of home. Some people like to write in a noisy cafeteria; others need a quiet place like a library. I like public places where I can write surrounded by strangers babbling around me. Airplanes are okay, but I usually get squashed between two huge people. I need to be able to stretch out.

I love writing in rooms with tall ceilings and huge windows. I also like to write while sitting by a window in a busy coffee shop. Somehow the combination of the talk, the coffee smell, the sunlight pouring over me and my notebook make it a great place for me to write.

"Writing is so compact, so portable, so easy to take with me wherever I go," says Jerdine Nolan, author of *Harvey Potter's Balloon Farm* and other books. "I hardly ever write at a desk, but there are times when I have to. I like to write in unexpected places like airports, train stations, the passenger seat of a moving car, on trains or planes. I like the idea of sitting still while I'm moving very fast. Seeing scenery flash by me is also very stimulating. For a while I even wrote in a very small closet!"

One way to make your writing place comfortable is to surround yourself with the things that help you write. I set up my office so I have certain objects around me when I work: crystals I've dug up

trilobite fossils, sand dollars, an owl pellet somebody sent me. On the wall I've hung a photograph of me when I was five years old, my brother Jim was four, Elaine was three, Tom was two, Bobby was one. These things remind me of roots—not only my family roots but also deep roots of ancient life on this planet.

I like to have certain books within easy reach when I write. I use books (novels and poetry) for inspiration. Other books (dictionary, thesaurus, and a book on grammar and usage) are important resources, too. When I'm putting words to paper I like to know that there are plenty of other words close by.

Find a place that feels right. Get a good place to sit. If you're outside, get a clipboard so you have something solid to write on. Make sure you have what you need to start writing. These may seem like small details, but I have found they matter a great deal. Just as a carpenter has tools particular to his or her trade, so does a writer—pens, a notebook, paper. If you have these tools in your writing place, you won't have to go rummaging around when it's time to write. Everything you need will be right where you want it.

When you come right down to it, *you* are the place where your words will grow. But most writers find it invaluable to have a regular writing place, a physical space, where they can water and weed their garden of words.



TWO

Finding an Idea

I get my ideas from living my life widened and awake. I sit on the edge of chairs. I pay attention to wherever I am.

—Drew Lamm

One day my friend Karen and her husband decided to surprise their seven-year-old twins. They woke the boys before dawn and drove them to the beach to watch the sunrise. One twin was sleepy and decided to stay in the car. But the other walked out on a rock jetty with Karen. He was mesmerized by the way the light bloomed and shone as the sun came up. At one point they saw a fiery core of light on the horizon. The boy turned to his mother and exclaimed, “Mommy!” He pointed at the horizon. “I can see my soul dancing!”

This is the kind of story that makes us smile. Younger kids say that sort of thing all the time, right? But as we get older we get more rooted in the “real” world. More and more, it matters to us what other people think. So we stop seeing our souls dancing on the horizon. Or, if we do see it, we don’t talk about it out loud. And we hesitate to write it down out of fear that someone might laugh at us. That’s too bad, because a lot of terrific ideas never get written about.

What do you see? Smell? Dream? Notice? Anything like that can be the spark of an idea to write about. Ideas can jump into your head at the most mundane moments of the day.

“For a long time I thought my ideas lived in my medicine cabinet in the bathroom,” says poet Kristine George. “It seemed as if each time I took out my toothbrush and toothpaste I’d get an idea.”

One day you’re taking a bath. Suddenly it strikes you that your knuckles look like an elephant’s knees. A single thought like that could be the start of a poem.

My ideas often begin like that. I use my writer’s notebook to catch ideas for my writing. (If you haven’t done so, you should read the book I wrote entitled *A Writer’s Notebook: Unlocking the Writer within You*.) I think of my notebook as a net with holes so tiny that no idea can slip through.

A few months ago I was swimming in the ocean. On the ride home I noticed that the drying seawater made my skin feel tight. Later, I jotted this entry into my writer’s notebook:

On the way home from the beach, the drying sea-water makes my skin feet tight, like all of a sudden it’s one size too small for me.

Eventually this thought turned into the following poem:

Driving Home

Our car is a seashell

in an ocean of darkness.

**There's sand in my hair,
nose, ears, bathing suit**

**I'm coated with dried salt
and my skin feels tight**

**like it has become one size
too small.**

Most of my ideas come from my life, but at times it has taken another person to help me appreciate an idea. About a year ago I had dinner with Eve Bunting, one of my favorite authors. I told her my plans for the Christmas holiday:

“This Christmas my family is going to visit my sister Kathy,” I said. “She is very, very pregnant. Her due date is around December twenty-fifth. I think it will be fun for my kids to be with a pregnant woman around that holiday. It might help them experience Christmas in a whole new way.”

Eve Bunting leaned forward.

“That’s a good picture-book idea,” she said with a twinkling smile. I hadn’t realized how true that was until she said it.

The topics to write about are as countless as the stars. I believe that the best ideas live inside of us. It’s our job to dig them out. Every writer gets stuck from time to time, so here are a few ideas to get your imagination flowing.

Family tradition. This is especially good if your tradition is an unusual one. I have a friend whose family had a ritual for whenever one of the kids lost a tooth. The mother would deposit the tooth in a “tooth bank.” There were seven kids in that family, so after a while the bank got pretty full. Think about what a good horror writer would do with an idea like this!

Collections. I know a boy who likes to collect used bandages. Most of them are stained with dried blood. A strange collection like that might provide the seed for a good story.

Special place. When my wife was a girl she used to go to a wardrobe in the basement where her mother’s nursing uniforms were hung. The outfits made it look like there was a person in there, and she gave her the willies!

You may have a particular spot—secret passageway, attic nook, the inside of a hollow tree, your grandmother’s kitchen—that could provide the setting for a story of your own.

Your place in the family. Are you the oldest? Youngest? An only child? Adopted? Your slot in the family has a great impact on who you are. Listen to this story written by Tanya White, an eighth grader:

My Big Stranger

Last summer my parents went to Hawaii. When they came home they had an unexpected visitor with them. A girl named Mandy. She was tall and pretty and about two years older than me.

“Meet your big sister,” Dad said on the driveway.

For a second I just stood there, speechless. Then I turned around and ran up to my

bedroom.

~~—Later on the story came out. Dad had a baby with another woman when he was in the military, stationed in Hawaii. That was a few years before I was born but he never told anyone in our family about it, not even Mom. But finally he felt he had to get it off his chest.~~

“I thought you’d want to know,” he told me, and I did, I mean I do. I’m real curious about Mandy. But right now I feel betrayed. I always had a special place—the oldest kid in our family. The first baby Dad played Patty Cake Patty Cake with. The first baby he sung to sleep. Or so I thought.

Moving. Did you leave behind a close friend when you moved from your old house?

Life changes. When I was little, my parents used to plop my sister, brother, and me into the bath together. This seemed quite natural since we were only one year apart. But one day I realized that I didn’t want to take a bath with my sister. I was too big for that.

Did your big brother go off to college? Did your sister and her baby have to move home to live with you? Was there one night when you realized you were too big to jump into your parents’ bed during a thunderstorm? Any change in your life will give you excellent material to write about.

What frightened you when you were little (or what still frightens you)? As a four-year-old I lay in bed, desperately needing to go to the bathroom, but convinced that the moment I stepped out of bed two bony hands would reach out from beneath my bed and grab me by the ankles!

I hope these ideas jog your memory and help you find a rich topic to write about. Lists like this are fun, but the truth is that the best ideas don’t appear on any lists of “story starters.” The best topics are highly personal, quirky and—well—even a little bit weird. (Anthony, a fifth grader, wrote about his all-time favorite sport: whiffle-ball.)

“Write about what makes you different,” says Sandra Cisneros, author of *House on Mango Street*.

Remember: The challenge isn’t simply to write about the idea, but to dig down and write about feelings connected to it. Whatever topic you choose, you need to ask yourself: What *angle* will I take when I write about it? Most writers find that broad, general topics don’t work nearly as well as topics with a particular angle or focus. Instead of writing all about the beach, write about how the beach looks at sunset. You could write all about sleepaway camp, but you will probably have better results if you narrow your topic to describing the nasty camp food, for instance, or the story of how one annoying counselor drove everybody crazy.

In the following piece, Jessica, a fourth grader, writes about the relationship between her and her little sister. Notice how she focuses her topic around the questions her little sister asks.

My Sister’s Silly Questions

My sister’s questions are so-o-o-o-o silly. Once she asked me, “How cold is cold?”

I said to my mother: “I’m going to faint.” Sometimes my sister is a pest. But I still love her!

Once she asked my mother: “Why do birds fly?”

So my mother said: “That’s how they get exercise.” Now we know that’s not really true. But what do you say to a child who is four years old?

I like my sister’s questions because they give me something to think about. Sometimes it’s fun answering my sister’s questions, other times it’s not. Once she asked me: “How come you were born first?” Another time she asked: “Why is the

summer called summer?”

~~Sometimes I get so-o-o-o-o mad I don't know what to say! What's worse, my sister is getting older and the questions are getting harder!~~



THREE

Brainstorming

I write for a couple of hours every morning. But it's what I do during the other twenty-two hours that allows me to do that writing.

—Don Murray

I recently visited a class of fourth graders.

“Do you know what brainstorming is?” I asked the class.

One boy raised his hand. “Is that sort of like meditating?” he asked.

“Well, not exactly,” I said with a short laugh. But then again, maybe it is. Like meditation, brainstorming invites you into a quiet room where you can think deeply about your subject before you start shaping your text.

Brainstorming is sometimes called *prewriting* or even *rehearsal*. Whatever you call it, it refers to all the thinking, preparing, and mental jump-starting that takes place before you start a particular piece of writing. It's a crucial part of what every writer does.

Important: The ideas in this chapter are intended as suggestions only! Some writers do a great deal of brainstorming before they do their actual writing. Other people prefer to simply start writing and see what happens. The start-writing-and-see-what-happens people discover how to organize their thoughts while they write.

What kind of writer are you? Chances are you won't know until you try a few brainstorming ideas. I suggest you read through this chapter and find some ideas that appeal to you. Try these ideas once and see if they help your writing. If they do, great, use them again. If not, try something else.

I do two kinds of brainstorming. The first kind is open-ended, where I'm casting a wide net, trying to be alert and aware of ideas I might write about. I usually use my writer's notebook for this kind of brainstorming. A writer's notebook gives you an easy, informal, no-pressure place to gather “see ideas” you can come back to later.

But like most writers, I do another, more focused kind of prewriting that allows me to play with an idea before I actually begin writing. Let's look at several ways you can prewrite on a particular topic. You can use the first one without even touching a pen or a piece of paper.

Talk. When I lived in New York City I often used to invite a friend to meet me at a Hungarian coffee shop. I'd buy my friend a cup of coffee and Danish. In return, he or she would patiently listen while I talked through whatever I happened to be writing about. (I found this especially helpful when I worked on nonfiction articles.)

Talking allowed me to get comfortable with my subject. And I learned to listen to the words I used to describe my subject. At certain times while I talked, my friend would nod, or smile, or lean forward, or seem confused. This told me I needed to give more information or a clearer explanation.

While talking about your writing can be helpful, I'd also be cautious. There is a danger that if you talk about an idea too much you can talk the mystery out of it.

"I'll brainstorm ideas in my notebook, but I never discuss what I'm working on with anyone," poet Kristine George says. "For some reason, talking seems to sap my energy and enthusiasm for an idea or a project."

Author Drew Lamm agrees. "I definitely don't talk to anyone," she says. "If I talk I lose that initial energy that's crucial."

You might want to try this strategy and see if it works for you. In my experience, a little bit of talking goes a long way.

List ideas. Lists are a great way to generate ideas. Remember in the previous chapter I got the idea about how the drying seawater makes your skin feel tight, like all of a sudden it's "one size too small"? At first I wrote that poem and stopped there. But later I returned to the beach with my family. Watching my kids burying each other in the sand and romping in the surf got me thinking about putting together a collection of beach poems. I started by making a list:

General Ideas on a Collection of Beach Poems

Beach Plums (title?)

Hearing the sea when you hold a shell to your ear

seagulls complaint sandpipers

Waves—tsunami!

Burying my brother

Baby eating sand

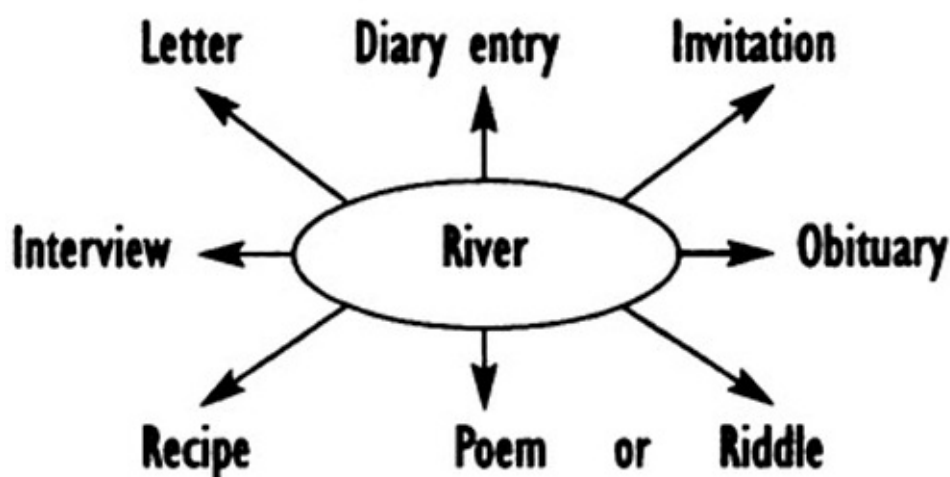
Old guy with a metal detector

Nobody argues at the beach, nobody fights

Sandcastles—trying to hold back the sea

This list of beach poems became the start of my recent poetry book, *Have You Been to the Beach Lately?* I think you'll find that lists are an excellent way to generate thinking about any idea.

Make a web. You may have done this before. Put your main idea in the center of the wheel, and make a "spoke" going to each connected idea. I have just begun writing a creative nonfiction book about a local river. My idea is to let the river itself speak through lots of different kinds of writing. To explore my thinking, I sketched the following web:



A web like this one is a good way to remind you how much you know about your topic, and identify gaps where you may need to develop your idea further.

Free write on an idea. The idea of free writing is pretty simple: Don't think, just write! Get a stopwatch or timer. Now give yourself three to five minutes to write. You can write about a topic, or just write whatever comes into your head. Write whatever you want: words, ideas, fragments, phrases. Separate the words you write with commas or arrows, if you want. The idea is not to let your pen leave the page. Don't think: Write.

You know that nonfiction book I just mentioned about the river? Well, this morning I did a five-minute free write on the idea:

river, river, river, river of water, downriver, tumble down rock stairs, rocks, mossy rocks, slippery, waterfalls, river of moist air on the bridge, white water, white sound, trout, speckled, lamprey river, lamprey eel, eel, leech, bloodsuckers, river animals, river insects, water striders, water bugs, water people, sunbathers at the swimming hole, kayakers, fishermen, man with high rubber boots, walking down river like he's walking down a stream...

Three by three by three. My wife JoAnn has had good luck using this idea with her students. She gives them exactly three minutes to write three ideas on each of three topics. This is a great way to jump-start your mind if you're feeling a little groggy. You might look through your writer's notebook for an idea, or pick something you've been itching to write about. You'll want to have a stopwatch handy so you can time yourself.

Try an informal outline. Okay, okay, I know what you're probably thinking: Horrors! Not a detailed outline—anything but that! You noticed that I said an *informal* outline. I'm not talking about the detailed outline with the *I, A, a*, etc. What I'm talking about is a lot simpler and, I think, more useful.

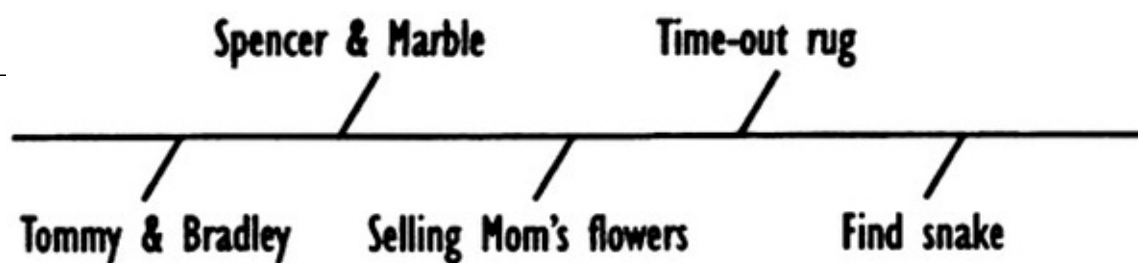
I use an informal outline to help me chunk my ideas before I write. Let's say I'm going to write an information piece about the South American rain forest. A detailed outline probably won't help me because at the beginning I don't know all the information I'll be gathering. Instead I'll use a simple one. It might look like this:

- 1) **The Rain Forest Introduction**
- 2) **Benefits of Rain Forest**
- 3) **Destruction of Rain Forest**
- 4) **Conclusion: What Can We Do to Preserve the Rain Forest?**

A simple outline like this creates four empty "drawers." Now I'll be able to place each new fact I gather into the right drawer. This will help me separate ideas and organize my thinking. I know it will be helpful in organizing my writing as well.

If you use an outline, be careful that it doesn't limit your thinking. Writer Ben Mikaelson says, "I'm not much on outlines because as I write, I get to know my characters better and they end up doing things I could never have predicted with an outline."

Make a time line. This strategy is helpful with narrative writing. I used a time line while putting together the story for my new book *Tommy Trouble and the Magic Marble*:



A time line like this can also be helpful when you're working on a biography or writing about historical events. Make a line, and write down when each important event took place.

A brainstorming strategy will help jog your memory and generate information you might have forgotten. But you need to take it a step further. When you are finished, go back and reread it. Ask yourself these important questions:

Where should I start?

What can I leave out?

How might I organize my material?

For example, which ideas could be clumped together?

Here's the bottom line: Whatever prewriting you do should build your energy to write, not deflate that energy. I've known too many writers who devote so much time and energy to their prewriting that they are absolutely sick of the topic before they even start writing about it! **Beware of prewriting that drains your life out of your topic.** If you feel that happening, stop prewriting and start writing!

Most of the ideas you find in this chapter are done with pen in hand. But I have found that often my best brainstorming takes place when I'm not writing at all but when I'm just living—taking a walk, taking a shower, dreaming while I sleep. I might be making a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich when all of a sudden an idea jumps into my head. A writer is always alert for ideas that can feed the writing.



FOUR

A Salad of Ideas by Gordon Korman

When Gordon Korman was in seventh grade, he wrote a novel as an English project. The book, This Can't Be Happening at MacDonal'd Hall, got published when he was in junior high! He has written lots of terrific books, including Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire, The Sixth Grade Nickname Game, and Nose Pickers From Outer Space. Read about how he brainstormed the idea for The Chicken Doesn't Skate.

I do a lot of school visits, and I turn that into advance brainstorming. Every time I pick up an idea for a story, a character, or even a character name, I type it into a little electronic pocket organizer I travel with. Then, when I'm brainstorming for a novel, I just flip through my "idea file."

A lot of stuff happens in my books, so brainstorming is really important for me. Sometimes, ideas that seem totally unconnected come together in one of my books. My favorite example is *The Chicken Doesn't Skate* (Scholastic). It's about an ice hockey team whose mascot is a chicken. But it really took shape when several "old" ideas from my pocket organizer got kind of mixed up in my head.

First came the chicken story, which I picked up on an author visit in Michigan. It's absolutely, one hundred percent true. A sixth grade science class did a project called "The Complete Life Cycle of a Link in the Food Chain." They adopted a baby chick—just hatched—and raised it in school. They built a mini-chicken coop, signed up for feedings and cleanings, and fought for the privilege of taking the subject home on weekends. After three months, when the chicken was a fully grown hen, the plan was to kill it, cook it, and eat it. Honest, I'm not making this up. Every student would get one piece of the chicken he or she had helped to raise.

By this time, though, the students had become quite attached to this chicken. They'd watched it grow up, after all. And I suppose a chicken can be cute. They'd even named it—Henrietta. As it sat in that their beloved class pet was really a McNugget-in-training, they caused a huge uproar in the school and, later, the whole town. Even the parents got involved in this major plea for mercy.

That was my original idea, but I knew I needed more. So I flipped through my organizer, and I found this old entry: Switching Narrators. It came from a book I'd read where every chapter had a new narrator. I thought it was so cool that the same events could seem totally different, depending on who was doing the talking. I wanted to try a kids' novel in the same style.

Well, this chicken story was perfect for it. Each narrator could have a completely different view of Henrietta. There could be chicken lovers and chicken haters; a brainy science kid who sees Henrietta as an experiment and nothing more; an animal rights activist; a teacher who is caught in the middle.

Plus—and this is what led to the next idea—if one of the school sports teams became convinced that the chicken was good luck, they would instantly make it their mascot. I chose hockey, and it's not just because I'm Canadian. Hockey players are notoriously superstitious. They would scream twice as loud as anybody else when the time came to take Henrietta to the butcher shop. After all, it can't be too

well for a team if somebody fricassees their mascot!

One final “old” idea made the story complete. In my pocket organizer I found an entry called Horror Movie. It was about a kid who writes hilariously bad screenplays for horror films—movies with titles like *Terror In The Sewer*, *Picnic of Death*, and *The Brain-Eaters*. It had nothing to do with chickens or hockey. But it turned out to be the element that tied together all of the other stuff.

I put this writer of horror movies in the class that’s doing the chicken project. Suddenly, chickens mysteriously appear in his screenplays. Alien invaders turn out to be interstellar chickens; a mad scientist transmogrifies the entire Super Bowl into poultry. Baffled, he comes to the conclusion that his writing will be haunted forever by chickens if he doesn’t protect Henrietta from the frying pan. His participation in the kidnapping gets him recruited by the hockey team as their new goalie. And he wins the championship, saves the chicken, and helps earn first prize in the science fair—all in the same afternoon.

Confused? Trust me, it makes sense when it’s down on paper. That’s another thing about my brainstorming process. Because so many different ideas get blended together, it’s hard to recognize the original seeds in the finished novel. But that’s also what makes my job so much fun. The story stays alive, always growing, always changing, even writing itself a little bit. I never know for sure how many salad of ideas will get mixed together—at least not until I type the last line on my word processor. But the brainstorming phase is where I try to get the ingredients right.



FIVE

Breaking the Ice: Getting Started

A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step.

—Lao Tsu (sixth century B.C.)

A piece of paper. On some days it seems inviting, like a newly opened box of chocolates. Like the silky surface of your best friend's pool on a hot summer day. But some days it seems to scowl up in an unfriendly way, demanding, *Who do you think you are, huh? How dare you disturb my perfect emptiness and whiteness?*

You are you. And you have something important to say. But you won't say anything if you don't make a start. You have to begin.

Many writers find that breaking the ice—beginning—is one of the hardest parts of the writing process. As a writer, you face that hurdle every time you sit down to write.

You may be thinking, *Wait. Didn't I already read a chapter called Finding An Idea? Doesn't that break the ice?* Well, yes and no. It's important to have something to write about, but it's also necessary to start writing about it. Those are two separate steps. The world is full of people who will tell you, "I have a great idea for a book [or story]"—but they never quite get around to making a start.

There is a gap between getting the inspiration/idea and beginning to write about it. During that gap, a flock of distractions, doubts, second-guesses, and negative voices come swooping in.

"For me, rough drafting is like facing a monster in the dark," says author Ben Mikaelson. "As long as the story is still in my head, it is still perfect. When I start writing it becomes flawed, and it's a struggle."

It's perfectly okay to wait before you start writing about an idea. I have a few ideas that I don't feel quite ready to tackle. But once you know you're ready, it's up to you to make a start. Even a small one.

Write one word. Then another.

On certain days writing the first word feels like sticking my toe into the cold lake. At other times writing even that first word feels like plunging headlong into deep water.

It is important to be gentle with yourself, especially at the beginning. Keep your goals modest. Maybe you're not in good enough shape to do fifty push-ups. But you can do one. And once you do that one, you can probably do a few more. Okay, you did five push-ups today. Tomorrow you can shoot for six, or even seven.

It's exactly the same with writing. You probably won't write too much when you start. One paragraph is fine. Two paragraphs is terrific. A whole page of writing is heroic.

Don't expect profound thoughts or brilliant poetry to flow out of your pen. If you do, and nothing comes, you'll get so depressed you'll stop writing. Lower your standards enough so you can get going.

something down on paper. And whatever you do, don't beat yourself up if what you write sounds pretty awful. Start. Begin. Write.

Here's the first poem in my book *Ordinary Things*:

Walking

Time to leave my desk

and leave the house,

pulling the door behind.

I write the way I walk

starting out all creaky,

sort of stumbling along,

looking for a rhythm.

Each footstep is like a word

as it meets the blank page

followed by a pause

before the next step:

step, step, word ...



SIX

Going with the Flow

If it is winter in the book, spring surprises me when I look up.

—Bernard Malamud

You start writing something, and you're excited because you think it might turn into a longer story or —who knows?—maybe even a book. Great! But this initial burst of enthusiasm doesn't last very long. Too soon you find yourself getting tired, petering out. The writing is harder than you expected. You get all tangled up in one sentence. The words come slower and slower. Your mind wanders, you get distracted by a TV program, and you abandon the project.

Sound familiar? I'm describing something that happens to all writers. Some writing days get me so frustrated I want to give up writing forever. But it's not as hopeless as it sounds. (See the chapter titled "Writer's Block and Other Monsters" later in this book.) In fact, there are concrete steps you can take to make sure the words keep flowing.

I don't claim to be the greatest writer on Earth. But I have learned that there are definite things you can do to keep the writing flowing so the words earned that add up to something, and you say what you want to say.

Read your way back into an unfinished piece of writing. Yesterday you started a piece of writing. But today when you pick it up again you can't exactly remember what you were thinking, how you planned to write it. This can be frustrating. When this happens it can feel like you have to start over, and you can lose interest in the project.

The first thing I do when I return to an unfinished piece of writing? I read what I wrote the day before. I read my words, enjoying the good parts, listening to the rhythms of the words. Often I'll even read it out loud. While doing this, I try to get the flavor of the writing. Now I can continue with what I was working on.

Separate the writing from the correcting. Most people speak about two or three hundred words per minute. But they write much more slowly—maybe twenty words per minute. Let's say while you are writing you stop frequently to look up the spellings of words in the dictionary. That takes a lot of time. Now you're only averaging ten words per minute. Your steady writing flow has been reduced to a mere trickle.

Rough drafting is the time for getting your thoughts down on the paper. Later, you can go back and make sure the spelling, punctuation, and grammar are all correct. But first you need to write words, lots of words.

Let's say I'm working on a rough draft of a story. I write the word *encyclopedia*, but I'm not sure how to spell it. For now I might just write *enc*, circle it, and continue writing. Later, I'll return to the word and look it up. I know some young writers who underline a word they know is spelled

incorrectly. That way they can easily find the word later when they want to correct it.

~~The writer Jacqueline Jackson puts it this way. When the fish are biting, you don't stop to clean the fish you have caught. You can do that later. You put another piece of bait on your hook and throw your line back into the water so you can catch more.~~

It's exactly the same with writing. When your ideas are coming fast and furious, keep your pencil to the paper. Don't do anything to interrupt the flow.

Don't be hyper-critical! Connor writes a sentence, crosses it out, writes another, crosses that out, too. Jill begins by writing three sentences, then crumples up her paper and throws it onto the floor. Melissa erases so often her paper wears through and rips.

Everybody knows writers like this. Try to identify whatever it is you do that gets in the way of your writing. Many of us have a little voice in our heads that says, *This stinks! This is weak! Hah! A first grader could write better than this!* It's important to silence this voice, gag it, tell it to go away, and come back much later.

Relax. Have fun with your writing. Make yourself as comfortable as possible. Being comfortable means feeling like yourself, which is so important if you hope to write anything worthwhile. I know a high-school girl who needs to have a little bowl of apple slices to make herself comfortable while she writes. I find that even having the right clothes matters a great deal. In my closet there are certain flannel shirts, cotton sweaters, and well-worn jeans that I think of as "writing clothes" because I feel so relaxed in them. You may find that it helps to change from school clothes into play clothes before you sit down to write.

Take your time. Many writers get frustrated when their sentences don't come out right. Or they have so many ideas in their heads, they can't possibly get it all on the paper. This can happen to a professional writer, too.

"Sometimes I get overwhelmed by how much more there is to say, especially if I'm writing a short story or novel," says writer Drew Lamm. "I stop myself immediately and say, 'Go back to the last word you wrote. You can write the next word. Then go to the next word after that...'" That way I don't overwhelm myself and get back to the work/play at hand."

Count words. Think small. A few sentences makes a paragraph. A few paragraphs makes a page. Even a page or two is a pretty good writing output. Ernest Hemingway, a famous American writer, wrote about two hundred and fifty words—one page daily—but he created a body of work that endures long after his death.

Donald Murray believes that writers need to break big tasks into smaller ones. He is the person who taught me about counting words, a simple technique that has been a huge help to my work, especially when I'm working on a long piece of writing. Yesterday I wrote 798 words of this book. The day before that I wrote 947. Today I have written 374 words, so far. My goal is to write at least 750 words before I quit for the day. I will not finish this book today, but when I write my 750th word I will have the satisfaction of knowing that I reached my goal.

Give yourself a "writing reward." I like to reward myself after I write well or complete a difficult writing task I had been dreading. It doesn't have to be a big thing. I might go to a favorite coffee shop in the afternoon, take a walk, or indulge in a chunk of dark chocolate. Try it. Rewarding yourself is a way of patting yourself on the back and saying, *Good job*. It's important to be your own biggest fan.

Are you still working on a writing project and running out of gas? If so, consider this one final bit of advice:

Make sure your topic interests you. About a year ago, I had what I thought would be a fun idea

for a picture book: *First Things First*. The book would describe all the “firsts” in my life. My first favorite food (besides Mom’s milk) was macaroni and cheese. Don’t ask me why, but my first word was *bazooka*. And the first thing that frightened me was the vacuum.

I began to write *First Things First*, and had gotten about halfway through when I began to run out of steam. It had seemed like a cute idea when I first thought of it, but the more I wrote the more I realized how little it interested me. At this point an alarm started ringing in my head, because I had learned that if I’m not interested in what I’m writing about, my readers won’t be much interested either. Quickly, thankfully, mercifully, I pulled the plug and abandoned this story.

Katherine Paterson says there must be an “emotional core” at the heart of every good poem or story. In other words, the writer needs to write it from deep inside. If that emotional core is missing and the writing is going badly, it may be a signal that it’s time to seek a different topic to write about.

Think of writing as talking on paper. Imagine that you are seeing your favorite cousin for the first time in four months and you can’t stop talking. Try to get that same talky feeling when you put your pencil to the paper. Let the words flow. I give lots of suggestions for writing with voice in my book *Live Writing: Breathing Life into Your Words*.

If you’re lucky, you will get to a point while writing where you lose track of time, you stop worrying about the spelling, and you lose yourself in the material. At that moment, the line between “work” and “play” vanishes, the outside world disappears, and you’re aware of nothing but the words you are creating with words. That’s a terrific feeling, and the more you write the more you will feel it. I call it living inside a story (or poem), and it’s a wonderful place to live.



SEVEN

Interview with Drew Lamm

Drew Lamm's books include The Prog Frince: A Mixed-Up Tale, Sea Lion Roars, and the short story "Stay True" in the anthology Stay True: Short Stories for Strong Girls compiled by Marilyn Singer. Her writing style is a mirror of Drew herself, funny, warm, playful, witty, energetic, and full of wonderful wordplay.

Why do you write? I mean, what's in it for you?

Writing is the possibility of falling in love. Every time I pick up my pen there's the chance that I'll have that astonishing feeling. Because I never know when a poem or story will emerge with a perfect fit. And I'll be delighted by it. Love it. Want to read it over and over again. And feel amazed that it's here somehow because of me.

When I write, parts of my soul emerge. It's like peering at a water droplet under a microscope—like it appears that you couldn't see before. There's hidden life inside of us and writing is the microscope that reveals it.

Where do you tend to get your ideas?

I get my ideas from living my life wide-eyed and awake. I sit on the edge of my chair. I pay attention to wherever I am. My writing notebook is with me most always, and I often think I'm a much more interesting person with my notebook than without because it keeps me alert. With paper at hand, an idea that flies by gets a place to land.

Sometimes a line of prose or poetry will bump into me almost as a physical sensation and I know that if I write it down immediately and follow after it, something will be there. Other times I hear a phrase spoken or read a line of poetry that moves my mind into a new place, and suddenly want to follow these new ideas.

What kind of prewriting/brainstorming do you find helpful? Do you outline? List? Make a web?

No! I know there are writers who organize all over the place. I'm not one. And I definitely don't talk to anyone. Ideas bring with them an energy to write them. If I talk about them instead, I lose that initial energy that's crucial.

Most all my beginnings or rough drafts start in my notebook. Once I begin to see the shape of what I'm writing, I often switch over to my computer. Except with poetry. I stay with pen and ink 'til the very end with poetry.

Lots of writers find it hard to start writing. Do you?

Usually I start because I have a strong feeling deep in my gut that I have to begin something. An idea hits me—whonk—and I have to follow it and write.

When it's a normal-nothing-knocking-on-my-brains kind of day I read poetry to get me off the ground and up into flight Or I write a bunch of slop and don't worry about it. I figure I'm just exercising. C

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