YOUR HAPPY FIRST DRAFT

A Practical and Painless Guide to Obliterating Writer’s Block

Daphne Gray-Grant

Foreword by Barbara Oakley, PhD
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s 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 first-hand 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 doorstop 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.
BEGINNINGS

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th minor errands in the early afternoon and then list
Any 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 As” 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
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