

How to Banish Your Fear of Writing – a video with Daphne Gray-Grant

What are you afraid of? If you're like me, it might be heights or confined spaces, or maybe it's spiders, snakes, thunder needles or public speaking.

But there's another common fear that a lot of people suffer from. And unfortunately, it's hard to avoid the fear of writing. You might be able to dodge *speaking* in public, but nearly everyone has to write. Maybe you have to write reports for work or essays for school, or perhaps you need to write proposals or blog posts.

And all of us end up having to write a lot of email. You might even be a real glutton for punishment and be trying to write a book or dissertation.

So why are so many people so scared of writing? What is it about this thing that we all have to do that makes us feel so bad?

I've been an editor for 44 years and a writing coach for the last 25. I've worked with just about every type of writer you can imagine, from the totally green to the completely hardened. Early on, I remember being an editor for a writer who said to me, "I like to send the reader to their dictionary at least once with every story I write." His arrogance still baffles me.

But to be honest, most of the writers I've worked with over the years have been at least a little bit scared. And many of them have been all out terrified. I spoke to three of my clients, Cathy, Marilyn and Mark to get a better sense of what the fear of writing looks and feels like...

Cathy: It came to me a combination or to a peak when I was going through the candidacy process for my PhD. And I didn't pass. There were two — three papers — for the candidacy process, and they were not accepted. So how did it feel when I my husband kept saying *you didn't fail, you didn't fail, you were misguided....* But at the time, it *felt* like failure. It felt like the day that I had miscarried my first baby.... So, you get you get a sense of how devastating that is, right? You think you know something, you think you have control, you think that you have it — if not in the bag — but you think you've got a good sense of what to do, in that you've done all the right things. And then, it's a complete, unmitigated calamity. I do remember sitting at my computer at 2:30 one morning trying to finish a paper for one of my first year PhD philosophy classes or something. And sitting at 2:30 crying, crying my eyes out, thinking, 'I don't know what to do. I don't know what to say. I don't know what I'm doing.' Because the paper was due, in fact, had been due at midnight. And here I was at 2:30 in the morning, completely anxiety-ridden about pressing send. And of course, that all came to fruition and all that feeling of anxiety about it through the candidacy process was just so hard to get rid of.

Daphne: To understand *why* people are scared of writing, we have to go back to *where* most people learn to write — school. Here's the problem. When we were in school, *all* of our work was graded. That turned writing into something that put *judgment* on us — did we get 95% or 55%. What's worse, traditional grading is weighted towards failure. Joe Feldman an educator

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and author of the book *Grading for Equity* describes why: With a traditional zero to 100% grade scale, more than two thirds of it zero to 79% represents poor performance. Students are being sent a message that the chances of mediocrity are much higher than the chances of success. All of this stress is bound to make people scared of academic work. And after 12 or more years of surviving this system. We don't even need a teacher grading us anymore. We start grading ourselves. We're trained like Pavlov's dogs to associate writing with an evaluation of our ability.

Making matters worse, many students are underprepared for writing. For example, a study from the National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that American students are not spending nearly enough time writing in school, nor are they being given the skills they need.

As a result, writing — which should be fun and interesting — has turned into an activity where people feel both *underprepared* and *judged*, not exactly a recipe for success. We analyze each word we type, trying to find the perfect phrase or sentence. Then we create in our own minds the expectation of how other people will *perceive* our writing instead of focusing on what we're trying to say.

Furthermore, writing is *personal*. Like any creative task, it makes us feel *vulnerable*. We're exposing little bits of ourselves as we write, putting our own thoughts onto the page for other people to read. We're worried about being judged. And we're also worried that we don't have nearly enough skill. As a result, we become stuck in a battle between our fear and our desire to put words on the screen.

That said, I'm here to tell you that banishing your fear of writing is not nearly as difficult as you think I've helped plenty of writers overcome their fear. And I've even put together [a course](#) with some simple strategies that you can use to banish your fear for good. I'll tell you more about that in a bit. But in order to *face* our fears, we first have to understand how they manifest in us.

So, what does the fear of writing feel like? How do we as writers experience fear? Plenty of famous writers *hated* writing. Kurt Vonnegut famously said that when he wrote he felt like an armless legless man with a crayon in his mouth. After *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published. Author Harper Lee struggled to live up to expectations. Her comforts became solitude and alcohol. Her unfortunate opinion of writing was that it required “iron-fisted discipline,” and that it was “heartbreak most of the time.” And the late, great Douglas Adams, author of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, found writing so arduous that his publisher had to lock him in a hotel room, as he turned out the final pages of his book *So Long and Thanks for All the Fish*.

Here's some more comments about writing from some of my clients.

Marilyn: My name is Marilyn Adams, and I'm a physical therapist, and I work in the NBA for the San Antonio Spurs. When I think about the fear I have when it comes to writing, particularly in this project where it's a book I've been working on, I really feel like that that translates into

anxiety, and then probably frustration that that's happening. And then I'm just annoyed in general that I just can't get it done.

Mark: My name is Mark Holliday, and I am an information architect working for a software company. For me the fear isn't so much around the writing itself. It's the presentation and having other people see my writing and read my writing and possibly even give feedback on my writing, which is, you know, feedback on your writing is a good thing to get. But it's not always easy.

Daphne: Fear, of course is associated with danger. We anticipate or expect that something bad will happen. And then our bodies react. Say you're walking down a trail going for a nice hike, and suddenly you see a bear. As soon as you recognize the danger, your body starts releasing stress hormones. These hormones cause your heart rate to increase, your breathing to speed up and your muscles to tense. Your digestive system slows down, which is why you might feel it as a sensation in the pit of your stomach. *Every part* of your body is getting ready to deal with a danger — to either run away, fight, or maybe even stay perfectly still and hope the bear won't notice. This is called the fight-flight-freeze response.

The problem occurs when the danger we're facing isn't a bear in our path — but an everyday task that we can't avoid, like writing. Fear of writing doesn't always manifest in a simple way. The emotions will vary from day to day, from person to person. Sometimes it isn't even obvious that it's fear. It might feel more like anger, exhaustion or frustration. Maybe it even feels like self-loathing or despair. When we suffer from the fear of failing at writing, we worry about writing something bad or even something that's just okay. We worry about displeasing our boss or our professor or the person we're trying to write an email to... of letting down someone else ...of letting down ourselves.

All of these unpleasant emotions make us want to act to get rid of them or get control over them. But people often take the wrong approach and end up hurting themselves. The single most common response to the fear of writing is procrastination. Contrary to popular belief, procrastination is *not* about being lazy. Most people don't postpone tasks because it's easier to watch Netflix. They postpone because writing feels too overwhelming or too painful. Also, it gives them a more enjoyable experience, having a laugh at a funny video.

The problem is they haven't actually dealt with their fear at all. They've just put it off to another time. Meanwhile, their deadline is getting closer, their to-do list is getting longer, and the writing task is getting more urgent, overwhelming and frightening. Procrastination isn't the only response to the fear of writing, but it's a debilitating one. That said, even writers who do manage to get their words down on paper might struggle to publish them, to press 'submit,' to hand in the dissertation, or to actually post their blog. They might feel like an impostor, that their work will never be good enough to publish, no matter how many times they edit or rewrite.

This reaction can lead to other destructive habits like editing while you write, starting a piece of writing and failing to finish it, or deciding at the last minute that you're too afraid to publish something. But the *good* news is that none of this is inevitable. You may be afraid of writing, but with the right strategies, you can overcome that fear for long enough to successfully get your ideas out into the world.

Managing any fear is not something that happens overnight. It takes hard work. I recently created a full course to help writers tackle their fear, and I'm going to share some of those insights with you in a minute. If you find these tips useful or want to learn more, you might want to check out my full “Banish Your Fear of Writing” program. It has 18 lessons and will also give you access to an online group where you can ask me questions directly and learn from other members of the group. The link to the course is [here](#).

Now, here are *my* five favorite tips for overcoming the fear of writing.

1: See boredom is a *friend* rather than an *enemy*. People often fear writing because they worry they aren't going to be able to come up with ideas. They feel oppressed by the empty screen, bored and unsure of what to write next. So, to avoid the discomfort of staring at a blank page, they allow themselves to become distracted.

But maybe being bored isn't the worst thing in the world. When was the last time you were bored? I don't mean scrolling through Netflix deciding what to watch next, or sitting in a dull work meeting. I mean, when was the last time you sat and did *nothing*? Most of us see boredom is something to avoid at all costs. And unfortunately, we've become really good at that. But taking time to be bored is *fantastic* for our creativity. It gives us the space to think and to be curious to imagine and to come up with new ideas.

A 2018 study showed that boring tasks make our minds more likely to *wander*. And it's in that wondering when we develop our creative ideas. That's just one of the reasons so many people say they come up with great ideas in the shower. It's because they're bored and relaxed, and don't have anything else to distract them. No sitting in front of a computer, waiting for the next great idea to appear.

We have to *get out into the world*. In particular, most people become more creative when they get the big muscles in their bodies moving. I'm not saying you have to become a marathoner. Try just going for a walk *without* listening to music or an audio book. And once your brain is working again, it's time to sit down and get started.

2: Start small. So, we've already talked a bit about procrastination, where it comes from and what it does to our writing. But procrastination is also a *habit*. We imagine that the only way to write is to put it off and then cram it into the shortest possible time. But what would happen if instead of having to write giant amounts of text in one sitting, we wrote tiny amounts over a long period.

When I see people struggle with procrastination, I always suggest they start small. And when I say small, I mean *really* small. Our brains tend to look at the overall size of the work we need to do, and then we get stuck. If you're writing a 70,000-word book, convince your brain to focus on the smaller pieces that make up that daunting total. After all, that book consists of chapters, and those chapters are made up of sections. Sections are made up of paragraphs, and paragraphs of sentences and sentences of just a few words.

Whatever the size of your project, I'm going to suggest something that might sound crazy. What if you wrote for only one minute a day. To be clear, I'm not suggesting you only *ever* write for one minute a day. But *start* with that. Set a timer and write for 60 seconds. I promise you, most people are able to do even the most unpleasant task if it's only for a minute. After a week, try writing for five minutes and a week after that, try 15. Over time, keep adding just a few minutes. Even if you write only 200 words a day, after a year, you'll have 73,000.

3: Stop editing while you write. I've helped thousands of writers break this very bad habit, and it's revolutionized the act of writing for all of them. The problem with editing *while* you write, is you could spend *hours* on the first sentence and not write much of anything else. We want so *badly* to write the perfect sentence that we can easily rewrite over and over and over again.

This concept can be a bit abstract so, let me give you an example. Let's say I'm working on a blog post about how to improve self-awareness. I started typing out my first thought about an editor who used to scream at me. I write my first paragraph. But I don't like a word I've used. So, let's change that. Oh, I put a comma in the wrong spot here. Better change that too. Oh, maybe I shouldn't have started the post this way. But what if I start talking about why self-awareness is so important, before I start yammering about my long ago, editor... okay, better delete everything and start again....

This is why trying to edit *while* you write is such a bad idea. Our brains are divided into different areas that have different responsibilities. One part of our brain is creative, original, inventive. Another part is rigorous, precise, exacting. Can you guess where I'm going with this? You want the *creative* part of your brain to do the writing and the rigorous part to do the editing.

But if you're constantly changing back and forth between these two different parts of your brain — writing for two minutes here, editing for 10 minutes there — you end up multitasking. We're all more relaxed and efficient when we do only one thing at a time. For some people, breaking the habit of editing while they write can be strange because they've never written any other way. You may feel extremely self-conscious about letting your imperfections stand on the page. But breaking this habit will not only make your writing and editing better, it will make it a lot less painful to do.

4: Accept your imposter syndrome. Many people tell me they are *cursed* by imposter syndrome. They feel their work isn't good enough or they aren't deserving or worthy of their own success. But if you feel this way, too, you're not alone. That idea of not being good enough is common among so many people.

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Some 62% of knowledge workers say they have impostor syndrome, and they're joined by a long list of famous writers like Maya Angelou, Brené Brown, Neil Gaiman, Cheryl Strayed and John Steinbeck.

Talking to people you trust about how you feel can be a huge help in overcoming impostor syndrome. That can take a lot of courage, so pick your people wisely. But a conversation with a trusted colleague, or a best friend can help to reassure you of your own worth.

And don't forget to take note of your accomplishments. That can be as simple as getting *rid* of words like 'helped' to describe what you did for a project you led. *If you did the work, take the credit.* Finally, you need to stop *comparing* yourself to other people. Imagine writing to be like a yoga class. You don't look at anyone else's Downward Dog. Instead, you focus only on your own achievements, on your own mat.

5: Protect your health. Okay, I know we all get tired of hearing that we should be sleeping eight hours and eating more fruits and veggies. But hear me out. Taking care of our bodies also helps us take care of our minds and deal with our fear. Let's start with sleep. Sleep is *not* a sign of weakness or laziness. It's crucial for our creative brains. It's a basic human need, and everyone requires a different amount of it. Figure out how much *you* need. And don't be a hero when it comes to sleep. This can mean not only setting a morning alarm, but also an evening, go-to-sleep alarm. As someone who's had a lifetime's worth of sleep disruptions. I know that taking care of sleep is really important.

Exercise can also have a huge impact on your creativity. I'm not talking about triathlons here. We writers tend to spend a lot of time sitting at our desks. I've written a lot about my own treadmill desk. But even getting outside and walking for just 10 minutes can have a huge positive impact on your creativity. Taking care of our bodies can feel like a luxury that a lot of us don't have time for. But even small changes can make a huge difference.

Thanks so much for joining me today. I hope you found these five tips helpful. And be sure to [check out my course](#) if you want to learn about them in more detail.

To close things out, here's Marilyn again, talking about how working with me and other writers in our group helped her to deal with her fear of writing,

Marilyn: Reading first of all, your books really helped me understand the process of not editing while you write. You just try to get all those thoughts down on paper. One of the things that also has been helpful is being in a forum with some of your chats with the people in the groups to just be around other writers. Because once you're in a community, you kind of see that okay, this is not me alone, having this problem. Your work is exposing or promoting all those different kinds of tools that are out there for writers, because everyone has a story of them. I do believe that the work you're doing is amazing, and I wish I knew about it a lot sooner.