

YOUR
Happy
CHAPPY
FIRST DRAFT

A Practical and Painless
Guide to Obliterating
Writer's Block

Daphne Gray-Grant

Foreword by Barbara Oakley, PhD

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CONTENTS

Foreword by <i>Barbara Oakley, PhD</i>	v
Introduction: Postponing perfection	1

I BEGINNINGS

1	The merit of starting	7
2	Why “small” is a beautiful habit	16
3	The value of daily diligence	24

II PREPARING TO WRITE

4	How a super model can help you	35
5	Feeling the wind on your face	45
6	The magic of mindmapping	59
7	Making your research more effective	78
8	Turning your mind into an ally	95

III WRITING AND AFTER

9	When you write, only write	107
10	Managing the emotions of writing	123
11	The multiple pass system of editing	144

	Conclusion: Putting it all together	158
	Acknowledgements	173
	Notes	174
	Index	197
	About the author	209

Foreword

Is there a magic formula to help you write faster, better, more creatively and with less angst? Pundits might pooh-pooh the idea, but *Your Happy First Draft* provides a brilliant, step-by-step approach to unleashing your writing muse, whether you're trying to finally get that book written or are nervously contemplating your dissertation.

You'll learn why editing while you are first getting the words out on the page is like walking while tying your shoes. Overwhelmed by the mass of words you're looking to disgorge? You will find simple tricks for breaking the task into small, doable pieces. Not sure how to find time to write? You may be surprised to find how even your walk to a bus stop or parking lot can help leverage your focus. What is a reasonable word count for a day — or for an hour? What do you do if you miss your writing target for a day, that week or that month? You'll find answers here.

Over forty years, Daphne Gray-Grant has edited and coached thousands of writers from virtually every genre and discipline. And she knows firsthand about the frustrations of poor writing practices. Her own early writing years were often agonizing, and the impact on her confidence — and her psyche — wasn't pretty. But as a result, her guidance in this book sparkles with understanding for the myriad ways writers can lock themselves in mental prisons. Getting into the flow of writing can be tricky — but this also means that tricks can help. Daphne knows them all.

As a *New York Times* best-selling author and an academic myself, having written many popular and scholarly books, research journal articles, op-eds and magazine articles — and, yes, an agonizing doctoral dissertation — I can only nod sagely at Daphne's advice. I have had to absorb that advice myself the hard way over the years. (How I wish I'd had Daphne's book thirty years ago!) But there's no need for you to go through a blundering, multi-year training regimen to learn to write efficiently. Daphne's book

provides dream coaching so you can quickly learn to hack your writing. And, no, that's not hack writing — or if it is on occasion, Daphne also teaches you how to edit your way to quality.

Every once in a while, a book resonates so deeply with people's needs that it becomes an instant classic. *Your Happy First Draft* is that book. Read, learn and enjoy. The lessons you take away will carry you through a lifetime — and make your writing dreams come true.

— Barbara Oakley, PhD, author of *A Mind for Numbers*;
co-author and co-instructor of the book and open
online course *Learning How to Learn*

INTRODUCTION

Postponing perfection

Get it down. Take chances. It may be bad, but it's the only way you can do anything really good.

— William Faulkner

I first read Dorothy Parker's witticism "I hate writing; I love having written" when I was sixteen years old, curled up in a chair in my bedroom. Feelings of enormous relief washed over me — as if my younger brother had been in a bad car accident but doctors had just told me he was going to be okay. I was relieved because I felt the same way about writing as Parker did. It was a horrible, distasteful job but as soon as the words were on paper, they miraculously turned into fun. I could *play* with them. And if Parker, a famous American writer and critic who said snidely clever things about people like Katharine Hepburn — "she ran the gamut of emotions from A to B" — could give voice to such contradictory feelings about writing, well, I could harbour such feelings too.

My relief lasted until my next essay was due. Because guess what? I still had to write. Eventually, I came to terms with the challenge of writing — I'll tell you the story in this book — and I have spent the most recent part of my career working with others who mostly hate(d) writing too. I give people a system that makes an apparently unlikeable job more fun. And, after a few weeks of coaching, the majority of people tell me they suddenly enjoy writing.

Dealing with that old devil, fear

Why does writing terrify so many? The heart of the problem is we aren't *taught* how to write. It's as if we're subjected to a massive sink-or-swim class. We get thrown over the edge of the pool, into very deep water. Some of us learn to float or tread water because of ability or the help of an uncommonly wise teacher. But the majority of us drown. We sink to

the bottom of the pool with barely a *glub*. But here's a secret we should all have learned in Grade 3. All of our fears about writing are never true of a first draft, because *no one else ever needs to see it*. In this book, what I'll be asking you to do is to satisfy yourself with a first draft that isn't any good. In fact, it may even be demonstrably bad. But then, at least, you will have something you can edit.

Does this idea sound crazy to you? If so, I ask you to think of some *real* writers and imagine how they work. Perhaps you picture these writers to be deeply self-assured, the way Margaret Atwood or Jonathan Franzen carry themselves — as if they're the best-informed, most literate people in the universe. They're like Robert Duvall as he strode across the beach in the movie *Apocalypse Now*. Bombs were exploding around him, but chin forward, shoulders thrust back, he announced, "I love the smell of napalm in the morning."

Or possibly you see writers as depressed, alcoholic artists crippled with self-loathing — think Ernest Hemingway, Dylan Thomas, Sylvia Plath — who transformed their pain into words of solid gold, before they eventually killed themselves.

Or then again, maybe you see writers as deeply literate, brimming with clever ideas, lovers of words and never at a loss for one. Oscar Wilde, perhaps, or Charles Dickens. They are supremely well-read and able to strike memorable aphorisms such as "Education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught." Or they create unforgettable first sentences such as "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief..."

Real writers, you may think, don't hesitate. Don't become frustrated. Don't stare at blank computer screens. Don't shake their heads at their inadequacies. Don't struggle with what to write. Don't even need to consult a thesaurus. They work eight or more hours each day, feverishly transcribing their text, which has sprung — unbidden — from their minds. A few weeks later, they ship their manuscript off to their editors for some (perhaps unnecessary) polishing. And, several months after that, they hold a published book in their hands.

Because most of us would-be writers have read many books — we have shelves bursting with them in our offices and bedrooms —

we imagine these works came out of other writers' brains already typeset, perfect-bound and free from errors. Do I need to tell you these perceptions are wrong?

A more nuanced view of writing

“Let’s face it, writing is hell,” William Styron (1925–2006), author of *Sophie’s Choice*, reported to *The Paris Review* in 1954. “I get a fine warm feeling when I’m doing well, but that pleasure is pretty much negated by the pain of getting started each day.” Styron — who enjoyed a comfortable middle-class lifestyle, with homes in Connecticut and on Martha’s Vineyard — slept until noon most days, languished in bed for an hour thinking and then had lunch with his wife around 1:30 p.m. He dealt with minor errands in the early afternoon and then listened to music. By 4:00 p.m., finally, he was ready to write, which he did for roughly four hours a day, producing no more than 200 to 300 words.

All writers find their own way in the world and their own methods for writing. Few describe the work as easy though. And why should they? Particularly book or thesis writing. The standard length for a book is 80,000 words. Note: This is a working average used by publishers. Obviously there’s wide variation. Consider the difference between the length of Ian McEwan’s lovely but razor-thin *On Chesil Beach* (40,000 words) and the doorstep length of Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (418,053 words) or Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* (587,287 words).

I have worked with thousands of writers over the past forty years, and I can tell you that almost all of them face the same problem: maintaining the determination to continue working for the months (or, sometimes, *years*) required to produce a book. Long-form writing is a marathon, not a sprint, and many people run out of juice well before the eighteen-mile mark — the famous running “wall” where, depleted of glycogen, our body demands we stop.

Even people who aren’t trying to write long-form projects struggle with the challenges of writing. Or perhaps I should say, the challenges they *put upon themselves* when writing. They want to make their bosses happy. They want to delight their readers. They want their words to be perfect. Now, there’s nothing wrong with writing a very fine article or book or thesis,

of course. That's a goal we all desire. But for the majority of writers, the constant fear of putting the right words in precisely the correct order is far too daunting — especially when the immediate task is to produce a first draft.

Why you should procrastinate about perfection

The problem is not our desire to have excellent writing. The problem is our need to have it in our first draft. So the aim of this book is to persuade you to let go of any hope for a flawless first draft. Instead, I encourage you to find joy in a truly abysmal preliminary version of whatever you are writing, whether it is something short, like a blog post, or long, like a book or dissertation.

The coming chapters describe the constructive aspects of a happy first draft and explain how you can finish it by establishing the writing habit. They discuss how *preparing* to write involves finding a model, walking, mindmapping, researching and (if you're brave) meditating. And they explain how, when you're writing, you'll want to abandon your habit of *editing as you go* and offer some useful tips for quieting the voice of your nasty internal editor. Finally, I wrap up with a description of when to let your writing incubate and how to begin editing or rewriting.

If you're a regular reader of my weekly *Power Writing* blog — which is also delivered as a weekly e-newsletter — you may have seen some of these ideas on my website. But when I have used some of the material from my blog, I have also updated it with new research or extra details and provided additional references so you can learn even more. I've also taken the time to interview some readers and writers, and I share their stories in sidebars scattered throughout the book.

After reading this book, I hope you'll understand that a less-than-perfect first draft — in fact, a downright *crappy* (but happy) one — is not something to resist. Instead, it is a wise and reasonable goal that will help you become a far more fluent and successful writer. ❖

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BEGINNINGS

CHAPTER 1

The merit of starting

Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.

— Samuel Beckett

Many writers delight in dilly-dallying. We call them people who “suffer from writer’s block” or writers who face “resistance.” But why does this problem exist? It’s not as if writing requires boundless amounts of energy.

Writers don’t have to use their large muscles — like workers moving loads of bricks or refinishing hardwood floors. Nor do they put anyone else’s lives at risk — as do doctors, nurses and paramedics. What’s more, our work usually isn’t very important in the grander scheme of things. Will anything frightful happen if an article in the employee newsletter is a little dull or predictable? And how will it hurt others if our book fails to become a best-seller or if our dissertation isn’t “groundbreaking”?

Yet many of us declare we “fear” or even “hate” writing, and we put off the job until the very last minute, thus manufacturing a perfectly predictable crisis. Because then we do have too little time.

Journalist and blogger Megan McArdle offered a compelling theory about writerly procrastination in a 2014 article in *The Atlantic*. “We were too good in English class,” she said. Describing herself as an “exceptional” reader who earned “seemingly automatic A’s” in school, McArdle argued that she’d also absorbed a harmful lesson along with the high marks. She’d learned that success depends on *talent*, not hard work. “Before you take to the keys, you are Proust and Oscar Wilde and George Orwell all rolled up into one delicious package,” she wrote. “By the time you’re finished, you’re more like one of those 1940s pulp hacks who strung hundred-page paragraphs together with semicolons because it was too much effort to figure out where the sentence should end.”

McArdle makes a clever point with her too-good-at-English-class theory, but she also doesn’t get to the kernel of the problem: how so few people

Index

A

academic writing, 36, 40–41, 91.
 See also thesis writing
Accidental Hawaiian Crooner, 76
accountability program, 28, 209
achievement(s), 31, 171. *See also* success
Achor, Shawn, 13, 177n
acknowledgement. *See* rewards
Ackroyd, Peter, 49, 182n
Action Enforcer (software), 117
active voice, 154
activity. *See* physical activity
adverbs, use of, 43
After the Falls (Gildiner), 156
ambiguity, 136
American Marriage, An (Jones), 162
Angelou, Maya, 123
anxiety, 95, 120. *See also* fear of writing
Apocalypse Now, 2, 174n
articles. *See* journal articles; magazine
 articles
artists, 36, 42, 62, 68, 73, 103
Artist's Way, The (Cameron), 125, 166, 196n
Atlantic (magazine), 7
Atwood, Margaret, 2, 134, 174n
Auletta, Ken, 153
Autopilot (Smart), 56

B

Beckett, Samuel, 7
Beeblebrox, Zaphod, 109, 190n
Before Happiness (Achor), 13, 177n
"beginner's mind," 145, 194n
beta readers, 95, 134, 135, 144, 148, 151
Bird by Bird (Lamott), 12, 177n

blank spots, 64, 92. *See also* notes
blogs, 99, 118, 164. *See also* *Power Writing*
book sales, 62, 177n, 196n
book writing
 author's, 144, 148, 151, 165
 daily writing time, 166–67
 and editing, 145, 146, 150, 164
 as marathon, 26, 169
 and mindmapping, 77
 models for, 39–41, 42, 161
 success stories, 110, 114
 tips for, 64, 120–21
 word counts, 3, 29, 39, 77, 163, 172
Boorstein, Sylvia, 99, 188–89
boredom, 55, 119, 128–30
bosses, 12, 38, 39, 41, 80, 112, 129.
 See also corporate writing
Bowman, Laura, 109
brain
 and activity, 47, 54, 140–41
 autocorrect function, 145
 and "autopilot," 56
 and creativity, 47–49, 136, 164, 167, 169
 and mindmapping, 63, 64, 66, 69–70
 parts of, 48 (illus.), 63, 118, 184n, 190n
 "wider than the sky" (Dickinson), 95
 and writing vs. editing, 109
 See also neuroscience; psychology
 research
Brande, Dorothea, 166, 196n
breaks. *See* taking breaks
breathing, 97, 98, 101, 140–41
British Journal of Educational Psychology, 67
Browning, Charlie, 100
Buddhism, 145, 189n, 194n

building a habit, 11, 20, 176–77n
 building a writing habit
 as “automatic,” 169–70
 calculating your speed, 29–31, 112
 chain of achievement 24, 31
 with Kaizen technique, 21, 23
 with morning writing, 11, 168–69
 and productivity, 26–27
 with small goals, 20, 27, 30, 32, 128, 132
 success story, 28
 See also word counts
 burnout, 26, 130–31
 Buzan, Tony, 62–63, 76
 Byron, Katie, 192n

C

Cadman, Rebekah, 129
 Cameron, Julia, 125, 166, 196n
 Cartland, Barbara, 9, 176n
Cast Away (movie), 186n
 Catch-22, 95, 187n
 celebrant, profile of, 64
 cellphones, 21, 52, 53, 89, 110, 129, 139
 Chaucer, Geoffrey, 36, 180n
 Christensen, Carol, 67
 Cirillo, Francesco, 115, 190n
 citation management, 87
 Clear Concept Inc., 110
 Cleese, John, 55
 clichés, 153–54
 “clustering,” 60–61, 76. *See also*
 mindmapping
 Cohen, Leonard, 96, 168
 comedy writers, 24, 55
 commitment, 10, 11, 23, 26, 169
 Computational Story Lab, 36, 179–80n
 computers, 58, 67, 183n. *See also* typing
 conditioning, 117, 132, 191n
 confusion, dealing with, 136
 consciousness, 100. *See also* subconscious
 cookbook production, 35

copy-editing
 about, 148–49
 multiple “passes,” 149–56, 164
 copying good writers, 40–44, 61
 copying last sentence, 120–21
 corporate writing, 76, 118, 156. *See also*
 bosses
 Couch, Jean, 195n
 Count Wordsworth, 150, 194n
 creative work, and subjectivity, 25, 162
 creativity
 aids to, 32, 56–57, 103, 117
 and the brain, 47–49, 118, 169
 emotions and, 55, 129–30, 136
 and overambition, 164–65
 and productivity, 25
 writers on, 35, 55
 See also ideas; mindmapping; thinking
 Crichton, Michael, 96, 159, 195–96n
 Curry, Mason, 50

D

Daily Rituals: How Artists Work (Curry), 50
 daily word counts, 27, 32, 159, 161, 163, 165, 196n
 Darwin, Charles, 62
 da Vinci, Leonardo, 62
 deadlines, 12, 29–30, 32, 144, 146, 167
 de Gaulle, Charles, 153
 deliberate practice, 24, 147
 Deming, W. Edwards, 20
 desks, 46–47, 57–58
 detail(s), 72–73, 85, 118
 determination, 3, 15, 59, 78, 168
 developmental editing, 148, 149
 De Vries, Peter, 25, 63, 184n
 Dickens, Charles, 2, 44, 49–50, 175n, 181–82
 Dickinson, Emily, 95
 diffuse mode thinking, 66–67, 73
 Dinesen, Isak, 16
 discipline, 31, 119, 138–39. *See also* willpower

- dissertations. *See* thesis writing
- distraction(s)
- cellphones as, 21, 55, 110, 129
 - desk time and, 46–47
 - digital, 21, 50, 55–56, 111, 137–38, 139
 - meditation and, 95, 97, 101, 102
 - and Write or Die (software), 119
 - See also* emotions
- doodling, 73
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor, 124
- Dotto, Steve, 90
- doubt, 104, 123, 134–35
- Duhigg, Charles, 71
- Dunham, Lena, 96, 187n
- Duvall, Robert, 2
- Dweck, Carol, 14, 177n
- Dylan, Bob, 168
- E**
- “early bird catches the worm,” 11, 176n
- editing and rewriting
- about, 146, 148–49, 157, 169
 - author’s experience, 55, 135, 151, 165
 - “best writing is rewriting” (White), 10, 176n
 - deliberate practice and, 147
 - incubation, 144–46, 163–64
 - multiple-pass system, 134, 149–56
 - not in first draft, 28, 107–12, 113–22, 168
 - software, 150, 155, 180n, 194n
 - time management, 8, 10, 30, 157, 164
 - tips for natural writers, 133–34
- editor(s)
- as mentors, 37, 39
 - natural, 132–33, 142–43
 - newspaper, 38, 59
 - professional, 134, 135, 151, 156
 - See also* internal editor
- education, 16–18, 45, 78, 108, 190n.
- See also* learning to write
- “Education is an admirable thing” (Wilde), 2, 175n
- 8½ Steps to Writing Faster, Better* (Gray-Grant), 120, 124, 191n
- Elbow, Peter, 166, 196n
- email(s)
- dealing with, 138
 - as a distraction, 21, 47, 50, 139
 - and multi-tasking, 111, 112
 - sending to Evernote, 89, 187n
- Email Warrior, The* (Gomez), 110
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 158
- emotions
- “fine warm feeling” (Styron), 3
 - and incubation, 146
 - and lack of discipline, 138–39
 - and meditation, 100, 101, 104, 138
 - and morning writing, 11, 168–69
 - “ran the gamut of” (Parker), 1
 - tips for managing, 126–41
 - See also* boredom; doubt; fear of writing
- Ericsson, Anders, 147, 194n
- essays, 39, 42, 67, 69–70, 78, 80, 108
- Estes, Fred, 114
- evening writing, 22, 168, 169. *See also*
- night owls
- Evernote (software), 87–90, 187n
- Everything Guide to Writing Copy, The* (Slaunwhite), 66
- exercise, 48–49, 58, 129. *See also* walking
- exhaustion, dealing with, 130–32
- expectations, 112, 126, 141, 147, 159, 161, 165
- experiences, need for, 140, 167
- experts, 84, 85–86. *See also* mentors
- F**
- fact-checking, 111, 118, 156
- Faulkner, William, 1
- fear of making mistakes, 46, 81, 108
- fear of success, 101

fear of writing

- causes and results, 4, 7, 46, 86
- dealing with, 1–3, 126–28
- and first draft, 12–13, 15, 92
- and Kaizen technique, 21, 23
- and meditation, 101

feedback, 28, 113, 115, 125. *See also*
beta readers

feelings. *See* emotions

Fehr, Carla, 84–86

Female Eunuch, The (Greer), 154

Ferriss, Tim, 96, 187–88n

fiction, 36, 40–41, 80–81, 91, 133, 148

first draft

- about, 2, 4, 10, 92, 163
- as “automatic,” 170
- benefits of, 12, 14–15
- end of research and, 92–93
- fear of writing and, 12–13, 15
- no editing, 28, 107–12, 113–22, 168
- as singular focus, 135

first lines, 2, 150–51, 175n

Fitzgerald, F. Scott, 136

Five Star Food (Johnson), 35

focus, 80–81, 90–91, 102, 135, 171

Focus at Will (software), 28, 179n

Fowler, Gene, 81

Franklin, Benjamin, 44, 181n

Franklin, Nancy, 155

Franzen, Jonathan, 2, 135, 174n, 193n

freelance writing, 19, 30, 59–60

free writing, 165–66, 196n

frustration, dealing with, 132–34

Full Catastrophe Living (Kabat-Zinn), 96,
189n

G

Get It Done program, 28, 209

Gilbert, Daniel, 53

Gildiner, Catherine, 156

Ginsberg, Allen, 96

Gladwell, Malcolm, 14, 71, 177n

goal-setting

- and deliberate practice, 147
- and Kaizen method, 20, 23, 30
- small goals, 159–61, 165, 170
- writing time, 128, 132, 138, 166–67
- See also* daily word counts

“A goal without a plan is just a wish,” 170,
196n

Goldberg, Natalie, 96, 188n

Gomez, Ann, 110

“good” and “bad” writing, 25, 38, 113, 163

Grant, Ulysses S., 154

Greer, Germaine, 154

“growth mindset,” 14

H

habit. *See* building a habit; building a
writing habit

Halberstadt, Alex, 43–44

Hale, Constance, 154, 195n

handwriting, 66–67, 166

happiness, 13, 177n

hard work vs. talent, 7, 14, 15, 29, 147,
168

Harris, Dan, 99

hating writing, 1, 7, 19, 140

headphones, 54, 116

Heller, Joseph, 187n

Hemingway, Ernest

- about, 2, 174n, 184n
- writing habits, 50, 120, 159,
- writing style, 41, 44, 180n

Hemingway Editor, 155, 180n

Hepburn, Katharine, 1

hiking story, 127–28

Holinshed, Raphael, 36, 180n

Homemakers, 59–60, 183–84nn

I

ideas, 51, 53, 54, 138. *See also* creativity
idleness, benefits of, 56

“If I’d had more time...,” 75

If You Can Talk, You Can Write (Saltzman), 19–20
Imagine: How Creativity Works (Lehrer), 40, 180n
 impatience, 137–38, 139
 imposter syndrome, 123. *See also* doubt
 Inc.com, 97
 incubation, 133, 144–46, 163–64
 inspiration, 2, 70, 74–75, 170. *See also* creativity
 internal editor, 102, 115, 119, 123, 124–26, 142, 163
 internet, 39, 55–56, 79, 83–84, 119–20
 interruptions, 111, 116, 191n. *See also* distraction(s)
 interviews, 84, 93–94
 ironic process theory, 124
It's Easier Than You Think (Boorstein), 99, 189n
 “It was the best of times” (Dickens), 2, 175n
 Iyengar, B.K.S., 135

J

James, Geoffrey, 97
 Joad, Cyril E. M., 35
 Jobs, Steve, 197, 189n
 Johnson, Eve, 35, 51, 158, 195n
 Johnson, Samuel, 78
 Jones, Tayari, 162
 journal articles, 36, 91
 journalism, 18–19. *See also* newspapers
 judgment, 25, 29, 71, 113. *See also* feedback; self-talk

K

Kabat-Zinn, Jon, 96, 99, 189n
 Kaizen technique, 20–21, 23, 30
 Killingsworth, Matthew, 53
 Kimball, Christopher, 43, 44
 King, Stephen, 134, 176n
 Kingsolver, Barbara, 9, 176n

L

Lamott, Anne, 12, 44, 96, 177n, 188n
 Laponce, Jean, 17, 178n
 learning disability, 107, 190n
 learning to write, 1, 7–8, 19–20, 36–37, 60–61, 107–8
 Lehrer, Jonah, 40, 180n
 Levin, Lena, 103
 Lewis, C.S. (Clive Staples), 24
 Lewis, Michael, 71
 libraries, 16–17, 83, 84, 87, 178n
 line editing, 148–49
 Linehan, Graham, 55
Loving What Is (Byron), 192n
 loving writing, 1, 140
 Lynda.com, 90, 187n

M

Madoff, Bernie, 155
 magazine articles, 38, 41, 43–44, 59–60
 magazines, 183–84nn. *See also* specific titles
 Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, 100, 189n
 Mann, Jonathan, 24–25
 Mann, Sandi, 129
 Mark, Gloria, 191n
 Maurer, Robert, 20, 21
 McArdle, Megan, 7, 175n
 McEwan, Ian, 3, 9, 176n
 meditation
 about, 96–97, 99
 benefits of, 95, 96, 99–103, 138
 obstacles to, 104
 success stories, 100, 103
 memoir, 42, 50, 102, 156, 193n
 Mendeley (software), 87
 mentors, 37, 147. *See also* experts
 Miller, Earl, 109–10
 Miller, Henry, 50
 mind
 beginner's, 145, 194n
 wandering, 45, 48, 53–54, 98
Mind for Numbers, A (Oakley), 66, 185n

mindmapping

- about, 60–63, 65, 75, 161–62
- benefits of, 64, 133
- for book or thesis, 77
- examples (illus.), 61, 65, 70, 72
- guidelines, 64–66, 68–74
- moving to writing, 74–77
- for research planning, 82, 91
- software, 66, 67, 68
- success stories, 64, 66, 76

Mindset (Dweck), 14

mistakes

- fear of making, 46, 81, 108
- and first draft, 92
- habitual, editing for, 156
- in interviewing, 93
- in mindmapping, 68–69, 72
- practice and, 147
- in research planning, 82

“Mistakes were made,” 41, 154, 155

Mitchell, Margaret, 3

models

- benefits of, 36, 38, 39
- for book or thesis, 39–41, 42, 81, 161
- copying, 40–44
- to narrow research, 80–81, 91
- for video script, 37
- and word counts, 90

monkey mind, 97

morning copying, 42

morning larks, 11, 130, 131, 168

morning writing

- and enough sleep, 130, 131
- and free writing, 166, 196n
- and motivation, 132, 167
- and writing habit, 11, 168–69

motivation

- activity and, 47, 58
- aids to, 115, 132, 141–42, 167
- barriers to, 139
- and “clustering,” 61
- and deliberate practice, 147

and goal-setting, 170

and tracking achievement, 171

See also rewards; willpower

Moveable Feast, A (Hemingway), 50

movies, 2, 174n, 186n, 196n

multiplier effect, 171–72

multi-tasking, 109–11, 150

Mundis, Jerrold, 191n

Murdoch, Rupert, 153

music, 28, 117

musicians, 25, 42, 76, 96, 136, 147, 168

N

Nabokov, Vladimir, 144

narrowing your focus, 80–81, 90–91

natural editors, 132–33, 142–43

natural writers, 133–34, 142–43

Nayeri, Dina, 168, 196n

Nelson, Willie, 25, 179n

neuroscience, 63, 66, 110. *See also* brain

newsletters, 75–77. *See also* *Power Writing*

newspapers, 18–19, 155, 162, 178n.

See also specific titles

New Yorker, 40, 57, 153, 155

New York Times, 125, 154

New York Times Magazine, 43–44

Nietzsche, Friedrich, 45

night owls, 11, 22, 130, 131, 168, 169

non-fiction, 41, 71–72, 91, 148, 161

notes, 51, 53, 116, 117–18, 153. *See also*

blank spots; Evernote (software)

O

Oakley, Barbara, v–vi, 66, 185n

One Small Step Can Change Your Life

(Maurer), 20

online research, 55, 85

online training, 90, 187n

Oppizzo, Marily, 57

Orlean, Susan, 57

Orwell, George, 154, 194n

outlines, 65, 74, 75, 76, 149

overambition, 32, 164–65

overthinking, 47–48, 74

P

Pacific Press (Southam Inc.), 35, 178n

paraphrasing, 94, 152

Paris Review, 3, 50, 66–67

Parker, Dorothy, 1

Parkinson's Law, 167

parts of speech. *See* adverbs, use of;

pronouns, use of; transitions; verbs

passive voice, 39, 41, 154–55, 194–95n

Patterson, James, 9, 176n

Pavlov, Ivan, 117

Pay Attention, for Goodness' Sake (Boorstein),
99, 189n

pedometers, 52, 171

perfectionism, 3–4, 10, 86, 104, 123, 139

perseverance, 78, 98, 163

PhDs. *See* thesis writing

physical activity, 48–49, 58, 129. *See also*
walking

plagiarism, 40–41

planning and preparation

for interviews, 93

for research, 79–82

for writing, 8, 9, 10, 53–55, 138–39,
166, 170

See also mindmapping

Plath, Sylvia, 2, 175n

Plotnik, Arthur, 42–43, 108–9

Plutarch, 36, 180n

poetry, 13, 95, 103, 156, 177n

Pomodoro Technique, 28, 115–16, 190n

Poole, Jason, 76

Porphyry of Tyre, 62, 184n

positive psychology, 13

positive reinforcement, 120, 124. *See also*
rewards

positive self-talk, 141–42

posture, 158, 195n

Power Writing, 4, 29–30, 54, 90, 175n

practice, benefits of, 24, 147

preparation. *See* planning and preparation

problem-solving, 21, 50, 103, 156, 192n.

See also copy-editing

procrastination

about, 7, 107, 139

editing and, 111, 113, 133

overcoming, 11, 18, 165, 169

reasons for, 46, 55

research and, 81

Procrastination Equation, The (Steel), 139,
193n

productivity

benefits of, 25–26

exemplars of, 24, 55, 110

small goals and, 159

software, 119–20

time of day and, 168–69

tricking yourself, 140

and writing habit, 26–27

See also time management; writing speed

pronouns, use of, 151

Province (newspaper), 178n

psychological test, 118, 145

psychology research

accomplishment, 13–14

boredom, 129

classical conditioning, 117, 191n

deliberate practice, 147, 194n

meditation, 96

subconscious motivation, 61

typing vs. writing by hand, 67

walking and creative thinking, 56–57

wandering mind, 53–54

white bear phenomenon, 124

publishing, 102, 126, 168

Pullman, Philip, 8, 176n

Pullum, Geoffrey, 154, 194n

punishment, 122. *See also* Write or Die

Q

quality

- and first draft, 165, 166
- ignoring, 19, 28, 103, 125
- improving, 36, 67, 95
- writing slowly and, 9

questions

- to ask before writing, 80
- for interviews, 93
- and Kaizen method, 21
- for mindmaps, 69–71, 82, 91
- problem-solving, 192n
- and research, 83, 85, 90–92
- use in writing, 37, 152

quiz, born writer or editor, 142–43

quotes, use of, 43–44

R

Ramsay, Kathleen, 42

readability statistics software, 150, 194n

readers, 38, 71, 102, 133, 146. *See also*

beta readers

reading, 169–70. *See also* rereading

reading aloud, 155–56

redundancy, 152

reports, 36, 41, 80

rereading, 111, 113, 146

research

- author's, for thesis, 16–17
- diary, using a, 82–83
- end of, and first draft, 90–93
- importance of, 133
- management, 86–90
- mindmap for, 82, 91
- planning your, 79–82
- sources of, 55, 83–84, 85
- tips for, 84–86, 93–94
- See also* fact-checking; psychology

research

resistance, 61, 63, 67, 104, 111–12, 123.

See also fear of writing

reverse psychology, 127, 140

rewards, 21, 23, 50, 111, 121–22

rewriting. *See* editing and rewriting

rhythm, 155–56

Richards, Keith, 136

Rico, Gabriele, 60, 62, 63, 190n

“right” writing, 38, 107, 165–66

Ringham, Cathy, 28

Rowling, J. K. , 25, 179n

S

Saltzman, Joel, 19–20

Salzberg, Sharon, 99

Saunders, George, 96, 188n

saving time, 39, 64, 75

Science (magazine), 56science(s), 62, 96, 108, 114. *See also*

neuroscience; psychology research

screen time, 58, 131. *See also* cellphones;

computers

scriptwriting, 37

Seinfeld, Jerry, 24

self-loathing, 2, 134

self-quiz, 142–43

self-talk

about, 123

dealing with, 140–41, 162–63

examples, 126, 128, 130, 132, 134

and meditation, 103

positive, 141–42

See also internal editor

Seneca, 36, 180n

sentence length, 37, 39, 44, 150–51, 155

Shakespeare, William, 36, 69–70, 180n

sitting, 46–47, 50, 51–52

Slaunwhite, Steve, 66

sleep, 100, 130, 131–32

Smart, Andrew, 56

Snopes website, 57, 183n

social media, 47, 56, 131, 137, 138

software

activity tracking, 52

editing, 150, 155, 180n, 194n

mindmapping, 66, 67, 68
 music, 28, 179n
 productivity, 118–20, 191n
 research management, 87–90, 187n
 social media monitoring, 138
 task management, 137
 writing, 55, 117
 software training, 87, 90, 187n
 songwriters, 24–25, 96, 136, 168
 Sontag, Susan, 66–67
 sources, 35, 86, 87. *See also* research
 speed. *See* writing speed
Spunk and Bite (Plotnik), 42, 108
 Stafford, William, 13–14, 177n
 statistics, 13, 58, 80, 87, 150, 176n, 183n,
 194n. *See also* book sales
 Steel, Piers, 139, 193n
 Steinbeck, John, 123
 storytelling, 64, 71–72. *See also* fiction
 Streep, Meryl, 25, 179n
 stress reduction, 13, 96, 159, 171
 structure, 36, 40–41, 43, 73, 74, 76, 149
 style, 38, 39, 40–41, 44, 180n
 style guide, 42–43, 108
 Styron, William, 3, 175n
 subconscious, 55, 61, 71, 100, 140
 substantive editing, 148, 149
 success, 7, 14, 24, 101, 139, 147, 167,
 168. *See also* achievement(s)
 success stories, 28, 64, 65, 66, 76, 100,
 103, 110, 114, 128
 Suzuki, Shunryu, 194n

T

taking breaks, 26, 27, 32, 116, 129, 133,
 141. *See also* incubation; walking
 talent vs. hard work, 7, 14, 15, 29, 147,
 168
 task management software, 137
 taste, 39, 162
Teaspoon of Earth and Sea, A (Nayeri), 168
 television watching, 58

10% Happier (Harris), 99
 10,000-hour rule, 14
 thesis writing
 about, 16–18, 26, 169
 daily writing time, 166–67
 and editing, 150, 156
 incubation, 145, 146, 164
 and mindmapping, 77
 models for, 161
 research, 84–86, 87–92, 187n
 success stories, 28, 128
 word counts, 77, 172
 thinking
 avoidance of, 56
 and creativity, 47–48, 133
 desk time and, 46–47
 diffuse mode, 66–67, 73
 and meditation, 101
 about research, 91–92
 while walking, 49–50, 53, 54
 Thomas, Dylan, 2, 175n, 184n
 Thurber, James, 107
 time management
 daily writing, 11, 22, 130, 131
 and editing, 8, 10, 30, 157, 164
 and meditation, 97–98
 incubation, 133, 144–46, 163–64
 Pomodoro Technique, 28, 115–16, 191n
 and weekends, 17, 26, 163, 169
 for writers, 8–10, 110, 166–67, 169,
 171
See also taking breaks
 time saving, 39, 64, 75
 tips
 book writing, 64, 120–21
 editing, for natural writers, 133–34
 getting started, 161–62
 interviewing, 84, 93–94
 managing emotions, 126–41
 researching, 84–86
 writing, 22, 37, 113–22
 writing, for natural editors, 132–33

Tolstoy, Leo, 3
 tracking, 24, 52, 135, 171
 Transcendental Meditation (TM), 100, 189n
 transitions, 152–53
 treadmill desks, 57–58
 typing, 17, 50, 67, 107. *See also* word processing

U

Uncapher, Melina, 109
Uncommercial Traveller, The (Dickens), 49
 University of British Columbia, 16–18, 45, 78
Use Both Sides of Your Brain (Buzan), 62

V

Vancouver Sun, 18, 59, 60, 178n
Vancouver Western News, 18, 107, 178n
 verbs, 154–55
 videos, 37, 90, 187n
 visual artists, 36, 42, 62, 68, 73, 103
 visualization, 21
 voice, 130. *See also* passive voice
 Vonnegut, Kurt, 36, 179n

W

walking
 about, 158
 author's, 45, 50, 52, 54
 benefits of, 46, 50–52, 55, 58
 creativity and, 56–57
 literary history of, 49–50
 tracking your, 52, 171
 treadmill desks, 57–58
 writing and, 53–55
 Wallace, Alfred Russel, 62
Wall Street Journal, 141
 wandering mind, 45, 48, 53–54, 98
 weekends, 17, 26, 163, 169
 Wegner, Daniel, 124
 White, E. B., 10, 44, 176n
 white bear phenomenon, 124

Wilde, Oscar, 2
 willpower, 11, 22, 78, 130. *See also* discipline
 Wilson, Timothy, 56
Winter Notes on Summer Impressions (Dostoevsky), 124
 Wolfe, Tom, 196n
 word choice, 37, 129–30
 word count(s)
 book or thesis, 3, 29, 39, 77, 172
 daily, 27, 32, 159, 161, 163, 165, 196n
 as daunting, 16, 21
 increasing your, 31–32
 mindmapping and, 69–70
 modest, and writing habit, 23, 27, 170
 research and, 80, 90
 tracking your, 24, 135, 171
 See also writing speed
 wordiness, editing for, 151–52
 word processing, 55, 114–15. *See also* computers; typing
 “Write drunk but edit sober” (De Vries), 63, 184n
 Write or Die (software), 118–20, 191n
 writer's block
 and creativity, 55
 and free writing, 166, 196n
 and natural writers, 133
 overcoming, 30, 36, 46
 reasons for, 7–8, 46
 writers on, 13–14, 176n
 See also procrastination
 writing
 about, 7, 30, 36–37, 175n
 challenges of, 3–4, 140, 172
 managing emotions of, 1–3, 126–41
 narrowing your focus, 80–81, 90–91
 practices that undo writers, 164–71
 preparation, 8, 9, 10, 53–55, 138–39, 170
 separate from editing, 28, 110, 168
 setbacks, dealing with, 27, 31–32

- setting small goals, 20, 23, 30, 159–61, 165
- time management, 8–10, 11, 166–67, 169, 171
- tips for, 22, 37, 113–22, 132–33
- See also* book writing; fiction; first draft; non-fiction; songwriters; thesis writing
- “writing apnea,” 140–41
- Writing the Australian Crawl* (Stafford), 13–14
- writing block(s). *See* writer’s block
- writing habit. *See* building a writing habit
- Writing the Natural Way* (Rico), 60, 63, 190n
- writing space, 22
- writing speed
 - author’s, 13, 30, 108, 114
 - calculating your, 29–31, 112
 - editing while writing, 108, 110, 168
 - and internal editor, 123, 125
 - tips for increasing, 113–22
 - typing vs. writing by hand, 67
 - See also* word counts

Y

Yorkshire, Heidi, 64

Z

Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind (Suzuki), 194n

Zinsser, William, 44

Zotero (software), 87

About the author

Daphne Gray-Grant grew up in the newspaper business. Her family owned a weekly newspaper in Vancouver, B.C., and she worked there from the age of sixteen, writing stories, editing, dealing with newspaper carriers and even selling the odd advertisement. During this time she also managed to earn an honours degree in political science from the University of British Columbia.

After leaving the family business she became books editor at the daily *Vancouver Sun* and then moved up to the role of features editor, a job she held for six years, running a large department and being responsible for many daily pages.

On the birth of her triplet children, Daphne briefly left paid employment but returned a year later, in 1995, to launch her own business as a communications consultant and writing coach.

In addition to helping companies write and produce newsletters, brochures and websites, she also coaches people in how to write faster and better. Her YouTube channel, <https://www.youtube.com/user/thepublicationcoach>, has provided many people with useful and compassionate advice. And since 2013, her accountability program Get It Done has helped struggling writers and academics finally finish their books or dissertations.

Daphne's popular newsletter, *Power Writing*, goes out every Tuesday to subscribers around the world. If you'd like to sign up (it's free), go to www.publicationcoach.com. ❖

