

# 8½ Steps to Writing Faster, Better



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*Plumbers don't get plumber's block, and doctors don't get doctor's block; why should writers be the only profession that gives a special name to the difficulty of working?*

– Philip Pullman

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“ The main difficulty with writing is that no one ever *taught* you how to do it. At school—whether high school or college—it was sink or swim. You cranked out the essays, hating every step along the way. Sure, the teachers graded your work, putting little red marks all over it to correct spelling and grammar mistakes. But did they ever tell you *how* to write? Not likely. ”

## INTRODUCTION

### A Quick Word

*You don't have to suffer to write;  
adolescence is enough suffering for anyone.*

– Paraphrased from John Ciardi

If you don't know how to do it, writing hurts. It's boring and tedious. It makes you feel inept and inadequate. You sit at your computer, staring into the flickering screen, waiting desperately for inspiration. When a few words finally spring to mind, you type rapidly but look at them for mere seconds before hitting the backspace-delete key. *Dammit, I just can't get it right.*

Writing makes you feel stressed. You know it's an important skill. You realize that “good communicators” – the ones who can write killer memos and persuasive materials that make clients ecstatic – earn more money and have more fun than those who don't. But you never feel you're in control of your writing; instead, it controls you. You spend so much time calculating word counts that you start to feel like a dieter operating in reverse. While the weight-watcher wants to lose pounds, you want to *gain words*. But the word count needle moves so slowly it seems stuck.

Writing takes too much time. You'd like to be able to finish that short article in an hour or that report in an afternoon, but you realize it's hopeless. You just can't work that fast. That's bad news if you have a boss, because he or she wants the project *right away*, and you just know the deadline is going to mean another late night at the office. And it's even worse news if you have a client. Then it's not just your pride at risk – it's your income. Time is money, and you can almost hear the dollars trickling away as your fingers fumble over the keyboard.

### A tantalizing taste of writing freedom

But then, every once in a long while, something strange happens. You discover you *can* write brilliantly. Your hands fly across the keyboard, trying to keep up with the words flowing freely from your brain. You write as though you have propellers attached to your fingers. It feels fantastic. There's just one problem.

You can't do it regularly; you have no control over it. It's like bumping into a seldom-seen friend at a coffee shop. When it happens, it's a fluke – a happy accident – and, of course, you're thrilled. But you can't *make* it happen. You just have to wait for it.

Or do you?

## Why you didn't learn to write in college

The main difficulty with writing is that no one ever *taught* you how to do it. At school – whether high school or college – it was sink or swim. You cranked out the essays, hating every step along the way. Sure, the teachers graded your work, putting little red marks all over it to correct spelling and grammar mistakes. But did they ever tell you *how* to write – beyond telling you not to leave all the work until the night before it's due? Not likely.

Many teachers and most parents assumed writing was largely a question of discipline. If only you put your posterior to the chair a little sooner, or a little longer, then the article, report or essay would be done by now. You just needed to *apply* yourself.

This “buckle down and do it” attitude permeates much of our society – from the gym to the workplace. And although this credo is partly true (since we all have to do *some* tasks we don't enjoy each day), brute forcing yourself to write will likely make you miserable. I know. I did it.

## What I learned from the school of hard knocks

I started my writing life in weekly newspapers. I developed many skills there, but not how to write easily and fluently. Something about the distance of the deadline – days away instead of hours – gave a false leisure to the whole enterprise. *Story? Yeah, I'll get around to it. . . tomorrow . . .*

Of course, deadline day was another matter. Have you ever heard how medical doctors describe the field of anesthesia? They say it's 59 minutes of boredom punctuated by one minute of total and complete panic. That's life at a weekly, too. It's feet on the desk for several days, procrastinating. Then, when there's almost no more time left, you hunker down and write.

But finally, after a few years paying those sorts of dues, I'd built up enough credentials to be able to land my first job at a daily. I started by managing the book section. At last, I'd entered the big leagues – as an editor, no less. For a while, I was busy dealing with freelance writers, choosing stories off the wires and writing headlines. But all too soon the day came when I had to write on deadline. My über-boss, a tall, barrel-chested Scot who had a soft spot for literature and poetry, had discovered that British novelist Doris Lessing had just been caught writing under an

assumed name. It didn't matter that I had no hope of interviewing the novelist. He wanted a story for the next edition.

Talk about a crisis! I had no training in how to write fast. I looked around the newsroom and saw myself surrounded by seasoned pros who cranked out stories while arguing with their spouses, planning their next visit to the press club or checking on the antics of their kids. (Much later, I would discover many of them had writing difficulties, too.)

## Writing by procrastination

Desperate, I did what every panicked writer does. I researched. I trudged to the morgue – that's newspaper-speak for the library – pulled out some yellowed folders and began to read. This was in the days *before* online search engines, or I would have squandered even more precious time on Google. When I finally started to write, I felt as though I was squeezing anchovy paste out of the old, half-rusted tube at the back of my fridge.

It was agony. I'd write a couple of words, look at them, and erase them. As I went on, the chatter in my head grew louder. *This isn't good enough for a daily newspaper. Thousands of people are going to read this. My boss is going to fire me when he finds out I can't write.*

Somehow, after what felt like days of torment – it was actually “only” a couple of hours – I managed to produce a four-paragraph story. I reluctantly showed it to my immediate boss (who was doing an admirable job of not rolling his eyes). He read it. He had someone else write a headline for it. And it went in the next edition of the newspaper. Simple as that.

I wish I could report that this incident led to some sort of epiphany. Sadly, no. I stumbled along for several more years, torturing myself whenever I had to write a story. Fortunately, this wasn't too often. I was a good editor and mostly, I edited

## Getting paid to produce

Ironically, I didn't develop any ease with writing until I'd left journalism, had a bunch of kids and started doing corporate writing and communications. I think a couple of things helped. First, few people in the corporate world could write comfortably, so I was suddenly a writing genius. As a result, I could relax and tell the negative chatter in my brain to shut up. Second, the volume of work I was handling was huge – much more demanding than in my journalistic days. And as a freelancer, I didn't have the luxury of doing one story at a time. I was regularly juggling six, seven or even more.

As well, I had some powerful reasons to work more quickly. Rather than sit and stare at a blank computer screen, I needed to make time to feed and

play with my kids. As well, the economics were stark: in a newsroom, you earn money just for being there. As a freelancer, you are paid only when you produce.

## Decoding the writing-speed riddle

As Samuel Johnson said, “There’s nothing like the threat of imminent hanging to concentrate the mind.” Because I so desperately needed to learn how to write faster, I started reading about writing. And I began to analyze what I was doing.

Right away, I noticed something that was both puzzling and counterintuitive. The more writing assignments I had, the more easily I wrote. Why was this so? Shouldn’t I have become more stressed and more blocked? I also noticed that I’d often start “writing” articles in my head, while I was walking somewhere. On my way to the coffee shop, for example, I’d figure out the basic architecture for a piece. Sometimes phrases for the article, or even entire sentences, would pop into my head.

At the same time, I detected a certain reluctance to write whenever I created an outline. Instead of making writing easier, an outline seemed to make it harder – in a funny way, it made me almost resent writing. Wasn’t that odd?

But most strikingly, I noticed how often I edited my work “on the fly” – that is, I wrote a few sentences and then immediately started playing around with them to make them better. However, if I *stopped* myself from doing that, and had enough discipline to separate the writing from the editing, my writing speed picked up enormously.

Slowly, painfully, I came to understand that writing involves many separate steps. And by trial and error I learned that the writing process is most effective if you perform those steps in a particular order.

## Writing is like painting

Imagine you want to paint a room. Sure, you need to dip a brush in paint and apply it to the walls. But if you’re more than ten years old, you know that that’s only a tiny part of the job. The real work lies in preparing and cleaning up.

First, you have to strip the old, blistered paint and maybe do a bit of sanding. You have to wash the walls. You need to tape the woodwork – a tedious job – and put down tarps or drop sheets. Often, you’ll have to apply a primer or an undercoat first. Then you need to wait until it dries before you can start painting the colour you want. After that you’ll need to do touch-ups and repairs. And at the end of the job, you need to clean up.

So the actual painting is neither the beginning nor the end of your

work. It's simply one step in the middle. Professional painters might even tell you it's not the most important step. (They'd probably single out the sanding or the cleaning for that honour.)

How does this apply to writing? After carefully analyzing my own writing, reading many books on the subject and talking to dozens of other writers, I have identified eight and a half distinct steps involved in writing and the specific order in which they should be tackled. I call this the Publication Coach System.

## **The 8½ steps, summarized**

SAMPLE