

10 Simple Secrets to Unleash Your Writing Potential — Without Writing a Word!

It may surprise you to learn that, sometimes, tips about writing have little to do with prepositions, pronouns and passive voice. Here's the thing: While using good grammar is essential to your finished product, it's only useful at the final stages of editing. And it's not helpful for the *writing* process.

To write, you need to engage your *creative* brain, not your correcting one. And making writing easier and more fun calls on all sorts of habits and practices that seem to have nothing to do with writing.

Here are 10 easy non-writing ways to become a better writer:

1. Be sure to get plenty of sleep



Did you know that a third of people in the US don't get nearly enough sleep? Roughly 33% get fewer than seven hours a night, which is widely regarded by doctors and scientists as the bare minimum. (And some people require more than that — as much as 10 hours a night.)

I decry the wrongheadedness of writing coaches who encourage their clients to get up “just 15 minutes earlier every day,” pushing them to achieve a wake-up time of 6 am or earlier.

We are all hard-wired to be morning or night people or “third birds,” who fall somewhere in between. I started life as a night owl and, mostly against my will, turned into a morning lark in my late 40s. I now go to bed at 11 pm and wake at 6 am, usually without an alarm. In my night owl days, I went to bed around 2 am and got up, reluctantly, at 8 am, only because I had a job.

Don't work against your own biology. And above all, don't compromise your sleep. We all need different amounts, and if you don't get enough for your body, your creativity will suffer. Sleep first; plan your writing time later. You will write better that way.

2. Take frequent breaks



When we have stalled or simply feel incapable of coming up with a way to approach a tricky piece of writing (or editing), some of us want to keep working at it — almost as if we were hitting our heads against a brick wall. Some teachers and coaches call this “diligence,” but the habit ends up inhibiting our judgement and harming our performance as writers.

Instead of staring at your screen, you're far better off taking a *break* and doing something vastly different (talking to someone on the phone, reading about something unrelated to your current writing project or even doing some mindless filing). [Overthinking](#) is often the result of having *too much* information. Taking a step back from your writing will help you see it more clearly and more creatively.

We can't generate creative solutions to our writing problems using sheer force of will. Instead, we can only provide a comfortable environment in which the solutions can emerge on their own. This is why overthinking is such a big mistake, and why it makes more sense to take plenty of breaks.

3. Spend more time in nature



Spending time with water, trees, flowers and greenery not only helps reconnect us with the natural world, it also calms us and energizes us. Research from the [University of Rochester](#) shows that nature gives us more resilience and boosts our vitality. And if you live in a big city and are far from any parks, consider using photos (even screensavers), swaths of colour (flowers on your desk?) or even ambient noise (the sound of pounding surf or falling rain) to accomplish the same goal. YouTube provides many wonderful soundscapes free of charge.

4. Work in a larger room



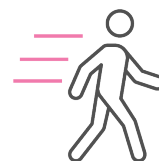
If you're stuck in a small cubicle, your thoughts will be smaller, too. When you want to do something creative, get yourself to a bigger venue. A large library — preferably one with an extra-high ceiling — or a big conference room or even a cafeteria should help open your mind. And, when the season permits it, consider working outside for a couple of hours. Take your laptop and go sit on a park bench or under a tree. Seeing far and wide will help you *think* far and wide, too.

5. Take a shower



I once worked with a writer who had all his best ideas in the shower, but he could never remember them afterward. (I advised him to buy a [diver's slate and pen](#) so he could write under water.) But he's not the only person who has great ideas in the shower. We all do! This happens for a couple of reasons: Showers are a habit for most of us, and doing something "mindless" and habitual inspires our creativity. The warm water also relaxes us. And when we're relaxed, our brains release more of the feel-good chemical, dopamine. A shower is a great way to boost your creative juices.

6. Walk more



Thinking at our desks — instead of out in fresh air, while we're moving our bodies — is almost always a spectacularly bad idea. The gentle exercise of walking leads to [new connections between brain cells](#). Walking does more than just slow the usual decline of brain tissue that comes with age — it also has a positive effect on creativity.

In 2014, researchers from Stanford University published a set of [studies designed to measure the way walking changes creativity](#). In a series of four experiments, researchers asked 176 college students to complete different tests of creative thinking while either sitting, walking on a treadmill or wandering through Stanford's campus.

In one test, volunteers had to come up with unusual uses for everyday objects, such as a button. On average, the students thought of between four and six *more* creative uses for the objects while they were walking than when they were seated.

Another experiment asked volunteers to think about a metaphor, such as “a budding cocoon,” and come up with a unique but equivalent metaphor. Some 95% of students who went for a walk were able to do so, compared to only 50% of those who never stood up.

If you want to write more easily, add more walking to your daily routine.

7. Sleep on your writing problems



Always be sure to start any writing project far enough in advance of your deadline that you have a couple nights to “sleep on it.” This isn’t just a cliché. Our brains consolidate memories, process emotions and sort through information while we’re sleeping. As well, we *dream* when we sleep (even if we don’t remember those dreams) and the act of dreaming gives us access to the most wildly creative part of our brains. A good night’s sleep can be a great way to give your brain the time and space to come up with solutions to your most challenging writing problems.

8. Approach your work as if you were a five-year-old



Children are experts at creativity. Remember how everyday things seemed magical when you were five? A refrigerator box could be a house or a car; mom’s lipstick and a pair of high heels could turn you into a princess; and you just *knew* that one day you were going to be president. Tap into that childlike creativity by allowing yourself to revel in fantasy while you’re writing. Don’t worry about going overboard — you’ll be editing later, anyway.

9. Meditate



To some people, meditation may sound flakey. To others, it will sound unnecessary. I can tell you that meditation is a valuable life skill that will be different from anything else you do. Meditation will help improve your focus and your self-acceptance. It can be practiced with or without religious beliefs.

And it needn’t take huge amounts of time. There are [benefits in doing it for just 13 minutes a day](#). I meditate every morning, and it has changed my writing practice and my life. I give more tips on how to meditate [here](#).



10. Work at being happy

Most of us think that we'll be happy if we solve a creative conundrum. But, in fact, happiness needs to come first. *When* we are happy, we work harder and more effectively. American author and Harvard grad [Shawn Achor](#) — one of the world's leading experts on the connection between happiness and success — gives advice that supports many of the items on this handout. He also suggests keeping a list of three things you're grateful for every day, maintaining a journal about one positive experience you've had over the last 24 hours and performing a random act of kindness every day.

Your Next Steps



When most of us think of improving our writing, we imagine ourselves sitting at our keyboard or wielding a red pen. It never occurs to us that getting enough sleep, meditating or walking more might be remotely relevant.

But they are! To be a confident, capable writer, you need to be a comfortably well-rounded person. Tasks *other* than writing will help you be that way.

To get more ideas, tips and strategies for writing faster, better, visit www.publicationcoach.com

Happy writing!

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