

The Writing Engine

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO WRITING MOTIVATION

by Luc Reid

www.willpowerengine.com



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INTRODUCTION

10 reasons to read *The Writing Engine* right now

1. You don't have to read the whole thing: you can dive into any part that looks interesting without having to have read what comes before
2. It's organized in small, well-labeled chunks of information that are convenient for reading even when you just have a few minutes
3. For any writing problem, there's a good chance you'll be able to find an immediate solution in the Motivation Troubleshooter section
4. It's free, which other than "they pay you" is the best of all possible prices
5. The Writing Motivation Cheat Sheet at the end summarizes the whole book. You can look at it to see exactly what the book has to tell you before having to read the book, if you like.
6. If you don't read this book now, you might not do it later, and then you'll never reap the benefits
7. Even though this book covers the subject of writing motivation thoroughly, it's much shorter than a regular book, so it won't take you long to read
8. There are funny parts. And where else do you get to see a photograph of Emily Dickinson white water kayaking?
9. *The Writing Engine* is based heavily on recent research, much of which you won't have heard about in any other writing book or article. Some of the contents of this eBook will be new to you even if you are already a successful writer, a research psychologist, and/or a regular reader of my blog.
10. If you try using even a few of the techniques from this book, you'll earn back the time spent reading it in a very short period
11. You get extra, bonus material, like the additional bullet items in this list. I only promised you 10 items, yet I'm delivering 16. Seriously: if anything, I'm underselling this stuff
12. Much of the knowledge you'll get from this eBook about writing motivation applies to other parts of life, including health, relationships, learning, and happiness
13. The book will point you to a lot of practical, informative material on the Willpower Engine site (<http://www.willpowerengine.com>) that may interest you
14. You may have friends who could really use this eBook. If you find it useful, you could pass it on with a recommendation, and it might be useful to them and cause them to feel grateful toward you
15. You can read the book in pieces, in order or out of order, whenever you need a boost to your writing motivation
16. If you need writing motivation right this minute, you can use the Emergency Writing Motivation Techniques section

Writer's Block vs. Dentist's Ennui

Writing is not like most other kinds of work. There's generally no clock to punch, no in-box, no blueprint to follow, no coworker to keep up with. At its heart, writing is a solitary occupation where it's our job to step in and make a blank page into something valuable, compelling, unique, and (ideally) marketable. Once we have those blank pages filled, the trouble is not over: we then have to decide what needs to be changed and whether the piece is any good, even when we're really too close to it to be able to judge how a fresh reader would see the piece. Then, in many cases, we have to send the work out into the world to someone who will (usually) have it for quite some time and almost always reject it. Wash away disappointment, rinse off preoccupation with getting that piece published in that venue, and repeat.

So it is that motivation is a disproportionately serious issue for writers. There's even a term coined for one kind of motivation conflict, "writer's block," whereas terms like "mechanic's clog" and "dentist's ennui" have yet to catch on.

In response to these issues, we writers often look for inspiration: we seek out writers we want to emulate, successful published books that are so awful that we are propelled to the keyboard to prove how much better we can do, story ideas, and so on. Inspiration is fine, as far as it goes, but inspiration is only one source of motivation, and not a very well-tamed or persistent one either, as a rule. However, research findings in psychology and neurology—especially over the past dozen years or so—provide solid reasons to believe that motivation at its heart is not a basic personality trait or something that is beyond our control: instead, it's a set of skills, learned in the same way that we as writers learn to write authentic-sounding dialog or how to create suspense or how to describe Elizabethan politics. In the same way we learn to write, we can learn to motivate ourselves consistently and effectively.

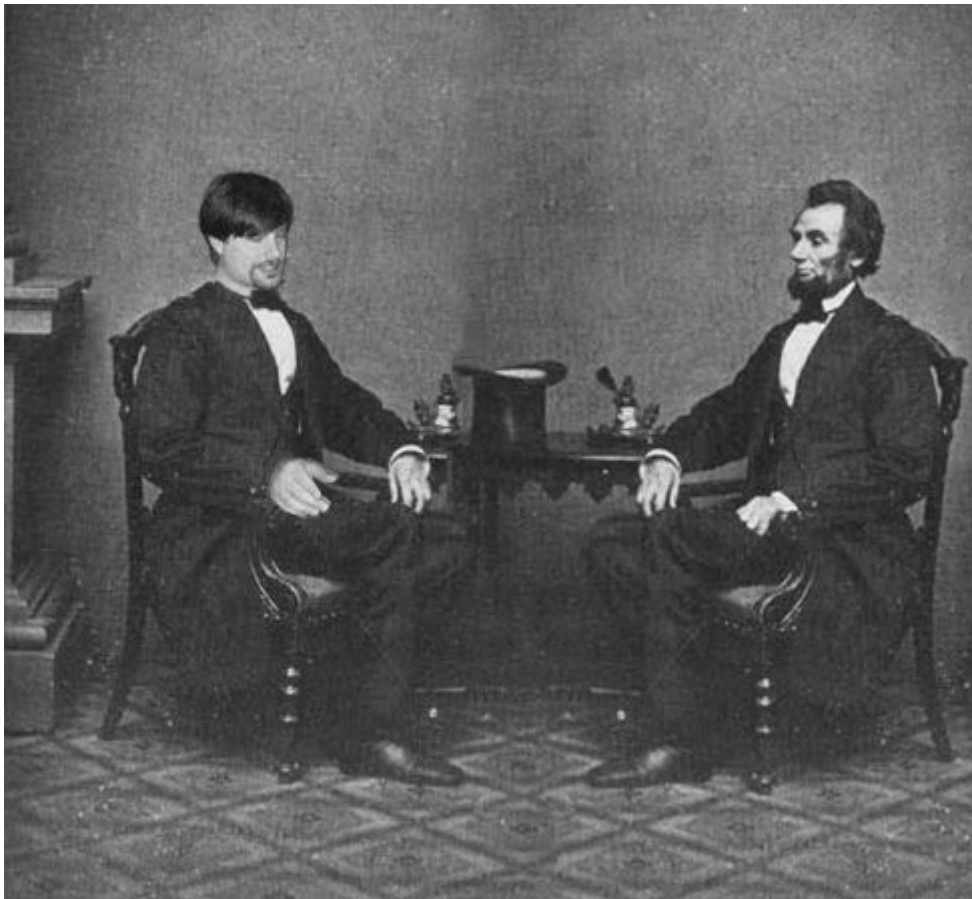
The benefits of understanding self-motivation skills include being able to complete difficult projects, getting good at even the parts of writing that may not appeal as much, increasing productivity, improving the quality of our work, and enjoying writing more.

The rest of this Introduction section will tell you who I am and how you can turn the knowledge in this book to best advantage. In the next section of this book, "How Motivation Works," you'll find an explanation of the how writing motivation works and what opportunities that offers us. The following section, "Practical Techniques," lays out specific skills that you can use to boost writing motivation, and the "Tools and Resources" section at the end offers emergency writing motivation techniques, a motivation troubleshooter, a list of useful resources, and a cheat sheet that summarizes the key ideas in this eBook as an easy refresher.

Who is this “Luc Reid” person, and why should you pay any attention to anything he says?

If you just want to get to the good stuff and judge it on its own merits, feel free to skip this section, which just explains who I am and why I have anything useful to tell you on the subject of writing motivation.

I'm a writer who has modest professional sales in both fiction (e.g., *Writers of the Future, Volumes XIX and XX*) and non-fiction (e.g., *Talk the Talk: The Slang of 65 American Subcultures*, Writers Digest Books, 2006, <http://www.subculturetalk.com>). I've studied with Orson Scott Card, Tim Powers, and other people you may or may not have heard of and am the founder of a very successful online writers' group for neo-pro speculative fiction writers called Codex (www.codexwriters.com) whose members have gone on to win major contests and get multi-book deals. I've written well over a hundred flash fiction stories for the free daily online fiction site The Daily Cabal (www.dailycabal.com); I've done radio commentaries for Jacksonville, Florida NPR affiliate WJCT; and I contribute a minimum of three articles weekly to a blog site of mine that as of this writing gets about 800 reads per week.



the author conversing with an unidentified friend

Since I'm not a psychologist, neurologist, psychotherapist, or a perfectly self-realized and serene being, you might wonder what business I have writing about self-motivation. Fortunately for me, it doesn't take a doctorate to research a subject thoroughly, develop a clear understanding of it, and then communicate it in a useful way to a lot of people: that takes a writer, preferably a writer who's gotten

obsessed with the subject—which, in the immortal words of Inigo Montoya, I have. I've spent more than a decade studying conflict resolution, strengths psychology, the human brain, cognitive psychology, and a variety of other fields related to motivation, and in the past two years I've focused intensively on self-motivation.

(A note, added later: All this learning has paid off. On my most productive writing day for this eBook, I churned out 15,000 reasonable polished words, a new personal record. My own writing motivation has benefitted a lot from learning about motivation in general.)

The clearest evidence of my passionate involvement with self-motivation is my Web site, The Willpower Engine (www.willpowerengine.com), where I post a minimum of three articles a week on willpower, self-control, self-motivation, and related subjects. Writing for this site, I found I was accumulating a lot of useful knowledge about motivation for writers specifically, which (along with a quest for fame, fortune, and the undying gratitude of the literary world) led me to write this eBook.

Hearing your feedback would be really great

I am always grateful for your questions, ideas, comments, recommendations of books and resources, condemnations, testimonials, objections, rebuttals, hallelujahs, requests for motivation writing on other topics, blog comments, links to me, suggestions for blogs to read, etc.

To give feedback, you can send me messages through the contact form on The Willpower Engine at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/#ContactForm>, post on the Willpower Engine forum at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/forum>, or e-mail me directly at [luc @ willpowerengine . com](mailto:luc@willpowerengine.com) .

New Editions, New eBooks, and Other Resources

If you'd like to be automatically notified of updated editions of this book, new eBooks by me, or other resources I make available on writing and motivation, please sign up for my notification list at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/#Notifications>. This is a very low traffic subscription, and your contact information will not be used for any purpose other than to send you very occasional information about sites, materials, and resources I make available.

News about these kinds of things, including new editions of *The Writing Engine* (if any) will also be posted on The Willpower Engine at www.willpowerengine.com .

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http://www.facebook.com/sharer.php?u=http://www.willpowerengine.com/?page_id=1012.

How to milk this eBook for all it's worth

While it's useful to have knowledge, there's a meaningful gap between just knowing something and acting on it (see <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=789>), so you'll get the most out of this book if you take action on ideas in *The Writing Engine* that you find useful. This section provides some ways you can translate the information in this book into getting writing done.

Learning and practicing motivation skills

The goals of this book are first, to provide insight into how writing self-motivation works, and second, to train you in specific self-motivation skills. While these skills can help if they're applied from time to time when you especially need them, what will really provide the greatest benefit is internalizing the skills you don't already use and making them into habits (see <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=645>). The next section discusses methods for learning the skills in the first place; from there, practice will turn those learned skills into habits. While you can get a lot of benefit out of this book just by reading it, you'll have a permanent solution to writing motivation if you use it to develop strong writing motivation habits.

Acting on ideas promotes learning

If you plan specific actions in the near future based on any useful information you find here, this will provide a double benefit: first, you'll reap the rewards of applying the technique to an area where it's needed; and second, using the technique will make a major contribution to learning it permanently. So while still reading this book, depending on what approaches strike you as most useful, it could be helpful to do things like working out a specific writing time schedule with a spouse, finding one improvement you can make to your writing space, starting your next writing session by facing those dreaded edits, etc.

Talking promotes learning, too

Another way to drive your writing motivation forward significantly is to talk with other people interested in the subject of writing motivation: friends, supportive family members, writers' groups, online forums, workshops, etc. It can be especially helpful to try to teach or pass on ideas from this book that you may find useful, as teaching or describing something requires us to review and organize the entire subject in our minds.

You can read and post comments about this eBook and writing motivation in general on the Willpower Engine forum at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/forum>.

Controversial or confusing topics are especially good to talk about, since these are often the areas where we have the most to learn and that we'll discuss most energetically.

As with any non-writing activities that are meant to help your writing, though, don't let talking about writing take over large amounts of your writing time.

Tools to assist you quickly

If you run into trouble with your writing motivation, consult the Motivation Troubleshooter in the Tools and Resources section: it provides insight into many different kinds of motivation problems, with pointers to steps you can take to solve them.

I've also included a cheat sheet summarizing the key points of *The Writing Engine*, which you can post in your writing area if you find it useful. You'll find it right at the end of this eBook.

If you want to work on your motivation on an ongoing basis, whether for writing, weight loss, relationships, studying, your day job, living a more healthy lifestyle, overcoming bad habits, or anything else, there is also the Willpower Engine site <http://www.willpowerengine.com>, where I post research- and experience-based articles on willpower and self-motivation several times a week.

Strategies to improve learning from the written word

This section is adapted from my article “Improving Motivation Through Better Learning and Memory” (<http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=600>) and will give you some specific techniques for permanently remembering any information you find useful in this eBook or in other materials you read.

Make sure you understand as you’re learning

Despite how it naturally seems to us, our memory *doesn’t* work like a video recorder, faithfully making a complete record of everything we sense, think, or feel. Storing that much information, we would quickly go beyond our capacity to remember anything. We’d also be so overwhelmed with raw material, most of it repetitive and unnecessary, that it would be impossible to sift through it all to remember what we need, unless we wanted to replay an entire conversation just to recall, for instance, what restaurant we chose to go to, or how to tie our shoes.

Instead, our brain breaks up everything we see, hear, touch, feel, and think into a lot of separate kinds of information, holds onto only the things that are novel or significant, and stores the results all over the brain, bringing the pieces back together later if they’re needed. That means that we you don’t learn something when it’s presented to us the first time, we usually won’t be able to learn it by trying to recall the details: we need to understand and store our conclusions as we learn.

We learn better when information has meaning

The more meaning and connections information has for us, the easier it is to remember. Many top chess players can look at a chess board mid-game and instantly memorize the location of every single piece on the board. In one study, chess players with this ability were able to remember layouts set up from actual games beautifully, but were much poorer at being able to remember layouts where pieces were just set randomly around the board. The actual game layouts were meaningful to them: a possible threat to the queen here, mutually protective knights there, and so on. Random game layouts didn’t have these meanings, so they couldn’t “chunk” the information (that is, bind up many pieces of information into a single element that can be stored together), which was what had been enabling them to memorize so much information so well. (By the way, I’m trying to help both myself and my readers chunk concepts when I use subheadings that cover a specific point, as I do in most parts of this book.) More meaning connections to a piece of information also gives you more possible ways to remember it when you need to.

One way to exploit the boost meaning gives to memory is to stop when you come across an idea that you want to remember and take a few moments to think about—or better yet, scribble or type down a few notes about—how you could use it in your own work or life.

To really learn something, start using it immediately

When learning how to do something, one of the strongest possible ways to fix it in memory is to start using it. This serves several purposes: it provides a lot more neural connections for the information; it allows you to experiment and apply the information while it’s still fresh in your memory; and it helps reveal any misunderstandings or gaps in knowledge while you’re still close to the source of the original information and may be able to go back to fill them in.

One way to start using knowledge immediately is to write, talk, or teach about it. If you encounter some information you think will be especially useful in your life, you might consider calling up a friend soon after and telling them what you’ve learned—or you could blog about it, post about it on an online forum, or write a journal entry about it. (One place where you can discuss motivation specifically is the Willpower Engine forum at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/forum>.)

Communicating information forces you to use it in a way that creates more neural connections and helps you see exactly how well you've understood it. At the same time, you're doing other people a service by passing it on.

Come back to the same information several times to fix it in memory

Getting information to permanently take up residence in long-term memory usually requires revisiting it several times, with perhaps a few hours to a few days between repetitions. If you make notes about something you want to learn, you can leave yourself two reminders to come back to it two more times, just to review. You can also use the "write, talk, or teach" approach at timed intervals. Studying a subject over a day, a few days, or a week seems to be much more effective than trying to cram it in all at once, at least for remembering it long-term.

In this eBook, there's a special review section at the end, the Writing Motivation Cheat Sheet, which recaps in brief all of the key points of this book. You can use it as a review, to search out tactics to try, or to remind yourself of any points you might be interested in but might not have fully internalized yet.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Laurel Amberdine for her speedy critique of the initial draft of this book, Guy Stewart for excellent feedback on the Willpower Engine site, the Codex writers' group for years of aid in my quest to learn more about writing, Heather Bouchey for support and encouragement, and my son Ethan Reid for letting me have "off duty" times during which I could focus on my writing. Highly successful veteran blogger Leo Babauta of Zen Habits (www.zenhabits.net) gets credit for putting the original idea of doing an eBook in my head in by describing the process and the benefits in a report he offers at <http://www.alistbloggingbootcamps.com>.

I'd also like to thank in advance all of those who may provide feedback on this book, visit and comment on the Willpower Engine site, participate in the forum, or pass this eBook along to other writers.

HOW MOTIVATION WORKS

Your long-term goals



The first essential step in self-motivation is knowing and fully understanding what you're motivating yourself *toward*: that is, being very clear on your goal.

I say “goal” in the singular because while we can have many goals over the course of our lives and can be serving many purposes at once, it's difficult and problematic to be *focusing* on more than one goal at a time. That is, if you want to make a real impact on any area in your life—like writing—then it will sap your attention, time, and focus if you're simultaneously beginning a new effort in getting fit, uncluttering your house, or restoring a classic car. If you stick with a new behavior long enough, though, your goal can transform into a habit, which then opens up time and attention and allows you to take up a new goal.

The reason it's important to understand your writing goal is because knowing your goal is an essential preliminary to planning the best steps to reach it. The questions in this section are designed to help make sure you've had a chance to decide what you want out of writing at this point in your life. As you then read the rest of the book, you can use or discard the ideas presented based on how well they match the your overarching writing goal—whether it's just to write regularly for pleasure, to get better at writing, to write for publication, to move into a full-time writing career, or some combination.

Is Writing Your Primary Goal Right Now?

The first thing to understand about your writing goal is to ask whether right now, at this point in your life, writing is the most important thing for you to build up. Alternatively, it could be that something else—your relationship, your health, your children, your day job, etc.—really needs your full attention first. While many of us would prefer to prioritize writing over everything else, trying to do that when there's more

² Image based on a photo by David G. Steadman, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/90949166@N00/>

pressing conflict in our lives sets us up for failure. Writing is a serious business in many ways, but in the long run, writing will only be hurt if it gets in the way of more basic matters like health, financial viability, or relationships.

If writing can't be your primary goal right away, of course that doesn't mean you can't write or can't improve your writing motivation: it just means that you'll benefit more from specific motivation tactics and solutions to immediate problems for now than you will from trying to change your writing habits or methods.

With all that in mind, do you already know whether writing should be your top priority at the moment? If you don't know for sure, now is an ideal time to decide about it—realizing that you can change that decision at any time.

If you do need to decide this, some ways to work it through include talking it through with yourself (for instance, while driving alone); writing out your thoughts; or talking about your priorities with someone who's supportive of you and your writing. Now's probably a great time. Go ahead: I'll wait.

*

OK, I didn't mean I'd wait *forever*. Wrap it up, OK? (No, just kidding: I'm using the time to catch up on some podcasts. Take all the time you need.)

Hobby, Sideline, or Career?

Whether or not you're able to prioritize writing above all else right at the moment, the next key question about your goals is this: What kind of writer do you want to be? Sure, most of us would accept the position of wealthy, famous, internationally best-selling and beloved author if it were just offered to us, but here we're not talking about how successful you want to be, but how much *work* you want to put in.

Whom are you writing for? Yourself, of course: there's not much point in pursuing writing if you don't get some satisfaction or fulfillment out of it yourself. Are you also writing for other people? If so, there are easy and direct ways to get it out, like blogging, creating a Web site, and self-publishing. These approaches rarely bring much income and often don't connect you with a large readership, though. If you want a larger audience, you probably need to be writing for someone else to publish your work: if so, you'll need to be willing to put in a substantial amount of time submitting your work and probably put up with a lot of rejections, even if your work is really solid. If it's the writing itself and not the connection with readers that you enjoy, it may not be worth all the trouble for publication to be a primary goal. If you are writing for publication, are you doing it as a hobby? Are you interested in selling your work anywhere that it will get published, or are you mainly interested in professional markets? If you do want to make pro sales, do you want to do that in your spare time, or as a full-time job? For many of us, "full-time" will be the immediate answer that springs to mind, but remember that if successful, this would require writing for long hours day in and day out, that it's extremely competitive and difficult to make a full-time living with writing (though easier with some kinds of writing, like non-fiction articles, than others, like picture books), and that there's a certain amount of permanent financial instability involved in most cases.

I'm not trying to scare you off, just to help identify what you really want. Many beginning writers seem to come to writing with the expectation that they can write one novel (for instance), sell it, and have enough money to live on from that for a couple of years. What's more typical is for a writer to write several novels over the course of at least a couple of years, finally sell one, and in the end earn maybe \$7,500 on the book. Fortunately, this can go up with subsequent novels if your work does well. The point is that making a full-time living writing—especially writing fiction—is a long and arduous path. Some other approaches are a little easier (I mentioned non-fiction, for instance), whereas others are close to impossible to make a living from (for instance, poetry and short stories).

Families, Jobs, and Other Priorities

In thinking about your writing goals, it's helpful to take into account the other factors in your life. A family, day job, or other important subjects of your attention may compete with your writing sometimes.

Do you already have a good working system for balancing those priorities so that you feel good about how your time is allotted? If not, it may help to write out a few specific things you want to accomplish in organizing your writing efforts, for instance “Have a chance to write at least a chapter a week,” “Don’t let writing prevent me from going over the kids’ homework with them,” or “Make sure I get in a three-mile run at least four times a week even if I’m doing a lot of writing.” Strategies you’ll read about later in this eBook can be helpful in getting on track with these kinds of goals.

Your short-term goals

While your long-term goals might include things like publication, professional story sales, numbers of readers or copies sold, good reviews, and so on, in a way these kinds of things aren't really goals at all: instead they're wishes, or aspirations. As writers, we can seek to promote or influence any of these things, but since ultimately agents, editors, readers, reviewers, bookstore buyers, and others are going to act on their own, we don't have direct control over these matters—and because we don't have direct control, it can be a little demoralizing to pin our hopes on these things.

Goals that are within our control

What this suggests is that long-term goals that we can't directly force to happen may not be as motivating as shorter-term goals that based on what we can accomplish ourselves. There is research to support this: for instance, in a recent study (discussed on the Willpower Engine at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=504>), women who concentrated on the more immediate, controllable benefits of exercise (like increased energy and improved mood) were more successful at losing weight than women who concentrated on long-term goals like weight loss or appearance.

So we are more likely to be able to sustain and improve our motivation if we focus not on what we wish will happen in a while, but on what we can *make* happen in the short-term. This means taking pleasure from the writing process, finishing projects, getting submissions out the door, and so on.

For example, if I'm interested in writing and selling articles about the psychology of motivation (which I am), that would entail moving into a market where I have relatively little experience, large circulation magazines. I could try to motivate myself by thinking about the money I might receive, the increased exposure for my other work, and the professional accomplishment that would all come from selling work to such magazines—but none of those things are under my control, and at the same time I'm thinking of these potential payoffs, I can't help but be nagged by concerns: I don't have much experience in these markets, they're fairly competitive, and I don't have academic credentials that would make it much easier to prove that I know what I'm talking about. These doubts interfere with the rosy futures I've been trying to envision and sap some of their power away.

By contrast, if I focus on the satisfaction of having a dozen queries out at a time, something that is feasible for me and that on average would result in me hearing back on queries a couple of times a week or more, and if I also concentrate on the improvements to my knowledge of the writing industry and to my skill in writing query letters and marketing my work, then none of my fears about possible obstacles matters. I can more or less guarantee that on my own efforts I can get twelve decent queries out at a time to different magazines, and continued practice is bound to improve my skills in this area, regardless of anyone else's actions. These payoffs may be smaller, but they're also more immediate, and it's much more fun to experience small payoffs now than to worry whether or not I'll receive large payoffs down the road.

Momentum

There's a common perception that writing quality comes from working very slowly and deliberately, that something written quickly is by definition bad writing. And it's certainly true that careful editing, letting works sit for a while before going back to improve them, and other slow-cook methods can often benefit the writing a lot—after the first draft is done. But there are reasons to believe that especially for the first draft, working quickly, in longer sessions, closer together, can yield better writing than slowly chipping away at the writing could ever do. These benefits can also help in later drafts, and in any draft they offer improved motivation and productivity.

Immersiveness

One reason writing quickly can work well is that it's more immersive. The more intensively you work on a writing project, the more it will be on your mind, the more opportunity your subconscious will have to come up with solutions and improvements, and the more your thoughts will tend to turn toward your work in progress. Perhaps more importantly, your continuing immersion in your work gives you a greater familiarity and awareness of it. Immersion means having more pieces of your project in mind at once and being able to perceive more connections.

Psychological momentum

Writing quickly also provides psychological momentum. We tend to set our sights higher when we have already done something once before, so if I write two chapters of a novel in one day, the next full day I have to work on the novel, I may feel ready to take on that same amount, or more. The immersiveness of the process also contributes to momentum, since the more I think of a project, the more eager I will usually be to get back to working on it.

Getting some initial momentum is fairly easy: just tackle any task that will move your project forward in any way. Shorter, easier tasks are better if you're finding the project daunting; longer tasks are better if you want to dig in without changing gears for a while. Each step you take to further your project will benefit other steps you take. For instance, finding someone to read your work (see the heading on Wise Readers in the following section on Support, Camaraderie, and Mentoring) encourages you to write more, which gives you more writing to send to your feedback readers, which causes more communication about your project, and so on. Any step you take to engage with your work—writing it, figuring out where to sell it, talking about it with supportive friends and family, researching for it, etc.—builds momentum.

Developing a writing habit

Writing regularly also helps contribute to a habit of writing (see <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=645>), so that sitting down and cranking out words becomes easier and more automatic the more you do it, especially if the sessions are close together. Behaviors that occur every day without fail, or very close to that mark, are prime candidates for becoming habits.

Reasons *not* to write quickly

There is at least one major limitation to writing a lot quickly, which is that it's not of nearly as great use if you haven't internalized good writing habits. For instance, if you're writing a short story and dash off 7,000 words before you realize your protagonist is completely unsympathetic, or if you write a long article about raised garden beds without any real sense of how much detail to go into on each point, then much of your writing is wasted, and the writing habits you're practicing are not necessarily good ones. Sometimes too, writing quickly can prevent us from considering the larger questions, allowing us to get farther off course because we're moving ahead so quickly.

Striking a balance may mean writing fast and resigning yourself to doing a lot of editing, or writing slowly at first with great attention to all of the important techniques you want to use (that is, resigning yourself to not having access to the benefits of writing quickly until you've internalized them). Personally, I

have a long list of factors I like to take into account in my writing posted on the wall in my writing area, and I try to consult it regularly to build ever-better writing habits. I write as quickly as I can as long as I stick to the precepts I'm trying to follow, which slows me down sometimes. For people who prefer a more intuitive, less analytical approach, however, this is not ideal.

Reasons to write every day

The obvious reason for writing every day—to get more writing done—is of course a great recommendation for the practice, but there are other things that recommend it, too. First, writing every day helps form a strong writing habit in a way that even writing every other day or writing four or five days a week doesn't do nearly as well or as quickly. (For more on how habits form, read "How Long Does It Take to Form a Habit?" at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=645> .)

Another advantage of writing daily is immersion, which we've already talked about. Related to this is the advantage that writing daily keeps you focused on your work in a way that makes good use of idle moments for thinking about and planning writing. It maintains your momentum and makes more writing easier to do.

Writing every day, because it increases the amount you write and the amount of time you think about writing, also increases the speed at which your writing improves. It provides a nearly ideal circumstance for learning about writing and for keeping your writing goals front and center.

Finally, writing every day can be a source of confidence and pride. It's been said too many times to count that the essential definition of a writer is someone who writes. If we go days between writing sessions, then to some extent during those times we retreat from being a writer and immerse ourselves in different roles. Writing daily keeps us in touch with our writing and with its importance in our lives.

Support, camaraderie, and mentoring

Writing itself—even in collaborations—is a mainly solitary activity, but human beings developed to be social—to work together, share ideas, and pool resources. Writing motivation, following as it does basic human psychology, can benefit hugely from a writer’s connections with other people. However, connecting with others also has its pitfalls for writers, and failing to steer clear of them in time can damage both the writing process and writing motivation.

Talent and practice

The key to becoming very good at something is not, contrary to a widespread belief, inborn talent: it’s practice and feedback. The research and reporting supporting this point is formidable, and I talk about in some detail in my Willpower Engine article “Do You Have Enough Talent to Become Great at It?” at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=86> . The essential point is that the more writing we do, the more neural connections and mental resources we bring out to support the process of writing.

This doesn’t contradict the idea that some people when they first turn their hand to serious writing have advantages over others, since knowledge and skill in other areas, as well as previous, casual writing experience can benefit writing.

It’s clear that some people have more passion for writing than others, and this passion for writing makes all the difference, because the more you love writing, the more of it you’re likely to do, and the better you’ll get. Interestingly, getting better also makes writing more rewarding, which contributes to passion. To put it another way, our writing efforts can not only make us better at writing, but they can also in some cases make us more passionate and spur us on to greater writing efforts.

Why feedback is essential

I mention both practice and feedback, and for a good reason: we need some kind of meaningful response to our work to make sure we devote our attention to nurturing the connections that actually make our writing better, and only those connections. We don’t want to get better at writing cliched dialog or at muddled, confusing descriptions.

Practicing music provides a good illustration of the principles of practice: the amount of time a musician has practiced in their life so far tends to correspond very closely to how proficient they are at playing their instrument. In a given practice session, a musician can improve at playing a particular piece by playing it repeatedly—perhaps initially at a slower tempo—and *correctly*. Playing the piece incorrectly will not only fail to help the player get the piece down, but it will help ingrain the mistakes in the musician’s brain through repetition. This seems almost too obvious to be worth mentioning, but inexperienced musicians often rush through practice sessions trying to play a piece as quickly as possible even though they may be making mistakes. More experienced musicians will stop immediately if there is a mistake, play the faulty passage correctly several times, and only then proceed with playing the whole piece. This process is much more effective for learning to play the piece without mistakes than the beginners’ approach.

But musicians have a major advantage over writers in terms of feedback: it’s much easier to tell whether a note is out of tune, a tempo uneven, or even whether a passage isn’t being given the proper amount of expression than it is to tell whether a character is sympathetic or whether a difficult point will be understood by readers. Musicians can certainly benefit from critique, but for writers, some form of feedback is crucial.

Wise readers

Writers have access to a variety of kinds of critique, including responses from a teacher or mentor, responses from other writers, and responses from readers who are neither teachers nor writers. We’ll take a look at those first two in a moment, but for now let’s look the idea of getting responses to our writing from people with no special writing expertise. Orson Scott Card calls these kinds of people “wise

readers,” because they provide insight into the effects our writing is actually having with normal readers, which for most of us is what counts the most. Wise readers may not be able to tell us what to change or even necessary where a problem is occurring, but they know what does and doesn’t work for them.

Wise readers aid writers not only with becoming better at writing, but with writing motivation as well. A person who’s genuinely interested in our writing but not predisposed for or against it, if they are willing to share their responses with us, can provide a one unique and authentic reaction to how our writing is really working in a real-world situation. They will be able to tell us whether they care about what happens to the protagonist, or whether the explanation of mitosis really made the process clear to them, or if the descriptions were boring—at least for that particular reader.

In the process, they provide several side benefits to motivation including an audience and (sometimes) a deadline. When we write for wise readers, we have an actual person to please and perhaps a time frame in which our work is expected, and this can help drive us to write more, write better, or both. Once the reader responds to a piece, they are also engaging us in conversation about our writing, which as noted elsewhere, is an excellent writing motivation technique—as long as we take the critique as information and not a personal attack. More on this in the section below on responding to critique.

Writers’ groups

Writers’ groups can be an incentive to write more regularly, a context in which discuss writing, a forum for vetting ideas, and a source of critique on demand. Too, writers’ groups can provide new insights into writing principles by offering the opportunity to critique the work of others. But they can also be an excessive time commitment, an aggravation, or a font of bad advice.

It terms of gauging whether a particular writing group is helpful to you as a writer, consider whether attending the group makes you want to write more, whether you’re finding good use for the feedback you get, and what the quality is of the responses you’re getting.

Staying within one writer’s group for a long period can support a sense of community and mutual support, but over time in smaller groups the critique may get repetitive, depending on the circumstances, and it may eventually be necessary to look elsewhere for fresh insights on your writing.

In-person writers’ groups may create a stronger sense of community, while online groups may offer a wider array of writers and an ability to focus on more specific kinds of writing. As an example, Codex is a group for neo-pro writers interested in science fiction and fantasy; this has worked better for us than opening the group to all comers or attempting to cover all types of writing might have done.

If you can’t find an in-person group that really suits your needs, you may want to consider starting one. However, keep in mind that such a group will take more of your time and effort to run than it would have just to participate. In many cases, though, a passionate writer can reap substantial rewards by running a small writers’ group.

In terms of online writers’ groups, you’ll probably get the greatest benefits from joining an existing group unless the one you have in mind is something that doesn’t currently exist (as Codex was before it started). Fortunately, even non-technical people, with a little attention and effort, can set up online forums and critique groups.

Workshops, teachers, mentors, and writing courses

The utility of workshops, teachers, mentors, and writing courses depends to a large extent on the fit between the teacher and the writer. When the teacher has successfully sold work in the general area of the student’s interest, the student admires the teacher’s writing, the teacher is sympathetic to the types of writing that interest the student, and the teacher is genuinely interested in teaching, the relationship can be positive. Writing teachers who don’t have significant publishing credits of their own or whose writing tastes don’t extend into the student’s area of interest may not be of great help.

Many writers have become successful without the benefit of a teacher, while very few writers have become successful without doing a lot of writing first. With that said, a teacher who is a good fit can provide answers to many questions a newer writer might have, can offer detailed and insightful feedback,

and can recommend avenues of reading and writing to allow the student to thrive, including (in some cases) professional connections. In short, a good teacher can provide a much faster route to good and effective writing.

Responding to writing feedback

As with any critique, it's important to separate the work from the writer. Even if a critique is completely negative—or even rude—the information being provided is still valuable as long as it's candid. If someone says our dialog sounded stupid, our description of the shuttle launch was boring, or our character is annoying, it becomes both much easier to take and much more useful as information to consciously reframe that information as “one reader’s response to their reading of this piece” than as “a final judgement of me as an artist and a human being”—yet the second one, for many of us, is closer to our automatic reaction. More insight into how to hear other people in a way that gives us information rather than triggers our defenses can be found in either of two excellent books, Marshall Rosenberg's *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* and Kelly Patterson, et al.'s *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When the Stakes Are High* (see http://www.willpowerengine.com/?page_id=907).

On the other hand, some critiquers may well have a different agenda than providing a candid response to your writing. There are writers who will respond to others' writing with a detailed explanation of how *they* would have done it, and readers who take critique as an opportunity for self-aggrandizement or other kinds of acting out. These kinds of responses need to be weeded out and ignored.

With readers who are actually responding to the piece, it's often theoretically possible to hold constructive, friendly conversations about a reader's feedback on a piece of writing—we do it on Codex (the online writing group I run) all the time. However, doing so requires the writer to be absolutely comfortable with the idea that the reader is providing information that might help improve the piece or the writer's abilities. If there's any feeling of defensiveness or unfairness from the writer, it is generally much better to respond with only a “thank you.” Since defensiveness is hard to steer clear of sometimes, especially with people you don't know and like already, many top writing workshops have a rule that writers may only respond to critiques with questions of clarification (“Was it the passage about shearing where you didn't understand what Clarence was saying?”) and “thank you”s.

Friends, family, and significant others

Of course it's preferable, although not essential, to have some support from family and friends for your writing, since devoting yourself to writing will take you away from them some of the time. Since the great majority of writers—even the great majority of writers with professional sales—do not make a full-time living at their trade, this time generally needs to be built around other responsibilities, including day jobs, friendships, and family time. If you are writing occasionally, this can be easy to manage, but if you are writing regularly, and especially if you aspire to a full-time writing career, the conflicts can become problematic. Having opposition to your writing in these cases not only causes friction in relationships, but also undermines writing motivation by associating writing with conflict and potentially guilt, anger, resentment, frustration, etc. In these cases I would again recommend *Crucial Conversations* and *Nonviolent Communication* (see above) as books that can describe plainly and in detail some well-researched and well-documented approaches to working out contentious issues.

Planning specific, uninterrupted writing times (where possible) can sometimes help both with relationships and writing motivation. In terms of relationships, this kind of approach provides predictability, so that family members know they're losing access to you for only a set period of time, and you know that you can count on a specific time period to write. In terms of writing motivation, these times provide you with set windows in which you know you need to write and to fend off procrastination and distraction.

For ways to find more time to write, see the How to Get More Time to Write section later in this book. For techniques that help ensure you actually get writing done during your writing time, see the Using Writing Time Well section.

Unmasking Writer's Block

Orson Scott Card, a bestselling novelist and an excellent teacher of writing, was the first person from whom I heard the idea that writer's block is a mainly imaginary affliction (see <http://www.hatrack.com/writingclass/lessons/2002-09-23.shtml>). This claim is a little bit shocking, considering that many respected writers have spoken about having writer's block, and interviewers for television, radio and magazines often ask about it as though it were a physical disease, like cleft palate or syphilis.

If it really existed, writer's block would be the inability to write. If we look at this idea for a moment, we begin to notice that it doesn't make much sense. Is a person with writer's block physically unable to put words on a page? If that's really the case, it's not called "writer's block," but rather "paralysis" or "death" or "extreme drunkenness." So, people with writer's block can clearly write. Presumably the actual problem writer's block threatens is the inability to write anything *good*.

The perils of trying to forecast quality

But how in the world can we determine whether or not we're able to write something good unless we write something in the first place? We can guess at the quality of what will come out, but for all we know, we might get rolling and write the best work we've ever come up with. Some successful writers I know have reported writing their best work when they were on a roll and feeling great; others report having had to wrestle their best work out of a pile of garbage. So while it is possible to write and for it not to be good, that's not writer's block: that's just bad writing, which can be cured in a variety of ways, of which more a little further on.

Nothing to fear but fear itself

So writer's block isn't the inability to write, or the inability to write anything good, but rather a code name for being *afraid* of not being able to write anything good. But since people who don't write aren't really familiar with the process, it's much easier and more comfortable to say "I have writer's block" than to say "I wrote something terrific last year, and ever since, I've lived in terror that it was the only good thing I'll ever write and that if I keep writing, I'll be exposed as the hack I really am."

The only real cure for writer's block is to write something, however random or awful. If it's bad, that's fine: we'll spin that by calling it (and here I'm borrowing another one of Card's phrases) an "exploratory draft." The virtue of writing that doesn't meet your standards is that it provides material for more writing that you might like very much while often teaching you a lot in the bargain. What if you rewrote it from scratch, but changed _____? Or maybe that just helps you see that the real story isn't the one you just tried to write, but something that comes before it, or after it, or instead of it.

Lifelong Writer's Block

As a cautionary tale, consider the story of Harper Lee, author of the beloved classic *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Published in 1960, the novel not only immediately became a bestseller, but also went on to win the Pulitzer Prize. *To Kill a Mockingbird* was Lee's first novel (following a number of short stories), and to date it was her last. None of Lee's fiction has seen the light since, although she worked on a second novel and eventually put it aside.

It's a bit perilous to make conclusions about an author's state of mind based on broad details of that person's life, but as Lee clearly didn't lose her interest in writing (as evidenced by the attempt at the second novel), and since she clearly has had plenty of time to write, and since she apparently hasn't submitted anything for publication since her original novel came out, it seems very likely that she has decided not to risk sucking. About the success of *To Kill a Mockingbird* Lee herself says, "I hoped for a little, as I said, but I got rather a whole lot, and in some ways this was just about as frightening as the quick, merciful death I'd expected." The impression that Lee suffers from fear of looking mediocre is strengthened in light of Lee's habit of not granting interviews or speaking in public. On this subject, Lee

has said "Well, it's better to be silent than to be a fool." I will respectfully disagree, if only because every wise person was a fool once, and wisdom doesn't come from only ever doing the safe thing.

It's true that *To Kill a Mockingbird* would be a tough act to follow, and that there's a good chance whatever Lee had written directly afterward wouldn't quite have measured up. But would this have invalidated *To Kill a Mockingbird's* success? Do people turn up their nose at *Huckleberry Finn* just because *Tom Sawyer, Detective* isn't a classic? In fact, Lee might well have gone on to write any number of decent, good, or excellent novels or nonfiction books—might even have eventually written something to outshine even her early masterpiece—but fear of failure seems to have scared her off. Talented as she is, let's not follow her example, but instead follow other, more reckless role models.

What if everything I write really *is* crap?

What happens if you plow through your non-existent writer's block and start writing, but it really all does turn out to be garbage, and none of it is even useful as an exploratory draft? Well, then it's time to turn your attention to your craft. For a while, you may need to fall back on doing short exercises rather than full-blown pieces meant for publication. There are any number of excellent writing books out there (among which are Card's *Character and Viewpoint*, Donald Maass' *Writing the Breakout Novel*, Stephen King's *On Writing*, Noah Lukeman's *The First Five Pages*, and Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey*), or you could work with a good writer's group or take a good workshop. The only caution here is to avoid books about writing by people who don't know what they're talking about and classes taught by people whose fiction you don't enjoy (or who don't enjoy the kind of thing you want to write).

The drive to write

Another possible kind of writer's block is having trouble writing because you don't really like to write, and don't feel compelled to. Some writers talk about not enjoying the process of writing, but they're compelled to do it anyway. Either compulsion or enjoyment will work, but at least one (and preferably both) are essential. After all, if you don't enjoy writing and don't feel compelled to do it, why write in the first place? There generally isn't much money in it, and even if you get famous people won't recognize you on the street unless you're Stephen King or Samuel Clemens. Or ...well, I guess that should be the zombie of Samuel Clemens, considering the poor guy's dead. Anyway, you know what I'm saying here.

Lack of Writer's Block in action

In support of all these claims I'm making about the misleading nature of Writer's Block, there's my own experience: I used to believe in writer's block and to think I was afflicted by it from time to time. Some years ago, however, I was introduced to more aggressive writing methods, and I've never had any trouble with Writer's Block since. As of this writing, I contribute regularly and sometimes on very short deadlines to *The Daily Cabal* (www.dailycabal.com), a site where one Cabalist or another has posted a very short story every weekday without fail since March 26, 2007. I've written well over a hundred stories for the site. I write articles on self-motivation a minimum of three times a week (currently every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday morning, plus occasional in-between posts) for *The Willpower Engine* (www.willpowerengine.com), have been doing so for a number of months, and have never yet missed a deadline.

I hope you'll excuse this tooting of my own horn, but I hope too that it makes the point that it's possible to simply sit down and start writing whatever you need to be writing, whenever you make time to write. As sports columnist Red Smith once put it, "All you do is sit down at a typewriter and open a vein."

Prioritization errors

Even writers who sit down and write regularly sometimes are held back by in their goals by problems with writing priorities. Here are some of the most common writing prioritization errors.

Error #1: Infinite rewrites

Robert Heinlein once famously said "Never rewrite except to direct editorial order." This advice can be taken in various ways, which various successful writers agree or disagree with, but it does contain a piece of fairly inarguable wisdom: if you're seeking publication, sooner or later your baby's going to have to leave home and take some chances in the big, wide world. If you find yourself spending most of your writing time editing and rewriting, then editing and rewriting again, it's worth taking a step back and deciding whether you're making major improvements or just pushing your food around on your plate.

Error #2: Getting too attached

Another piece of famous advice that contains an essential truth is Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's "Whenever you feel an impulse to perpetrate a piece of exceptionally fine writing, obey it -- wholeheartedly -- and delete it before sending your manuscripts to press. Murder your darlings." (The quote is sometimes misattributed to William Faulkner, who did say something like it, but well after Quiller-Couch.)

Clearly the idea of rooting out everything you really like from your writing is overstated. Sometimes we write something, we like it, and other people like it too. That's the kind of situation in which we should give Quiller-Couch a funny look and move on.

However, it's very easy to look at a piece of writing that needs serious editing and to leave parts in solely because we like them, even if they're not helping what we've written. Liking a piece of writing is not in and of itself a problem, but it becomes a problem if it isn't moving the piece forward and serving its purpose, or if it's getting the piece off track. This rule can apply to chapters, stories, and even whole books: a book that is fatally flawed (for instance, a novel written around a character whom none of your readers, it turns out, want to read about; or a non-fiction book written on a subject that, it turns out, has already been covered better by a number of other books) may need to be abandoned. While we don't want to be too eager to jump ship (that's the next error), it's important to realize when a piece of writing needs to head into The Drawer or even The Circular File.

Error #3: Always starting, never finishing

While it's true that some projects ought to be abandoned, it's also true that if you keep starting up new projects before the old projects are finished and out the door, your actual amount of completed work will be very low. In fact, it's possible to be kept in a permanent holding pattern by this habit. This doesn't mean that it's never appropriate to switch gears, but if you do it all the time, it's probably time to think about finding a project you really love and committing to it until it's done, even if you have doubts along the way.

Error #4: Focusing on more than one project at a time

There are some benefits to having two projects going at once: sometimes one project provides a break from the other, or can be worked on while the other project is stewing or being critiqued. However, there tend to be a lot *more* benefits to focusing on just one project at a time. Focusing in this way allows you increases immersion in the project, allows your subconscious more opportunities to solve problems for you, makes it easier to keep track of the next thing you need to do, and in other ways offers the benefits described in the section on Momentum.

Your writing tools

In the most basic sense, all any of us needs to write is a blank piece of paper and a writing implement, or the most basic word processor. Yet writing tools can make writing easier, less overwhelming, and even better. They accomplish this in two ways: pleasure and organization.

Tools to make writing more pleasurable

Taking pleasure in your tools is a small part of writing motivation, but it's a mistake to overlook it. If you write on a computer, is your monitor large enough to work on comfortably? Is it clear, not causing undue wear on your eyes? If you don't have an ergonomic keyboard, would one make a difference in your comfort, or even your health? Are you more inclined to make writing notes when you're away from the computer if you have a handsome notebook and a particularly good pen? Is your computer too noisy? Do you stop writing after a while because your setup is uncomfortable? If there are reasonable, small improvements you can make to your writing setup, they're worth strongly considering, because they will encourage you to write more.

Tools to help organize

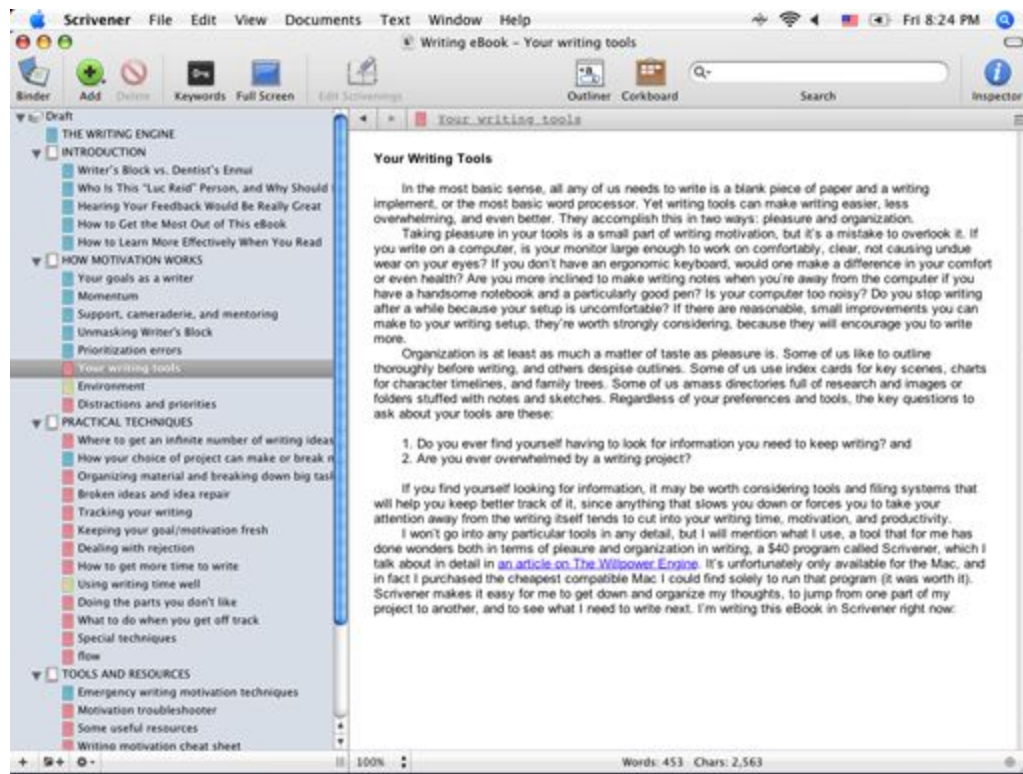
Organization is at least as much a matter of taste as pleasure is. Some of us like to outline thoroughly before writing; others of us despise outlines. Some of us use index cards for key scenes, charts for character timelines, and family trees. Some of us amass directories full of research and images, or folders stuffed with notes and sketches. Regardless of your preferences, the key questions to ask about your tools are these:

1. Are you ever kept from writing because you're looking for information you already have? and
2. Do you ever feel overwhelmed by a writing project?

If you find yourself looking for information, it may be worth considering tools and filing systems that will help you keep better track of it, since anything that slows you down or forces you to take your attention away from the writing itself tends to cut into your writing time, motivation, and productivity.

An example

I won't go into any particular tools in any great detail, but I will mention what I use, a computer program that for me has done wonders both in terms of pleasure and organization in writing. The tool in question is a \$40 package called Scrivener (<http://www.literatureandlatte.com/scrivener.html>), which I talk about in detail in an article on The Willpower Engine at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=680>. It's unfortunately only available for the Mac, and in fact I purchased the cheapest compatible Mac I could find solely to run that program. It was well worth it. Scrivener makes it easy for me to organize my thoughts, to jump from one part of my project to another, to break down a large writing task into manageable pieces (see the section on breaking down tasks later in this eBook) and to know immediately what I'll need to write next. I'm writing this eBook in Scrivener right now:



click for larger image

With that said, I don't think Scrivener is necessarily going to be ideal for every writer, just like any other tool. There seem to be any number of ways different writers write effectively in terms of their tools and process, so as well as Scrivener works for me, for other writers so much organization might just feel confining, or computers might not be the preferred writing tool. It's worth playing with a variety of tools and seeing which ones appeal, though, even if at first glance a tool doesn't seem to be your kind of thing. There's no harm in doing a little experimentation when the potential payoff is so high.

Your writing environment

Like your writing tools, your writing environment can have a subtle but pervasive impact on how well, how often, how long, and how happily you work. What could you do to the space where you work that would

- make you happier or remind you of things that make you happy?
- make it easier to concentrate?
- put things more easily to hand or more conveniently out of the way?
- attract you to your work?
- remind you of why you do the work you do? or
- put you in a good mood or a frame of mind to focus?

In answer, here are eight elements you can consider when looking for ways to make your work environment work harder for you.

Light: Is there enough of it? Is it prevented from glaring in your eyes and reflecting off screens? Is there a way you could get more natural light, or a lamp with a quality of light that's more comfortable for you?

Space: Does your writing space feel open and uncrowded? Can you easily move around in it without bumping into things? Can you see around you and get to things without being obstructed?

Music: If music helps you work at least some of the time, do you know what kinds of music fit your working habits the best? Have you experimented with different kinds? Do you have a convenient way to play music? If you don't have a library of music available wherever you write (or even if you do), I highly recommend Pandora (<http://www.pandora.com/>), a free sort of jukebox where you steer the music selections by naming artists and songs you like—although the free version has occasional, brief audio ads. In case your musical tastes turn out to be anything like mine (which are a little unusual sometimes, I admit), you can hear my Pandora stations at <http://www.pandora.com/people/luc2>.

Comfort and ergonomics: Of course it's more expensive and takes more trouble to get a good office chair or monitor, but if you spend long hours writing, problems like back pain or eyestrain can tend to make your work unenjoyable or cut your work sessions short. It's possible, depending on your situation, that some extra effort and expense to make your writing space more ergonomic might be well worth it in the long run.

Neatness and organization: Your writing area only has to be neat and organized enough that you can easily get to everything you need to use, nothing's in your way, and you're happy. For me, having a place for everything and everything in its place is an ongoing process, but one that makes me noticeably happier to sit down to work whenever I make progress at it. For you, a little more disorder might be joyful—or like many people, you might find a little time spent on organization goes a long way in lifting your spirits.

Beauty and personality: Photographs, objects that make you feel at home, artwork that puts you in a good mood, or anything that makes your workspace more comfortable or beautiful is likely to make you more eager to get things done as long as it isn't distracting.

Refuge: Depending on your living and working circumstances, it might be an option to have privacy and peace while writing or it might not, depending on the way things are arranged.

If you would prefer a more peaceful environment but need to write in the midst of chaos, remember that it *is* possible to adapt. I used to be barely able to write in a room where I could hear anyone talking; after a couple of years of writing, by necessity, in a room that was also a playroom for two young children, I grew nearly immune to distraction. One large writing project was finished in the midst of a bunch of writers having a half-convention, half-party—and it was a lot of fun to work in that context. We're adaptable creatures.

The directions of things: Though I was skeptical at first, I learned some valuable techniques from a feng shui expert who came in to talk to a group of us at a former job. Not all of the teachings of feng shui necessarily struck me as constructive for offices (though admittedly, I'm hardly an expert), but the ones I like are:

- Avoid having things (corners of tables, pens, etc.) pointing at you while you work if you find it sets you on edge
- Try to work in a position where you can easily see the door. This prevents being distracted by our very basic urge to check who's behind us when we hear a noise
- Arrange your writing space so that things meet in curves or open angles rather than corners. For instance, turn one piece of furniture 45 degrees where it meets another in order to create a more harmonious line.
- Add plants to your writing space. Some easy-to-maintain possibilities include ficus and jade plant

Flow



What would it feel like to be perfectly motivated, even if just for a little while? You would become deeply involved with what you were doing, even fascinated with it, so that you'd stop noticing distractions. You'd be excited, working hard but not wearing yourself out. You'd know exactly what you were doing and exactly what you were trying to accomplish and exactly how well it was going. Things would just flow.

As you might already know (or have quickly guessed), this state of mind does exist, and it's not even particularly rare. Probably you've experienced it yourself at least once or twice—maybe many times. When it works, it feels magical, because you're working at about the highest level of difficulty you can manage, yet everything feels profoundly easy.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (pronounced “chick *sent* me high,” as in “This guru chick *sent* me high into the Himalayas to find myself, but she didn't go herself”) has a word for this state, which he's studied now for decades. He calls it “flow,” because when you're in this state, you feel like you're being carried along, as though by a river.

Perfect *short-term* motivation

It's a little misleading for me—or Csikszentmihalyi—to talk about flow being a state of perfect motivation, because while that's true in a sense, flow only applies to short-term experiences. You can get into flow when writing a chapter of a book or giving a musical performance or playing a game of baseball or even fixing a lawnmower, but you can't get into a single experience of flow over the course of days or weeks or months. Flow also only applies to things we're already pretty good at: if you're just learning something, then you need to teach your brain about each of the pieces before you can put them all together into a complex whole.

So if it doesn't last long, and if most large, important goals take a commitment of weeks or months or years, what good is flow? Well, that long-term commitment breaks down into work done in individual sessions, and in those individual sessions we can strive for flow. Flow is addictive, I can tell you from experience (mostly with writing and music). It's also pleasurable. It's also hellaciously efficient. Even if it

only comes along now and then, a little flow can turn a long-term project into a long-term source of both satisfaction and thrills.

The components of flow

So what are the components of flow, and how do you get into it? I'll give an introduction here, and if you'd like to learn about flow in detail, you read Csikszentmihalyi's book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*.

Interestingly, flow has several things in common with good self-motivation techniques in general:

- Clear goals
- A strong focus on what you're doing (in the case of flow, so much focus that everything else is blocked out)
- Immediate feedback as you go (for writing flow, this is primarily your own judgement of how well your writing is meeting your goals)
- Challenge that is just within your ability

Indicators of flow

Csikszentmihalyi describes some signs that show when a person might be in flow:

- Your consciousness of yourself fades, and your awareness is focused pretty much entirely on what you're doing
- Your sense of time distorts: an entire afternoon may feel like half an hour
- You're enjoying what you do: it doesn't feel effortful
- You feel powerfully in control of what you're doing.

Flow doesn't apply to everything

First, not every activity should be done in flow. Flow requires being able to concentrate on one particular task or related group of tasks for a substantial period of time without having to switch gears. This can happen alone or with other people, but if anyone or anything is going to need to pull your attention away from the task—ringing phones, kids needing help with homework, pets needing to be let out, changing to a very different task—it will tend to disrupt flow. That doesn't mean a person can't have a phone, kids, or pets, just that whenever there are potential distractions, getting into flow means making sure as well as you can that distractions are taken care of. See the section on Handling Distractions for specific anti-interruption techniques.

A balance between control and challenge

Flow requires that you know what you're doing: it's a balance between control and challenge. If you're just barely getting a grip on a new skill, you won't have the control you need. That doesn't mean you can't get into a flow state when learning or practicing, but the ways I know of to do that are either 1) mastering the basics first, or 2) getting into flow about learning, not about the activity itself. If you're just beginning to learn how to outline a novel, for instance, it's unlikely you'll be able to get into flow when doing it unless it's closely related to something you've done before, like outlining another kind of writing.

Challenge means that you're pushing your limits. Doing something in pretty much the same way you've done it before isn't likely to be challenging enough to create flow unless the project is throwing you curve balls of its own. Interestingly, this suggests that sometimes it can be motivating to make your own writing harder—to increase the suspense when you already think the suspense is adequate, or to try to come up with new ways to organize information on every page even when you feel the information you're presenting is clear. Don't overwhelm yourself, which would prevent flow, but do challenge yourself.

Experiencing flow also means needing to carefully set clear goals that provide the challenge needed. If you're not feeling challenged or driven in doing the work you're accomplishing right now, ask

yourself if you have clear, immediate goals you're trying to accomplish. If not, can you devise some that suit your intentions for the piece?

Short-term feedback

Feedback in terms of flow means knowing how you're doing as you proceed. As writers, the only *immediate* feedback we can get is from ourselves. Is the tension in the plot pulling us forward in the story? Are all the pieces of the political point we're trying to demonstrate coming together into a clear whole? Is our description of Jersey City at night vivid and convincing? Of course we know very well that we're flawed and biased judges of our own work, but if we're tuning in to how well our writing is doing, at least in our own myopic, skewed judgement, then this can be more than enough feedback to support a flow state.

A short list

And that's it. Surprisingly, the task being doesn't have to be something you would usually consider fun. You don't have to be a world-class expert at it, and you don't necessarily need complete peace and quiet. Flow can be achieved filing papers, making a sales presentation, playing "Für Elise" on the piano, sketching, vacuuming, teaching, brainstorming, organizing ... or anything else that meets the following simple requirements: you are able to focus on it; you have a clear goal; it's challenging yet within your abilities; you've already learned the basics; and you can see how you're doing as you go. Writing is naturally well-suited to flow, and only requires arranging the details of the writing session and the project to encourage that state.

PRACTICAL TECHNIQUES

Where to get an infinite number of writing ideas



There is no shortage of writing ideas in the world, and most of us have probably had hundreds, if not thousands, of writing ideas we haven't gotten around to using—even if most of those weren't as good as some of the ones we chose instead. This makes it especially ironic when we sit down to write and feel like we've got nothing to write.

But the problem of having no ideas never happens to me any more, since as of 2001 I have had a heightened awareness of writing ideas and have carefully and fairly consistently recorded them. In this section I'll discuss some of the techniques I learned for generating story ideas back in 2001, plus some I've learned since. If you should ever be prevented from writing due to lack of ideas, there will be approaches here that can generate new ideas for you—maybe even ideas you'll like more than the ones that just come on their own.

Several of the techniques in this section were learned from (once again) Orson Scott Card.

This section deals with fiction especially, but many of the approaches apply equally well to other forms of writing. Whatever approaches you use, it pays to aggressively think up or seek out new ideas until you find one you're deeply excited about writing. Not "this might work" but rather "oh man, I *have* to write this one!"

Notebooks

If you don't already have a notebook (or a folder, file on your computer, database, etc.) in which to record writing ideas, I would strongly, strongly recommend getting one. When we're hit with a particularly attractive or inspired idea, we tend to think, since it dominates our thinking so easily at the time, that there is no way we can forget it. However, the human brain needs connections and repeat visits to lock a memory in for easy retrieval, and most ideas that aren't acted on or recorded in some way will be lost.

Organization of writing ideas isn't as important as getting them down in the first place. I'm not personally enthusiastic about the system I use: it's a mixture of a desktop database, several word processing files on different computers, a couple of filing locations in my home office, and notebooks that I use when I'm traveling and don't have immediate access to a computer. This scattered, only-partly-electronic system prevents me from categorizing and searching my ideas to make best use of them, such that many lie dormant. My guess is that I'll eventually adopt some kind of Internet-based approach, probably involving a database. However, I tend to go whole hog with these things: for a normal person, a notebook may be acceptable, and a searchable word processing document darn near optimal. Just don't *lose* your ideas. As long as you know where your ideas are kept, you can go to that repository whenever you're running low and just start scanning through until something strikes a spark.

Research

Research can an exceptionally good source of ideas, for a variety of reasons:

- By doing research and generating ideas simultaneously, you're accomplishing two tasks at once
- Research yields ideas based on real information, which can lead to more realistic and compelling stories
- You will never run out of things to research, and therefore source material for writing ideas. This is especially true with the way the Internet has developed in recent times.

Along with book research, interviewing people about their lives and their interests is a rich source of story possibilities. If you have a conversational opening, it's generally very easy to get people to open up about their lives simply by being fascinated. *You're a dentist? That's interesting! What's the most difficult thing you have to do in your job? Is it ever dangerous for patients? How did you decide to become a dentist?* My experience has been that whenever there's a clear reason to be in conversation with someone, opening it up by talking about the other person is an extremely easy way to simultaneously be very friendly and surreptitiously plunder their lives for writing ideas.

On location

Visiting, researching, and wandering around locations can help provide writing ideas, questions, and especially vivid setting details. Playing "what if" with people and buildings (e.g. "The man in the gabardine suit was a spy!") provides endless possibilities.

Spitballing

"What if" also shines when shooting the breeze with friends, especially with writers or other layabout types. Different participants' ideas tend to clash and provide unexpected juxtapositions. Bring up a subject of interest and offer some ideas about what kind of story could be written about it to begin. Make sure you decide what the rules are for who gets to use which ideas beforehand, as all of your ideas will be mixing together.

1,000 Ideas in an Hour

This idea generation method is Card's, and is particularly useful for taking an initial idea for a story and generating a complete framework for the piece out of it. It can also be used, though, to come up with ideas for new pieces, generally with fiction. I've used this approach with for own work, with other writers, with first graders, and generally anywhere a story was needed.

The key technique in this approach is to ask questions, especially the question "OK, but what else could it be?" For instance, if you have a general idea that you want to write a story set in Brooklyn, begin asking yourself basic questions. Who's the main character? A male or a female? How old? Why does this person live in Brooklyn? What does this person do all day? What kind of problems does that person have? Each answer leads to other possible questions.

However, each question can also lead to multiple answers, which is where the "what else?" comes in. For instance, you might be writing about a 50-year-old woman, and in answer to the question "Why does she live in Brooklyn?" you might start with "Because she was born there," then try "She moved there to be close to her kids," or "She's hiding from someone who she knows hates big cities" or even "She's been trying for years to find a hidden grave that she knows is somewhere in Brooklyn." Not coincidentally, the more answers you try to each question, the farther you get from the easy and expected answers and the more you get into intriguing and story-worthy questions.

Good ideas and bad ideas

One thing to watch out for in when generating ideas is to not mistake any *viable* idea for a necessarily *good* idea. If, for instance, you use 1,000 Ideas in an Hour but the answers to the questions are all more or less off the cuff and don't develop a kind of thematic relationship—that is, if you end up with a string of more or less unrelated incidents—then you may have some scenes, but you don't yet have a cohesive piece. Look for connections that hit emotional triggers, and dig into the ideas and pieces those triggers suggest. You'll find more on choosing projects from ideas in the next section.

More ways to come up with project ideas

- Use or juxtapose ideas you've written down, or ones you have already knocking around in your head
- Look at some of your favorite books and see what you like most about them, then ask yourself whether you could write something original that has that same trait but is otherwise very different.
- Think about books you'd like to buy that don't yet exist.
- Listen to conversations people are having in public places
- Take an event that interests you and ask yourself how it might have been different
- Combine aspects of two interesting people (or locations or situations)
- Take any situation and ask yourself what the worst thing is that could possibly happen
- Do a stream-of-consciousness writing exercise for 5 minutes, with no constraints on subject
- Review any projects you may have started in the past and might want to go back to
- Turn a cliché or existing story/movie/book on its head. One example is Codexian Jim Hines' book *Goblin Quest*, in which he takes the hoary old idea of adventurers meeting goblins and retells it with the goblin as the protagonist.
- Take the basic thrust of a good existing story and move it to an entirely different setting, as Shakespeare did with many of his stories

Whatever approach you take, I advise strongly against "waiting for inspiration." The idea that inspiration can't be rushed ignores the way our brains really work: the more clashing ideas, new directions, and stimuli we throw at it, the more likely it is to come back with something new, unique, and valuable. Subconscious processes do churn away over time, and there's no denying that they give birth to some interesting material when the conditions are right, but the process of juxtaposing different elements to come up with a new and interesting idea works best if you consciously engage your brain and keep feeding it plenty of new possibilities.

How your choice of project can make or break motivation

A certain kind of writer tends to write whatever they're most passionate about, regardless of length, genre, or marketability. Another kind of writer tends to write whatever seems to be the most salable, whatever the market seems to be crying out for. A third kind of writer tends to follow some particular pattern dictated by their writing practices, being propelled neither by passion nor by salability but by process. All of these approaches have their good points, but each can have real drawbacks as well. The approach outlined here is more complicated than the ones above, but it also provides solutions to a number of writing difficulties—some of which might otherwise not become apparent until much later in the writing process.

Choosing a project that will help your motivation

The general approach I'm suggesting is to put extra effort into brainstorming possible projects, then making a selection based on the key criteria for your project's success. What I mean by this is that when it's time to start a new project, instead of looking for *an* idea for a new project, you look for *a lot* of ideas for new projects, using a variety of methods to come up with them.

If you haven't already read it, the preceding section on ideas gives a variety of methods for coming up with and developing project ideas.

Choosing too soon

Why go to all this trouble when you have an idea you already know you're burning to write, or that you think will sell well? The answer is that our first ideas are often not our best ones, and a little time spent picking the right goal can save a huge amount of time working on the wrong one. It's well worth slaving away at this brainstorming phase for a few hours even if at the end of it you opt for the idea you were interested in in the first place, if for no other reason than to understand deeply and clearly exactly why that idea is the best one for you to pursue. And many times careful consideration of possibilities will yield a much better idea than anything that would have come up on its own.

If you brainstorm in this way, or if like me you keep a running list of writing ideas that is overflowing with things you want to write, you may feel at this point "OK, I know what I want to write!" based on what catches your imagination the most. However, I'd strongly counsel *stopping* at this point and really looking over your whole list. Your passion for the project is an important factor, and you should cross anything off the list that you're not passionate about—but if you're writing for an audience, especially to try to sell your work professionally, there are other important factors that ought to get a little scrutiny.

Factors to consider

Passion is important because it's very difficult to get a reader excited about a book that the writer wasn't passionate about when it was written. What about marketability? If you really want to sell your work, it would be a bad idea to ignore how well it might do with agents, editors, and readers unless you're of the opinion that it's impossible to tell what will sell. So writing a vampire novel because you love writing about vampires isn't a bad idea, and writing a vampire novel because they're in demand (let's suppose) can work out well, but by far the best reason to write a vampire novel is that you're passionate about it *and* someone's clamoring to buy it.

Originality is also a factor, both in terms of needing enough and in terms of not going too far. A piece that can't distinguish itself from other work that's already on the market is likely to have trouble getting an editor's or agent's attention, while a work that is so different from everything else out there that publishers won't know how to sell it can garner a fat folderful of "Great, but not for us"-style rejections. That doesn't mean that a lot of originality is always a bad choice, just that it's a handicap in some ways, and it's best to understand that from the outset.

Another piece to consider is what the project will teach you. Are you trying to push yourself to be a better writer? If not, why not? If so, what aspects of the project will force you to do new things, experiment, try harder, and grow?

Length is also important: it will help determine both where the project can be sold and how much time you'll be investing in it. In some cases, it will even determine *whether* the project can sell. For instance, a 400,000-word novel by a new novelist isn't likely to find a home with any major publisher (at least, as of this writing), and novellas have very few potential markets these days compared to short stories or novels.

The process we're talking about applies not just to writing projects, but to any important decision: we often try to make choices based on one overwhelming factor, like buying something because it's the cheapest or because we're enchanted with it; or we take the first promising thing that comes along without considering other options. But any of our priorities we put aside when making an important decision will come back to haunt us later. If the cheapest item breaks long before the more expensive version would have, or if the thing we're enchanted with costs us so much that we end up short on the rent, then the choice has proven itself to be a bad one.

Why choosing drives motivation

But what does choosing well have to do with self-motivation? There are two key things: first, it's not that helpful to motivate ourselves toward a goal we don't actually want to reach, as with a writing project that we discover halfway through isn't going to work out—or worse, with one that we discover only after we have finished it can't be sold. While even working toward a wrong goal can be educational, the same can be said of working toward the right goal, and the right goal has the additional benefit of paying off, which is an educational experience in itself.

Second, if we are working toward a less-than-ideal goal, sooner or later we will realize that we're heading toward the wrong thing (or we'll achieve it, and the expected payoff will never materialize), and then we'll be back to zero, with the sense that work gets us nowhere.

Organizing material and breaking down big tasks

I've mentioned elsewhere in this eBook that our brains are only able to pay close attention to one thing at a time (on *The Willpower Engine*, see "How to Multitask, and When Not To" at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=567>). This helps explain why it is sometimes much easier to write something short than it is to write the next short piece of a large project: the large project involves many more pieces, and sometimes it's not immediately apparent what should come next, what other elements need to be taken into account, etc. If we have a short piece to write, the factors to deal with are few enough that we can more or less keep them all in our head at once. With a larger project, it's impossible to keep everything in mind at once: we aren't designed to do it. To our brain, which developed under very different circumstances, it's as though there are dozens of threats moving in all directions all around us. Paying complete attention to the saber-toothed cat that's coming in from in front of us is nearly impossible when there might be two more creeping up behind.

Streaming tasks by plan or by seat of the pants

When a large number of tasks are at hand—for instance, when we're writing a book with many plot elements or pieces of information to impart—there are two ways to simplify the situation so that our brains can handle it comfortably, and both have similar effects. First, we can take the outliner approach, getting down all of the scenes of the story or all of the facts we're going to cover in a list at the beginning. We can then focus on organizing those elements in order, and when we've done that, we have a list we can follow, focusing on (mainly) only one item at a time, dipping into other items as necessary but always knowing where in the project we are.

The other approach is the seat-of-the-pants approach, in which we write nothing down and have only general expectations of what will come out. By not committing to anything particular in the future, we're able to write about whatever seems appropriate to write about at the moment. This gets more difficult, if the piece is a long one (like a novel), as we get further in. By this point we've committed to quite a number of things in the existing text, and like it or not, those need to be taken into account. However, this approach can be carried through to the end, and difficulties are usually worked out at length in the editing stage. The seat-of-the-pants approach can become hairy and difficult to manage at stages, but it also retains a great deal of flexibility and spontaneity throughout. Outlined material can always be altered or even put aside in favor of other inspiration, but it does tend to be more dictatorial.

Both of these approaches narrows down the available tasks to only one that needs to be faced at the moment: it's like running into a canyon so that the saber-toothed cats need to come on one at a time. Our brains are much better at this, because the amount of information involved doesn't exceed our capacity: instead, our tasks are streamed to us one at a time, allowing us to concentrate fully and give our best effort to each in turn. The advantages of streaming hold true even though the results are rarely without hiccups.

The process of organizing a large writing project

If you want to outline a project (even a project that up to this point you've been writing by the seat of your pants), one fairly straightforward approach is available. The first step is to gather all of the elements, which means scanning any material you've already generated for reminders of things that need to be written; brainstorming, etc. The point here is just to get all of the cattle in the enclosure: no order is needed.

The second step is to find large patterns or groupings. In a novel, this might be Act I, Act II, and Act III (if you like to use three-act structure), changes in setting (at the school, on the road to New York, in New York City), individual chapters, or anything else that's easy to conceive at this point.

Then the unorganized material gets sorted into the groups you've defined. You may then come up with subgroups and sort items into those. After this (or optionally, before the sorting of elements), the groups are put in order, and the elements are put in order within groups. Lastly, the whole is reviewed to

fill in gaps and modify as needed. You may even want to write the structure up at this point as a narrative description or series of bullet points so you can get it critiqued.

This organization process can happen in a variety of forms, all written: you can write individual elements on index cards and either sort them into a stack or put them on a large cork board; you can do everything within a word processing file, cutting and pasting to get things in order; or you can use software that helps you organize your writing.

Increasing our short-term brain capacity

There are at least two ways in which we can effectively increase the amount of information about our writing project that we can keep in mind at once.

The first is by writing a lot in a short period, so that more elements of the project are fresh in our memory at once. This immersive approach is covered in the section on Momentum.

The second is by using aids to the writing process; there's more on this in the section called Your Writing Tools.

The elephant lurking in the basement

Breaking down big tasks becomes a subject of special importance when tackling a big project that's been avoided or put off for whatever reason: the massive edits you found you needed on that novel once the critiques came in, the entire new research direction you had to take once you realized you had to include information about New World monkeys, getting a grip on the short story project that turned into a novella that became a novel that expanded into a trilogy, or starting a new agent search.

With these big projects, the first question to ask is whether or not they should even be resumed (or started, as the case may be). Sometimes we will have invested huge amounts of work into a project that we discover later just isn't working out, as discussed in item #2 in the Prioritization Errors section. In these cases, sometimes the projects need to be abandoned for the greater good of your writing career.

If the project is worth doing, it's also worth knowing whether it should be the priority *now*. (There's more on this in the section on choosing a project.) Perhaps it's a novel that needs to be rewritten, and you've decided you need to improve your skill with dialog first. If that's the case, it could be best to put the novel aside while you write some short stories that pay special attention to dialog. Perhaps the agent search really needs to wait until some other edits are done. Or perhaps the book you want to write would be terrific, but very difficult to sell as a first-time author.

If the project is both worth doing and the best thing to do now, then the task is just to break it down as discussed above. Large projects that have been put aside for a while tend to take on a looming, massive, and unassailable character, but they are actually just as assailable as anything else. Either start in by breaking the task down into pieces and then prioritizing the pieces, which gives you a complete map going forward, or take the Nibbling Mouse approach and find any small part of the project you can do now, especially if it's easy, and do just that part ... then find another.

One note about nibbling, though: mice rarely finish off the whole wheel of cheese unless they turn into ravenous rats, so if nibbling doesn't get you obsessed with finishing the project, sooner or later it will probably help to organize and prioritize to prevent being overwhelmed by as-yet-unbroken-down tasks.

Handling distractions

Distractions are pernicious for even more reasons than might be immediately obvious: they provide unwanted invitations to stop working; they require two mental “reboots” (one to address the distraction and another to return to work); they degrade the quality of our writing by interfering with immersion; they cut into writing time; they make writing more frustrating and less pleasurable; they contribute to errors; they help discourage us from spending time writing in the first place, and they interfere with the very desirable flow state discussed earlier in this eBook.

If you have trouble screening out distractions, this section has a number of useful techniques to offer, but it may also help to know that focusing despite distractions, like virtually any other skill, is one that improves with practice. I mentioned in an earlier section my own transformation from someone who needs near-complete isolation to write into someone who can work at near-top efficiency in the middle of a social gathering (though not while energetically participating). I didn't do anything special to gain this skill except to keep trying to write even when distractions made it hard.

Why distractions are disproportionately costly

In his book *Brain Rules: 12 Rules for Surviving and Thriving at Home, Work and School*³, developmental neurobiologist John Medina describes the process the brain goes through when it has to shift attention from one kind of task to another. It has to disengage from the first task, shutting down the systems it was using; assess the new task; fire up new systems for it; handle the new task; then go through the whole thing all over again to switch back. Says Medina, “a person who is interrupted takes 50 percent longer to complete a task. Not only that, he or she makes up to 50 percent more errors.”

In other words, a two-minute interruption takes a lot more than two minutes away from your writing. It can also mean the difference between being in flow and being out of it

So, it pays to prevent distractions. There are at least four ways to do this: choosing a good place to write, managing responsibilities, devising rules, and erecting barriers.

Choose a good place to write

To the extent that you have some control over the times and places you write, good choices in these respects will help you work better and with fewer interruptions.

The place where you write should ideally have few distractions while also providing as many as possible of the benefits a work area can provide, as discussed in *Your Writing Environment*. It's also important that it be very accessible, for two reasons: first, a writing environment that is sometimes unavailable or that takes effort to get to will tend to offer you more excuses not to write. Second, a writing environment that's at any distance or requires work to set up (for instance, if a table that often needs to be cleared off before you can set down your laptop and write) will suck time away from your writing itself. If it takes you 15 minutes to get out the door and down to the cafe where you like to write and 15 minutes more on the way back, then the cafe will need to be so conducive to your writing that it's worth losing half an hour of writing time every time you go there.

Favor locations where there will be few distractions, like an isolated part of your house or the library. Try to avoid places where you might run into friends or be expected to respond to people or events.

Avoid being completely dependent on one location to write: find ways to make it easy to write in any location whenever time presents itself. I'm personally enamored of my very low-tech Alphasmart, a cheap, lightweight device that's comfortable to write on and pretty much useless for anything else. I go into some detail about the Alphasmart on my writing blog at <http://reidwrite.livejournal.com/6502.html>.

³ Medina's site is <http://www.brainrules.net/>; my review of the book is at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=665>

To the extent that you have a choice, try to prefer writing times when you'll have minimal distractions, as long as those times don't offer other problems—for instance, late at night can be a peaceful and productive time to write, but not if you're always exhausted by then, or if it will have a serious effect on you getting enough sleep. But if you have housecleaning to do and writing to do, you could do the housecleaning at a time when there are more distractions and the writing at the time when there are fewer. (I say this knowing full well that I might nefariously be compromising the quality of your housekeeping. I'm just evil that way.)

Be sure also not to use distractions as an excuse *not* to write. Of course it's more efficient to write when there are no distractions, but not only is some writing better than no writing, but the more you write with distractions, the better you'll get at ignoring those distractions.

Mental work environment

Your *mental* work environment is also a key factor. You can prepare your brain by committing to the project you're about to work on, which may involve ironing out conflicts as discussed in some earlier sections of this book. Avoid shifting around among projects within one work session when possible: you'll get much more done if you queue up specific things to tackle for a specific project, then burn through them one after another. Going back and forth between projects, mixing submissions and writing, and similar kinds of strategies amount to you interrupting yourself.

Of course, other ideas may come up while writing, for instance something that you want to add to a different section of the project you're working on, an idea for another writing project, a realization that you need to do a critique or submit a story, a promotion idea, etc. It's probably best to have a very simple way to record these ideas as they come up, for instance a word processing document that you can sort into tasks and ideas after you're done writing, or a system that allows you to easily categorize new information, like Scrivener (mentioned in the writing tools section and on The Willpower Engine at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=680>).

Should you interrupt your writing to do research? The answer here is less absolute, especially with so much information available on the Internet so easily. I often will stop in mid-sentence or mid-chapter to look up a few key facts, though not to familiarize myself with a whole subject. Whether or not this will work well for you versus interrupting your train of thought can probably best be judged by figuring out whether you are able to still keep the ideas you're writing about in the forefront of your mind while looking up the information. If you can, then the research can be part of your flow. If not, then it may be better for the research to wait, if it's not essential to you continuing what you're working on.

Of course, the ideal approach is often to gather all the information you'll need before you start writing so as to be able to write without stopping to research. However, of course there can be times when you don't know what you'll need to know until it comes up in the course of writing.

Manage responsibilities

Managing responsibilities means planning and negotiating to minimize interruptions. If you're able to write every night from 9:00 to 10:00, tell everyone you know that you're writing during that time and would appreciate no phone calls or spur-of-the-moment visits. If you're a parent and have a spouse or partner, offer to take full responsibility for the kids during certain periods in exchange for your spouse doing the same thing during your pre-arranged writing times. Almost anyone who might either interrupt you or be a means to head off interruptions is a good person to negotiate with to help keep your writing time undisturbed.

Managing responsibilities also means doing small important tasks before digging into writing. Writer and entrepreneur Nancy Fulda⁴, who has three young children, puts it like this:

⁴ Nancy Fulda (<http://www.livejournal.com/users/nancyfulda>) is the force behind AnthologyBuilder (<http://www.anthologybuilder.com>), a service that lets people edit their own anthologies of short fiction by professional writers. A full interview with her appears on The Willpower Engine at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=634>.

I prefer to take care of the ‘little’ tasks of the day before settling into the ‘big’ one. By ‘little’ tasks I mean things like answering emails, paying the bills, and so forth; individual items that take less than five or ten minutes to accomplish.

I used to be so enamoured of the current project that I’d push all that little stuff aside and dive right into the ‘real work’. The problem with that was that all those unfinished tasks weighed on my mind. It was like a mountain of work hanging over me, this big dreadful pile of Things That Needed Done, and it sapped my energy like a vampire.

The thing is, that huge dreadful mountain [of] tasks seldom took more than an hour to complete. I learned that if I cleared that stuff off my plate first, I’d face the rest of the day with only a single (albeit large) task looming over me.

Devise rules

Devising rules means thinking about possible interruptions and coming up with solutions to head them off before you even start writing. The resulting solutions are ones you can adhere to without thinking, for instance “Never answer the phone during writing” or “Never answer the phone during writing unless it’s Theresa, and when you pick up say immediately that you’re writing and ask if it’s an emergency.” Rules have to be clearly planned so that there is no thinking involved. If one of your rules is not to open your e-mail program during writing or not to use the Internet except for emergency writing research, then you’ll know that you’ll need to be strict about those rules in order for them to work. When you have preplanned responses like this, dealing with the situations you’ve anticipated does not take a large amount of attention, and therefore doesn’t require the wholesale reorganization of thoughts Medina describes.

An article on the value of rules in motivation is available on The Willpower Engine at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=481> .

Erect barriers

Erecting barriers means taking physical steps to guard your work area from interruptions: a sign on the door saying “Please come back after 2:30 PM,” unplugging your phone or your network cable, putting on music that you work well to, and using earplugs are all ways to use barriers to temporarily shield your writing environment from the infinite distractions of the outside world.

If you are interrupted regardless

If an interruption makes it through despite your plans, you can sometimes turn it to your advantage. When the distraction is taken care of, take a moment to figure out if there are any other distractions in the making—an impending bathroom break, a family member who just needs a minute of your time, that cup of tea you’ve been wanting—and take care of them at that time rather than letting them spawn their own interruptions a little down the road.

An interruption can also be a useful moment to reflect on the direction the project is going, how happy you are with your progress, whether you have any nagging concerns you want to examine, or if a bit of brainstorming might help open things up going forward. It can even be useful to touch base with yourself about how you’ve been writing and what you’re choosing to work on.

However, it’s essential not to use interruptions as excuses to get off track. It’s generally a bad idea to decide that because you’ve been interrupted anyway, you might as well check your e-mail, fold a few of those clothes, or call to check in on a friend. If those activities really have priority, this is fine, but it’s easy for such things to serve as excuses to not get back into our writing after being temporarily diverted. Don’t fall into that particular trap.

Broken ideas and idea repair

Some of the most powerful obstacles to self-motivation are broken ideas (or “cognitive distortions,” to use the formal term). A broken idea is any false thought that makes it harder to solve problems constructively. An introduction to them can be read on The Willpower Engine at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=104>, and this section will provide information on how to detect and repair them, to the benefit of your ability to write.

Broken ideas apply to writing just as they apply to other parts of life: if we’re held back from constructive action because of feeling upset, for instance on getting a rejection of a piece we were sure would be accepted, or losing confidence in our abilities, or getting angry at interruptions to our writing, then idea repair can get us back to a more balanced state and make it possible to move forward constructively.

In an array of psychological studies, idea repair (known in the literature as “cognitive restructuring,” “cognitive behavioral therapy” (CBT), and by other names) has proven effective against a wide variety of problems, including [anxiety \(including social anxiety\)](#), [depression](#), [repeat offenses by convicted felons](#), and many other issues.

Examples of broken ideas

1. A man has been applying for jobs, but isn’t getting any interviews. He thinks “No one wants to hire me. I’m going to run out of money and be homeless.” This kind of thinking will make it harder for him to be motivated to apply for more positions, and he will tend to come across as less confident and positive to potential employers when he does have contact with them.

2. A mother is late dropping her children off to school, then can’t get the car started when she tries to leave the school parking lot. She concludes, “This day is a disaster.” This puts her in a pessimistic frame of mind, so that she tends not to do things that would make her day better and to interpret events in the worst possible light. (For more on this specific situation, see my articles “Having a Bad Day? Here’s Why” at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=420> and “How to Stop Having a Bad Day” at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=423>.)

The Red Flag

Detecting that a broken idea is in place is easy in the sense that, if you’re feeling bad, there’s a very good chance you’re nurturing one or more broken ideas. To put it another way, maintaining negative emotions for any length of time usually requires ongoing cognitive reinforcement of those negative emotions. Paying attention to your own thinking does take some effort, which you can help elicit by committing to being mindful of your thinking in bad situations. It’s often harder to do this because of mood congruity (see <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=15>), which gets in the way of imagining better times when we’re experiencing negative emotions. Fortunately, since we generally don’t like feeling bad, we’re often also driven to seek relief, which idea repair can provide.

Finding the broken idea

Identifying the broken idea requires reflecting on what you’ve been telling yourself, either mentally or (and this often easier) by writing it down. If you’re not sure what you’ve been telling yourself, start by writing down your present thoughts about the situation: broken ideas tend to persist as long as the mood they cause, so they will probably be floating around in your head in some form and not difficult to stream onto paper. Writing them down makes it possible to examine these thoughts and figure out where they’re broken.

But What if The Broken Idea Is True?

Broken ideas are generally false (or at best, nothing more than a pessimistic guess), and they fall into specific categories of falsehoods. It’s easy to mistake them as truth because they often seem

plausible: the job applicant *might* not find a job soon if he keeps searching in the way he is now. The mother's experiences so far in her day *have* been unpleasant. Yet short of having supernatural powers, neither one of them can infallibly predict what will happen going forward, and both of them are taking a small number of incidents and imagining that they describe a large, absolute pattern.

Idea repair is not the same as “positive thinking”

Just to clarify what idea repair is and isn't, I'd like to point out how it's different from simply “thinking positively.” Positive thinking would direct a student who's worried about failing a test to tell herself, “I *will* pass this test!” This may in some cases help with immediate mood, but it's not necessarily any more realistic than the broken idea “I *won't* pass this test.”

Idea repair requires looking at situations realistically and in terms of what we really can do in our lives to make things better. If the student were to use idea repair, she might change the thought “I'm going to fail this test, and it will be awful!” to “It's possible I'll fail this test, and if I do, I'll deal with it.” Pretending to herself that she already knows whether she'll pass or fail doesn't do much to motivate her to improve her chances: instead, it tends to make the outcome look like it has nothing to do with her actions. Taking a realistic view, on the other hand, gives her the tools to face her situation and do something positive about it.

Here are the steps for idea repair. While they're not simple steps, there are only two.

1. Identify the broken idea

To identify a broken idea, compare it to these categories. Devised by Dr. David Burns (see http://www.willpowerengine.com/?page_id=911), they not only make it easier to spot a broken idea: they also point the way to a solution by a means described in more detail later in this section.

- All-or-nothing thinking: Seeing situations in black or white; thinking in absolutes.
- Overgeneralization: Taking separate incidents, like rejected job applications or being late, and concluding that they're controlled by a large, unvarying pattern.
- Mental filtering: Putting all one's attention on negative qualities.
- Disqualifying the positive: Dismissing good factors in a situation.
- Mind reading: Making sweeping assumptions about what other people are thinking.
- Fortune telling: Making assumptions about how the future will turn out.
- Magnification and minimization: Exaggerating information, often to support a negative viewpoint, for instance exaggerating someone else's positive qualities to make yourself look worse or their negative qualities in order to make them look like a villain.
- Emotional reasoning: Assuming that because something feels like it's true, it *is* true.
- Should statements (see <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=779>): Imagining that the way we want things to be has direct influence over how things really are. Often involves anger at other people for not acting the way we would make them act if we were in control of them.
- Labeling: Using words to generalize or explain a person or situation in a way that's misleading or incomplete.
- Personalization: Exaggerating our idea of how much a situation relates to ourselves; taking responsibility or blame for things that are not in our control.

Examples:

- “Everybody thinks my dancing looks stupid.” (mind reading)
- “He's just saying I'm a dedicated worker because he has to say something positive in the review.” (disqualifying the positive)
- “I'm scared something will happen to him. He'll probably be in a car accident.” (emotional reasoning)

Notice that these ideas aren't necessarily impossible: they're just assuming too much, in a way that tends to make it harder to take positive action.

2. Restate the idea in a strictly truthful way

When repairing a broken idea, it's necessary to take out all guesswork, undo exaggeration, and include all the facts that matter. Restating a broken idea into a repaired idea is often a source of immediate relief, because it allows us to stop battling ourselves.

Repaired examples:

- "I'm worried that other people may think less of me if I don't dance well."
- "My performance review had some discouraging parts in it, but he did compliment my dedication."
- "Just because I feel scared doesn't mean that there's anything to be scared about."

When repaired ideas break again

Repaired ideas generally bring some immediate relief, but we tend to have some of the same kinds of broken ideas in many situations over time. Unfortunately, repairing a broken idea doesn't mean that it won't come back broken later. So what's the point of repairing them?

There are at least two major benefits to idea repair even when broken ideas keep coming back. First, there's the immediate relief in the situation in which the idea has been repaired. And second, repairing an idea over and over will eventually make the broken idea come back less often and less severely. Given time, consistent effort has a good chance of getting rid of a broken idea permanently.

Tracking your writing

Tracking your progress—whether in words written per day, stories submitted per month, time spent writing daily, or other measures—may seem like distracting busywork, and it's true that it can be that if it's taken too far. But some kinds of tracking, which take only a moment at each writing session, can be powerfully supportive of your writing productivity if you use them to establish a feedback loop.

Reviewing your own writing habits

The kind of feedback I'm talking about here is not feedback about your writing itself, but rather a conscious investigation of how you are doing at getting writing done. It's especially useful when you don't feel you're getting in enough writing, especially if you're not sure why.

For example, a simple tracking mechanism might be to have a text document, spreadsheet, or notebook in which you make a quick entry at the end of every writing session. It could be as simple as the date plus either the amount of time or the word count, or it could include those three things plus the project worked on, the general kind of work done, any special challenges or problems, and what you want to work on next, for instance:

6/9/2009 - 1.25 hours, 800 words on Pirate Ships of Doom. Finished the zeppelin fight scene, but had trouble figuring out what Polly was supposed to be doing the whole time. Neighbors were having another party next door; hard to concentrate. Excited about writing Erroll's death scene next.

This entry contains a lot of information, but takes perhaps 60 seconds to jot down. Reviewing entries like these over time can provide information like how much time you put in on average, how often you really write, what gets in the way of your writing, how well you've been focusing, how long different parts of the project took, and so on. Noting what you would be working on next primes you to hit the ground running at your next session. The other information provides a means to hone in on problems with your writing environment or writing process.

If you're interested in knowing more about using feedback loops for motivation in writing and other areas of life, you may be interested in the Willpower Engine article "How Feedback Loops Maintain Self-Motivation" at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=560>.

Tracking submissions

Tracking submissions can offer some of the same kinds of benefits as tracking writing. It's sometimes easier to do a lot of writing and fairly little work selling that writing, which can lead to having a large inventory but few sales or published works (and less feedback from professionals). In the same way that reviewing your writing habits and setting writing goals can help your writing motivation, reviewing your submission habits and setting submission goals can help your submission motivation.

For my part, I've experimented with my own online submission tracking application, database systems, spreadsheet systems, and other means of tracking submissions. I have to confess that I have not yet found a favorite, although if I did I imagine it would be a Web application that makes it very easy to enter material and view statuses and that ideally links into up-to-date market information. If you have a system you love, I'd be grateful to hear about it: please go to the Willpower Engine site contact form at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/#ContactForm>, post on the Willpower Engine forum at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/forum>, or comment on The Writing Engine page at http://www.willpowerengine.com/?page_id=1012.

Tracking to get your own attention

Tracking your progress daily in some form, even on days when you get no writing done, also serves other beneficial purposes, particularly that of keeping your writing squarely within your attention on a regular basis. It's much easier to let a project slip entirely if you pay no attention to it at all than if you pay a little bit of attention to it regularly.

Beware of the natural tendency to avoid writing down details when you haven't done as well as you hoped: this is very common, because most of us are reluctant to document things we feel reflect badly on us. A moment of thought makes it clear that the exact opposite is true: by writing down that we did nothing, we're in fact doing *something*, however small, to promote and support our writing, which reflects well on our commitment and discipline.

There's an article on The Willpower Engine explaining some of the other benefits and reasoning behind daily tracking: you can find it at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=875> .

Dealing with rejection

There are some writers who become successful without ever receiving rejections. However, the chance that either of us is one of them is vanishingly small, especially since I have a file of rejection letters that would choke a horse, literally. In fact, I'm fairly certain I have enough rejection material (if I print out and include my eRejections) to choke two horses, or three and a half sheep, or a smallish giraffe. But in addition to the feedback, the valuable character-building, and the enormous contributions to my humility those rejections came with, they also came with something else: a few acceptances. Story sales, a book sale, contest wins, book signings, royalty checks, newspaper articles, some small-scale fame ... most oysters don't contain pearls, but you want pearls, you have to open a lot of dud oysters.

The Wunderkind's Tale

It may be encouraging to know that people far more successful than I would ever imagine becoming have had to slog through massive amounts of rejection. When Wolfgang Mozart first ditched his insultingly bad position with the Archbishop of Salzburg to seek out a noble patron somewhere—anywhere—in Europe, as composers of his day generally had to do if they weren't going to starve, he was repeatedly kicked to the curb.

This wasn't so early in his career that he wasn't both well-known and accomplished yet: he'd won honors all around Europe performing and composing as a child, charmed crowned heads of state, etc. If you sat the guy down at a pianoforte or an organ, he could improvise music that would have you in tears one minute and stitches of laughter the next. He didn't lack talent, skill, commitment, training, knowledge, or bonafides ... he just lacked a job. At the age of 21, in 1777, as almost inarguably the most talented musician in the Western world at the time, Mozart banged around from Munich to Paris to Vienna to Mannheim to Berlin looking for any good job that would let him advance himself and compose. He supported himself making a little money from selling compositions for street and home performance, getting commissions from noble patrons for chamber pieces and from theaters for operas, and by doing a lot of teaching. His monetary situation was abysmal.

Finally, by 1791, fourteen years after he started searching for a good job, things began to line up in Mozart's financial favor. He already had the acclamation of innumerable crowned heads and commoners, was friends with some of the top musicians of the day, and was otherwise fairly blessed, but finally by that year he began to be able to look forward to a life of financial stability and uninterrupted devotion to his work.

Then he died before he could enjoy it, but I hope you won't take that as the point of the story. The points are 1) that even though he barely ever had a sure thing going at any point in his life, the guy is still considered by many the single most gifted musician Europe has ever produced, and he's left a trail of masterpieces intermingled with lesser works that still blow the stuffing out of virtually anything produced by anyone else at the time, and 2) he kept trying for fourteen years and eventually got the kind of position he had always been dreaming of. A further useful point might be 3) don't die just when you're succeeding: it's bad form.

The Dyer's Tale

Stephen King, one of the bestselling authors of all time, didn't have it easy when he started writing. After he graduated from high school he worked first as a dyer, then at a commercial laundry facility, where he spent a lot of time washing, bleaching, and folding restaurant and hospital linens that were sometimes indescribably disgusting (although that can't be the worst possible job for a future horror novelist, come to think of it). But he was devoted to writing, and began sending his work out. In his book *On Writing*, King writes

When I got the rejection slip from *AHMM*, I pounded a nail into the wall above the Webcor, wrote "Happy Stamps" on the rejection slip, and poked it onto the nail ...

By the time I was fourteen (and shaving twice a week whether I needed to or not) the nail in my wall would no longer support the weight of the rejection slips impaled upon it. I replaced the nail with a spike and went on writing.

King accumulated hundreds of rejection slips in his time, though I suspect that eventually they stopped coming.

But rejections still suck

None of this makes getting rejected pleasant, even if a piece is rejected with glowing praise and a reason for rejection that has nothing to do with the quality of the work. However, we can choose how we handle these rejections. The ideal response for us as writers is 1) to learn everything we can from the rejection, and then 2) to send the work out elsewhere if it has another place it can go.

Learning everything we can from a rejection means stopping for a moment to consider its details and significance. Has the same market been responding similarly to certain kinds of work of yours? Are you happy with the markets you're choosing? Has this particular piece been around the block so many times, it's starting to creep out the neighbors? Did the editor or agent have anything to say about the work? Do you have any clues for future submissions to that market, or to markets where the rejected piece might go next? Looking at published work from that market, can you make any educated guesses about why yours didn't make the cut?

And if the piece does have another possible home, sending it back out right away can do a lot to relieve the tedium of the rejection. Once you send it out, it's no longer "rejected", but rather "submitted": it's a child off at college instead of one living in the basement playing *World of Warcraft* and eating junk food all day.

If you find a particular rejection especially upsetting, it is possible to process those emotional reactions and get back on the horse: to do this, consult the section on Broken ideas and idea repair.

How to get more time to write



One of my problems with getting enough writing done, one that you may share, is not having as much time to write as I want. We all tend to be squeezed for writing time now and then. Here are some strategies for finding more of it.

The approaches I'll mention may seem to carry an edge of “you should be writing instead of doing anything else” just because finding more writing time is the topic of this section. These ideas are really only intended to be starting points for considering where more writing time can come from, offered with the idea that we each have our own unique sets of priorities to juggle.

Breaks from work

If you have a full-time job, you may have some options to increase your writing time using breaks already provided to you. Since full-time jobs generally involve lunches and sometimes other breaks, these

⁵ Image based in part on a photo by Miles L (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/jiao>)

times can often be used to write, whether every day or just occasionally. Taking this approach may involve bringing in lunches so as not to have to spend time buying them, bringing a laptop in to work if you don't already use a computer there, seeing less of friends and acquaintances among your coworkers, etc. You'll know much better than I could whether this would be a good move for you, but if it does fit into your lifestyle, it can give you a very regular time to write that keeps your project alive in your mind on a daily basis.

Vacations from work, when family and other obligations don't take precedence, can provide a short-term boost to writing productivity. If you're really itching to make serious progress on a writing project, planning a couple of vacation days when you'll be alone to write can be enormously productive. If you have more flexibility and more vacation time available, you may want to consider a writer's workshop or retreat. Workshops are normally geared toward learning and retreats more toward producing.

If you have a very large project to tackle, flexibility at your job, and sufficient financial resources, you might even consider cutting back on working hours in order to write, for instance cutting back to a 32-hour week. I recommend against doing this on the assumption that you will make money from your writing to replace the lost employment income, though, unless you already have some kind of signed contract. Remember that making money from writing depends not only on the quality and amount of your writing, but also on finding the right match with an editor or publisher, and on all other parties responding promptly to their obligations. Unfortunately, since agents are often preoccupied with bigger clients and since publishing houses as a whole are notoriously slow to cut checks (not that there aren't some virtuous exceptions), taking the approach of depending on uncertain writing income can be excruciating, not to mention demoralizing.

Another alternative, again dependent on how flexible your job is, is to switch to different schedule, for instance four 10-hour shifts or even (in some jobs) three 12-hour shifts. This provides larger swaths of writing time on more days and lowers time spent getting ready for work and commuting, though it can be tiring in other respects.

Organization

You can often gain more time in your day by organizing yourself better, for instance by combining errands and prioritizing your activities more carefully; one Willpower Engine article on the subject can be found at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=123>.

You can also organize your day to clump together responsibilities, for instance parenting duties, during specific blocks of time, either simply by planning ahead or my making agreements with family members, coworkers, or housemates.

Available times in your day

Judge carefully when you get your best writing done, and consider tailoring your schedule around that if it will make a real difference. If you normally stay up late to write but often find yourself too tired to do the job well, consider going to bed early and then getting up early in the morning to write.

Some of the activities you're used to doing often, especially entertainment activities like TV, video games, and aimless Web surfing, could frankly be—and I hope you won't mind my saying this—expendable. For many people, the idea of ceasing to watch a TV program they always follow, or giving up their Halo time, is just short of outrageous. However, if you do spend some of your time on these kinds of recreations, it may be worth considering whether these activities are genuinely making you happier in your life. More often, these kinds of entertainment provide some short-term pleasure (which writing can also provide, although it's more effortful) but little or nothing in terms of pervasive happiness. Writing, on the other hand, can provide a source of pride, engagement, and confidence that can in some cases more than compensate for lost recreational time.

We often tell ourselves that we need “down time” or time to “decompress.” Often what we mean by this is that we need to change our mood and relax, and we expect to use more passive kinds of entertainment to do this. Yet an engaging activity that requires more action on our part can also provide relaxation while improving mood. In reality, we may have little or no real biological or psychological need

to spend time in passive entertainment, especially if we're meeting our desires for relaxation and pleasure elsewhere.

If you feel like you "should" watch less TV or do less of some other non-writing activity (forums on the Web, shopping, going to restaurants, etc.), and if you feel any guilt about those non-writing activities, it may help to know that this kind of thinking can be worked through and ultimately cleared out while you're working toward new habits you want to embrace. This is a complex subject toward which many posts on The Willpower Engine are geared, but one good place to start is "Good 'Should' and Bad 'Should'" at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=779> . Another good resource is the chapter in this book on Broken ideas and idea repair, which you may have recently read.

Using writing time well

Unfortunately, as you may have experienced, setting time aside for writing isn't necessarily the same thing as making good use of writing time. Writing time can easily be squandered on distractions, used to work on a project you had meant to shelve, be derailed by other demands, or wash out when you realize you're either not sure what to write or know, but don't feel very enthusiastic about writing it. So what approaches help make the best use of the available time?

First, make sure you choose the right project to work on. Second, minimize distractions in the ways discussed in the section on Handling Distractions. Third, try to establish Momentum and get into Flow, which are both described earlier in the book. In addition to these topics that we've already covered, here are some new ones that help address the problem of using writing time well.

Gather everything you need ahead of time

If you'll be drinking coffee while writing, or will need to find certain books, or if you have notes that you've written up that may need to be dug up, or if your laptop will need to be charged—whatever your prerequisites for writing, take a few minutes some time before your writing session, if possible, to get them in order. It's easy to interrupt yourself repeatedly to get up and get things, or to have to interrupt yourself because you don't have a resource or a set of notes you were depending on. Preparations to prevent these problems generally don't take much time, but they do require thinking ahead before you begin writing and making a small effort. That effort pays off in the opportunity for unbroken concentration, and in clearing away obstacles to writing.

Have someone waiting for your work

We tend to be more focused and organized about getting things done when we have people who are expecting to see the results. To take advantage of this, you might try seeking out a critique partner who will read your work as it's written, giving you an immediate audience to write for. Certain kinds of pieces can be driven by contest deadlines or seasonality (for instance, Christmas pieces that must be submitted to certain magazines by a particular date long before Christmas). You might also try publicly posting your progress in a blog or writer's forum, although there are potential pitfalls to this approach, particularly the concern that missing a deadline may make you want to avoid posting and break down the whole process. If you do post your progress publicly, post regularly even if you're not keeping up. If this would be too embarrassing for you, don't post publicly: being too embarrassed to fail doesn't assure success.

Have your next task already in the queue

To start off energetically each writing session, have a clear sense of where you're going to start beforehand. This can be accomplished by working to either an outline or a prioritized, near-term hit list of writing tasks. You can also manage it by taking a moment at the end of each writing session to jot down what you'll need to do next, e.g. "Next session: George's escape from the sanitarium."

If you do use one of these approaches, it helps a lot to focus for a moment on that next writing task at the end of each session. This primes you for beginning to write it as soon as your next session begins, and can often make good use of your conscious or subconscious problem-solving skills to plan out what you're going to write, to work out difficulties in the plot or organization of the piece, or to add more depth or vividness to your writing with details that may come to mind between writing sessions.

If you don't know what to write next, don't hesitate over your project and make yourself vulnerable to being drawn away from it. When you don't know what your next task is, this means that your next task is to figure out what your next task is. You do this by reviewing your project and your work so far and either determining what has to come next (if you're writing the piece in order) or by determining what the most useful, foundational, or appealing piece to write next might be (if you're writing out of order).

Doing the parts you don't like

Most of us have parts of the writing process we don't like as much as the others—perhaps research, editing, submissions, plotting, etc. When it's time to take on one of these less desirable tasks, there are strategies we can use to improve both our motivation and our enjoyment of the work.

Remember your purpose

If you hate editing, for instance, then you have choices as to what you tell yourself when you're faced with the need to edit some work. You can tell yourself things like "This is going to be hard" or "I hate editing." Alternatively, you can focus on more constructive things that are just as true, such as "This is all I need to do to be able to send this piece out" or "I think on this editing pass, I can finally make my villain interesting." Remember the reasons you're doing what you're doing, and keep in touch with the value of your project as a whole.

Is it the task or the process?

In some cases, the task itself might be much easier to enjoy if you try a different approach. If you don't usually enjoy doing submissions, consider getting together some writer friends and mailing supplies to have a submission party, where you all bring all of your ready-to-submit work, write cover letters together, and mail things out. This approach has the advantages too of giving you a deadline for having work to submit and of having other people off whom you can bounce submission ideas. If submissions aren't enough to justify a whole gathering, follow up the submissions with a critique session or writing challenge.

Different approaches can be taken to almost any part of the writing process. Instead of being written beginning-to-end, pieces can be written by writing each scene or section without regard to order, then assembled chronologically. Outlining can be done with specialized computer programs, index cards, a word processor, or other techniques. Story problems can be solved in discussion with friends or on writing forums, by writing out the ideas, or even by improvisatory role-playing (alone or with others). Writing or rewriting can be accomplished orally by using voice recognition software. And so on.

Fix your broken ideas

Often a large part of what makes something aversive to us is our internal running commentary on the subject, which may be self-doubting, anxious, neurotic, disparaging, or otherwise counterproductive. Identify and resolve these kinds of broken ideas using the processed outlined in the section on Broken Ideas and Idea Repair.

Get into flow

I keep mentioning flow, which is addressed in the section of that name, and it's for good reason: flow is a state of optimal short-term motivation, and while it's easier to get into flow doing something you love, it's also entirely possible to get into flow doing something that isn't particularly interesting to you in and of itself, whether that's searching through your piece for use of the passive voice or mopping floors. The means of achieving goals even with less appealing activities is to establish challenging, near-term goals on which you can get immediate feedback, like "OK, how many more instances of passive voice can I find in the next ten minutes?" The way you set the task up has everything to do with how easily you can get into flow with it. Prevent interruptions (see the section on Handling Distractions) and find a way to make the task challenging but possible, with constant monitoring of how well you're doing and clear-cut goals.

External motivation

While throughout this book so far I've been focusing on internal motivation and improving state of mind, as well as on organizational practices and arrangements that encourage more and better writing, it's true that in some cases external sources of motivation can help.

The reason I am so reserved in recommending external sources of motivation is twofold: first, research generally supports the idea that internal motivation is much more effective than external motivation. It's much easier to get a lot of writing done because we feel clear about wanting to write than to write for fame, money, or adoration (especially since writers rarely get very much of any of those things). Second, external sources of motivation—even the ones mentioned below—usually come with some kind of compromise. In the same way that getting a horse to follow a carrot may just make the horse neurotic about carrots being unattainable or make her mad at you for being a treat tease, most kinds of external motivation can backfire. By reflecting on the potential drawbacks, though, you can decide whether not a particular external motivation technique will be a good plan for you.

NaNoWriMo

NaNoWriMo (National Novel Writing Month, www.nanowrimo.org) is an event that occurs every November, supporting over a hundred thousand writers a year in trying to write a novel (so to speak) of at least 50,000 words. The emphasis is on moving forward, not on writing the best possible work or of editing anything at all. In fact, the emphasis isn't even on writing a novel per se, because even those NaNoWriMo winners who get through all 50,000 words won't generally have a publishable novel unless they've gone above and beyond the call of duty and written much more: adult novels generally don't sell at a length of less than 80,000 words or (more commonly) 100,000. (Juvenile and young adult novels are an exception, however.)

But the work plowed into a NaNoWriMo project can be expanded into a complete novel or used in other ways, especially after editing or reworking once the initial rush of writing is done. And the great value in NaNoWriMo is not intended to be guiding you through to completing a publishable work: rather, it's about getting you see how hard you can really write when you open up the throttle and don't hold back. It's an excellent exercise in not being limited by your inner editor and in producing much more than you might have thought possible.

Deadlines

Like any other external motivation, deadlines are a two-edged sword. As a concrete goal, they can be very valuable in cutting through hesitation and misdirection, because the piece has to be finished one way or another. Deadlines can also inspire pieces that might not otherwise have been written.

Personal deadlines (like "I resolve to finish this book by January 30th!") are harder to use for motivation than external deadlines (like a submission cut-off date for a magazine or an entry deadline for a contest) because it's easy to renegotiate them with yourself. It can help to announce them, or even better, to have a shared deadline with a writer friend by which you each need to get something done. In reference to announcing deadlines, though, there's some research showing that announcers immediately *lose* some motivation, because the announcement alone provides some payoff in terms of how they think about themselves and the reactions they get from others. If you do announce your goal publicly, make sure there's some kind of public accountability, a situation in which someone else will be waiting to hear that you met or missed the deadline, and that silence won't get you out of it.

Deadlines can be a lot more fun if you write to be a certain distance ahead of deadline rather than to simply meet the deadline. For example, as of this writing I post three new articles to The Willpower Engine (<http://www.willpowerengine.com>) every week, like clockwork, at 7:00 AM Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. I've done this without missing a single article deadline since I started the publishing schedule months ago. It hasn't even been a source of stress to write at this pace, and the reason is that I am not writing to meet each day's deadline: rather, I'm trying to stay at least a week ahead. I typically have 2-4

articles queued up and scheduled to go at any time, so that my focus can be on providing good articles and not on slapping something up on the site at the last minute.

Rules

Rules we make for ourselves aren't strictly speaking external motivation, but they share some of the characteristics of external motivation, while avoiding some of the drawbacks.

I've talked about rules a bit elsewhere in this book, and mentioned the Willpower Engine article about them at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=481> . The short version is that giving ourselves an absolute code of behavior cuts short any opportunities we may have to talk ourselves out of actions that we really believe are good for us. Instead of expending a lot of energy on deciding, we can focus all of our energy on obeying, on surrendering ourselves to good decisions we've already made. (A related article on The Willpower Engine, "Why Self-Reliance Requires Surrender," is at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=322> .) Of course, just making a rule doesn't ensure we will follow it, but making a well-thought-out rule gives us a simple choice of following it or not, day in and day out, which is much less stressful than reconsidering the entire issue (for instance, whether or not to stop writing before reaching our word count because of tiredness) every time the possibility comes up.

Rewards

It's true that rewards can help with short-term writing motivation—for instance "OK, I'll treat myself to dinner at Joe's Diner if I get this short story in the mail before the weekend." Unfortunately, these kinds of rewards don't generally have any connection to the effort we're putting into the work, and the work is directed at a short-term goal rather than done with full consciousness of our intentions and goals as writers. The need to use rewards regularly suggests a deeper writing motivation problem, so if you find you have to bribe yourself to write, it's worth delving into how you feel about writing and what has been sapping your motivation in the first place.

With that said, setting rewards for yourself can sometimes work, and as long as they aren't destructive to your other priorities in life, at worst they only take a little attention away from writing goals while getting writing done.

Write or Die

A miscellaneous, short-term, external motivation site that actually uses threats rather than enticements is <http://writeordie.drwicked.com/> . There are both Web-based and desktop editions, both free. Doctor Wicked describes the service this way:

Write or Die is a web application that encourages writing by punishing the tendency to avoid writing. Start typing in the box. As long as you keep typing, you're fine, but once you stop typing, you have a grace period of a certain number of seconds and then there are consequences.

The consequences include annoying noises and other harmless but aversive events. While probably not a useful way to address long-term writing motivation, Write or Die is a good kick-in-the-pants-style approach to cranking some words out if you need an immediate push.

Non-writing habits that help writing motivation

There are a few habits that have nothing directly to do with writing but that can help your writing motivation a lot. Many of these will be familiar advice to you, but some of the less well-known advantages of each may be new information.

Sleep

Most of us at one time or another seem to try to borrow from sleep to create more writing time (or time for other things). Unfortunately, shorting yourself on sleep generally results in temporarily reduced cognitive function, irritability (and therefore sometimes resistance to doing things in your own long-term interest if they're inconvenient), and of course tiredness. Often a person will cut sleep short to gain more time, but the following day (and possibly for some time after) will lose some of their capacity to get things done, resulting in less getting done overall with more discomfort.

There's a more in-depth discussion of sleep, including how much a given person needs and what sleep is good for, on The Willpower Engine at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=624>.

Consider Dropping Caffeine

Different people react differently to caffeine. Personally, I love the stuff, but it's poison for me. Even if your body is much more tolerant of caffeine than mine, though, you may be surprised by how much more you can get done if you cut it out of your life—or at least cut way down on it.

Caffeine certainly contributes to temporary alertness when you first take it, but this tends to come out later on in tiredness and grogginess when the caffeine has worn off. I used to drink coffee in the morning and feel relatively awake, then come home at night and be completely useless and exhausted. If that happens to you, it might be worth cutting out the caffeine even though it's not easy. My report of my experiences of my first full year without caffeine are on the Willpower Engine at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=501>.

The E Word

I know people are always telling other people to exercise, but hear me out if you can, because we generally tend to think of exercise as being something you do for weight loss and to be perky, and it really has completely separate benefits for motivation. These include improving brain function, providing more energy, facilitating better sleep, immediate stress relief and anxiety reduction, boosting self-esteem, fighting depression, increasing endurance, promoting relaxation, aiding clear thinking, and more.

I'm not talking about New Age wannabe payoffs here, but payoffs that show up as hard numbers in good research studies. You will be smarter, more energetic, and more on the ball if you exercise often, and you don't have to kill yourself to do it: just half an hour of walking a few times a week can make the difference.

My whole spiel on the subject is on The Willpower Engine in the article "Nothing to Do With Weight Loss: 17 Ways Exercise Promotes Willpower and Motivation" at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=1000>.

Good Food vs. Bad Food

I just don't let up with this healthy living nonsense, do I? But there's hard scientific evidence behind this one, too. Eating food that's relatively low in fat and relatively low in simple sugars will make you more alert and mentally capable. Getting a lot of fat in a meal or a snack tends to make you feel tired and sleepy soon after, and getting a lot of sugar tends to make your energy (and mood) spike, then plummet. Neither of these are good for writing, whereas apples, lean protein sources, whole grains, and all the rest will help you sustain a productive level of energy.

Meditate: It's Easy

Meditation is a pretty simple practice to start that is hellaciously useful in promoting clarity, focus, and serenity. If you're finding it hard to sit down and write because you're jittery about things, or if you feel distracted or uncomfortable, meditating for 10-30 minutes can contribute a lot to your mood and capabilities. You don't even have to be very good at it for it to start to pay off.

There's more information on The Willpower Engine at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=687>, along with some links to sites that can help you learn how to meditate for free in less than half an hour.

Meditation offers both immediate benefits and long-term benefits—which come to think of it, is actually true of everything else in this section as well.

TOOLS AND RESOURCES

Emergency writing motivation techniques

If you want to write right now but just don't feel motivated, here are some immediate ways to fire up your motivation. Any one of them might do the trick: pick whichever seems most likely or appealing and give it a try. If it doesn't get you right on track, try another one. While no self-motivation trick is sure-fire, we often tend to feel that if we're not motivated now, there's no way to get motivated, and there's very strong evidence that this isn't true. Our emotional and motivational states can change very quickly, given the right setup.

Keep in mind that just reading this list isn't going to motivate you—it's *doing* one or more of the things this section describes that will make the difference. (See "Knowing Isn't Enough: The 4 Steps Between Knowledge and Action" at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=789>.)

1. **Get a little exercise.** It may sound unappealingly healthy, but research strongly supports the idea that even a 10-minute walk can make you more alert and energetic and can improve your mood quickly. It might help to glance over some notes for whatever you're working on before you set out too, to let yourself mull it over while you're walking or doing a few push-ups or hula hooping.
2. **If something's bothering you, fix your thoughts.** Often we hold ourselves back by delivering a negative running commentary of broken ideas. If you're thinking "My writing sucks" or "I'll never finish this book" or "My agent should have done a better job selling my last project," turn to the section on broken ideas and follow the step-by-step instructions for detecting and repairing them. If you're feeling blocked, check out the section on writer's block.
3. **Visualize a result you like.** Take a few minutes to picture what it will be like when your piece is finished and you can turn it in to your critique group or ship it off to your publisher or start querying agents or submit it to a magazine. Think about the best-case scenario: what if this turns out to be not just good, but exceptionally good? You can't predict how things will turn out when you're done, but you can browse the possibilities. Spend a little time in the future enjoying what you might accomplish, then come back to the present and start doing it.
4. **Just start typing.** Momentum can be invaluable in making progress, and sometimes we work too hard trying to talk ourselves out of writing instead of getting started on it. Try opening a document and typing a few words, or making that first edit, or brainstorming some ridiculous ideas about how to continue writing or about changing your outline. Sometimes a little motion is all that's needed to shake off inertia. If it helps, pick a small task to get you started, like writing uninterruptedly for 10 minutes or brainstorming how the Dickens you're going to get your hero out of that steamer trunk.
5. **Meditate.** Even if meditation "isn't your thing," it can pay off handsomely when you need more serenity or focus. If you don't know how to meditate already, the Willpower Engine article at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=687> points you to online resources that can have you meditating within half an hour. You don't even have to do a great job of it: even a little success at meditating can provide benefits now. Regular meditation is also a great way to improve mood on an ongoing basis.

6. **Why did you decide to write this piece?** Get in touch with your goals and inspirations for writing what you're working on (or have decided to work on). Was there an idea that excited you? A publication opportunity? A scene you pictured that you couldn't wait to get down on paper? Were you challenging yourself with a piece that required stretching your skills? Grab a piece of paper or pull up a blank word processing document and write out why you were interested in doing the project in the first place. (You can also do this in your head, but writing it down can have a stronger effect.) Alternatively, write out an explanation of what's so great about the piece you're working on—why you would want someone to be interested in it, or what could make it special or appealing.
7. **If you feel overwhelmed, focus on one thing.** Our brains are only physically capable of focusing on one thing at a time (see <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=567>). Therefore, even if there are a lot of things that may be clamoring for your attention, you will be rising to the greatest possible level of responsibility if you just 1) figure out which one is most important to do now, and 2) get started on that one. All the others can be ignored until it's their time.
8. **Write it out.** Writing down your thoughts journal-style can help clarify what your obstacles are or what it is you really want to be doing, and why. Writing about your own writing is often an excellent way to work out both writing motivation problems and writing problems themselves, like plot difficulties or difficult decisions about how to organization of a piece.
9. **Talk with someone who supports your writing.** If you can easily recall times when talking with someone about your writing project got you fired up to work on it, then you (like me) can probably use that approach again and again. And while it's not true of everyone, a lot of people—both writers and readers—feel flattered to be asked to talk with a writer about a work in progress. There's a very complimentary implication that just talking to that person is inspiring, which is in fact the case when this works.
10. **Find inspiration.** If you're like many writers, you decided to start writing (or were recently inspired to write more) by reading something incredibly good (making you think "I *really* want to be able to write like that!") and/or by something that you were surprised was successful at all (making you think "Hell, I could do better than that!"). Go read a brief passage from one of those works, or spent a short time online perusing recent books that have sold, or look at a magazine you want to sell to, and think about having your work in there. Alternatively, if there's something that tends to get you fired up to write—a particular kind of music, an activity that gets you thinking, browsing random pictures on Flickr (<http://www.flickr.com>), etc.—try that now (but don't get so wrapped up in it that you don't come back to writing soon.)

Yet another way to get inspired is to reminisce about past successes for a bit. Have you written something you're really proud of, or made a great sale?
11. **Skip ahead.** If you're stuck about writing the next thing in front of you, ignore it for now and try skipping ahead to write the next piece you're excited about. You may find you don't even need the piece you were hung up on, or if you do, you can come back to it later when you've figured out what you need to do with it.
12. **Come up with something new.** If the piece you're writing isn't inspiring you as is, come up with something new to add to it that does inspire you. Add a character or a scene, think up a completely different approach to writing the next part, or do more research until something gets you lit up.

- 13. Take a short time to organize.** If you're having trouble getting excited about writing the piece itself, spend some time writing about what you're going to do going forward or what the implications are of what you've already written. If you don't like to plan or outline, you can do this just as a throwaway brainstorm session if you like. If you do outline, go back to that outline and play with it, or brainstorm how it might change. When you've gotten into the groove, switch to actual writing.
- 14. Warm up.** You don't have to start with productive writing work immediately if you don't feel ready. Instead, prime the pump by doing some warm-up writing that appeals to you: describe something incredibly disgusting, write complete nonsense, write a quick piece from the point of view of a piece of gum, execute a vivid bit of scenery description, start an argument in dialog, etc.
- 15. Work on a different project if necessary.** Don't keep abandoning projects to start up new projects that seem temporarily more appealing, but as an occasional jump start technique it can help to switch to a different project, especially one you've been neglecting. It's better to be writing something than nothing at all.
- 16. Use external motivation.** While external motivation has its problems and limitations, it can be better than not finding a way to write at all. Create a writing challenge (including deadline) with a friend, offer yourself a reward if you have to, or try "Write or Die" at <http://writeordie.drwicked.com/>.
- 17. If all else fails, do writing support work.** If you're not getting fired up to actually write, is there some writing-related work you can do? This might include research, finding markets to write for, writing query letters, organizing submission information, sending out submissions, reading writing books, critiquing, discussing writing in online forums, etc. Keep in mind, though, that it's possible to spend all your time doing writing busy-work and never writing, and also keep in mind that if you really want to write at the moment, there's almost always a way to motivate yourself to do that. With that said, if you're going to avoid actually writing, doing so by furthering your writing career is a lot better than playing video games or raiding the cupboard.

This section is an expanded, writer-specific version of a general motivation article on The Willpower Engine entitled "Don't Feel Motivated? 10 Ways to Find Motivation Right Now" at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=969>.

Motivation troubleshooter

Have a writing motivation issue? With luck, I was smart enough to anticipate it and list it here. Some of these items will point you to specific sections of this book that provide solutions, and others have steps that you can take written out here.

I have writer's block

Feeling like you have writer's block may mean you're having trouble coming up with ideas, in which case see the section on Writing Ideas earlier in this book, or it can mean that you have doubts about your writing. The section called Unmasking Writer's Block goes into problems and solutions for writer's block in detail.

I'm worried I may just not be a good writer

If anyone has ever experienced anything good from reading your writing, then there is some good in what you've written. Regardless of how much success you may or may not have experienced in the past, writing more can improve your craft, especially if you get regular feedback. Keep in mind that the people who are best at a skill are the ones who have practiced the hardest (see "Do You Have Enough Talent to Become Great at It?" on The Willpower Engine at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=86>). You may want to join a writer's group or take a writing course to gain confidence and get more feedback on where you are in the process so far: see the section on Support, Camaraderie, and Mentoring.

To put it another way: don't worry about whether you're a good writer, just about how you can become a better writer.

What if what I'm writing doesn't sell, or it sells but no one reads it?

You probably know logically that there's no way to predict the future, but it still feels hard to take risks. Keep in mind that virtually all successful writers experience a significant amount of rejection (see the section on Dealing With Rejection), that rejection isn't that bad when you face it with determination, and that if you've done the best you can with a piece, you do yourself a disservice if you don't send it out into the world.

With all that said, sometimes we choose the wrong projects to work on (see the section on Choosing a Project), so it's important to choose the right project (for instance, one that you can say passionate about and that is of interest to the readership or markets you want to reach), but it's also important to try to stick with projects to the end even when your confidence in them may be faltering. It's natural for confidence to fluctuate a little over the course of a project.

If you find yourself getting very anxious about your writing or your work, you might check to see if you're nurturing any broken ideas: see the section on Broken Ideas and Idea Repair for details.

My motivation comes and goes: some days I'm driven, others I just can't get fired up

The short response to this is that if you're not feeling fired up to write on a particular day, any one step in the right direction can make it easier, and multiple steps in the right direction build on each other. For more on the subject, see "What to Do When Motivation Comes and Goes" on The Willpower Engine at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=79>).

I get part way through a project, then lose interest

Sometimes we just suffer from natural human thirst for novelty: if this seems to be what's happening with you, read the next item, below: "The novelty of this project has worn off."

If you have thought about your project in depth and just don't feel confident in it any more, it's possible that you might have the wrong project and honestly need to change to something else—but it's also possible that you just need to reconnect with your passion for the piece. Read the section on Choosing a Project for ideas on these subjects.

The novelty of this project has worn off

Annoyingly, somewhere in our evolution we acquired a built-in trait that only allows us to enjoy something for a little while unless it changes. A dish that tastes “amazing” on the first bite and “really good” when we have it again in a few days continues to wane in amazingness as long as we keep eating it regularly. This is known as “hedonic adaptation,” and it means that anything that was delightful and new and exciting eventually becomes old hat unless there’s something renewing that excitement. When we first take on new goals, it helps a lot to understand that we need to not only take the steps to reach our goal, but to keep actively renewing our enthusiasm.

Renew your passion for the project by reminding yourself of what attracted you to it in the first place. Consider whether adding or changing elements will make it more appealing to you. Build up momentum by writing intensely, at least for a time: see the section on Momentum for more.

I’m not in a good mood to write

Everyone has better and worse days, days when we feel we can do more and days when we’re mainly just trying to keep things from going wrong. What may seem easy to do on a good day can be the last thing we care about on a bad day. But there are several tactics we can use to improve mood and turn this kind of situation around.

One tactic to get excited about the project itself. Remind yourself why you’re interested in it. Spend a little time visualizing what it will be like to get the project done and to be successful with it.

Another is called “emotional antidotes,” and is taken from Buddhist psychology. It’s a fairly simple process of reflecting on a subject or memory that you associate strongly with the positive mood that is the opposite of the negative mood you’re in now, or doing something that evokes that positive mood. Looking at pictures of a particularly fun time in your life, playing with your children (if you have any), or otherwise doing something that makes you happy can change your mood in a fairly short period of time, although the brain chemistry of differing moods does take a few minutes to alter. This is true even though we’re designed to have a hard time envisioning being in one mood when we’re in a different one already.

It’s important to remember that pleasure or indulgence will not counter bad moods in the same way that happiness will.

Pertinent Willpower Engine posts include “Antidotes to Bad Moods and Negative Emotions” at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=149> and “The Difference Between Pleasure and Happiness” at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=195> .

I tend to start a new project before I’m done the last one

Since things we’ve gotten used to become less exciting through hedonic adaptation (see “the novelty has worn off,” above), we human beings are seekers after the new and different. This can be fine in a lot of circumstances, but not when it repeatedly derails us from old projects by tantalizing us into taking on new ones. We generally have the resources to undertake only one new thing at a time. After we’ve been in the groove on one goal for a long time and have made those actions into habit, we might consider adding something else, but add something else too early and like it or not, the old goal will very likely go by the wayside. When you’re tempted in a new direction, think carefully about what you’ve invested in the goal you’re already working on and about why it’s important to you in the first place. Of course we have to keep some flexibility, but guard your progress jealously against all but the most important replacement goals.

If you’re not sure whether you chose the right project in the first place, see the section on choice of project earlier in this book.

I get working on multiple projects at once and have trouble getting any one of them finished

We have a limited amount of time and attention, so whenever we divide that, we are losing momentum on all of our projects at once (see the section on Momentum). It’s much more efficient to have a lot of enthusiasm for one project at a time than it is to have a little enthusiasm for more than one at a

time. As appealing as each project may be, one should come before the others: list out your reasons for doing each, and then choose your project. See the section on choosing projects for more.

I don't send out my work very often because I hate rejections

Rejections are a normal part of the process for almost all successful writers, and generally speaking they don't suggest anything bad about your skills or your work except that you haven't met the needs of the particular markets you've submitted to with that particular submission. The section called *Dealing With Rejection* explains in detail and gives some examples of very successful rejected people.

I want to do more writing, but I don't feel inspired very often

Inspiration is fickle, limited, and rarely strong enough to carry major writing projects on its own. New ideas come when we stimulate our minds and provide new materials to work with. Read the section on coming up with writing ideas for detailed information on creating your own inspiration.

I want to do more writing, but I don't have the time

There are some useful approaches to getting more time for writing: read the section called *How to Get More Time to Write*. Remember that "not having time" means "putting priority on other things." It may be that there are other things in your life at the moment that are much more important than writing, and writing may have to wait. However, it may also be that you can get more time for writing simply by changing your priorities.

I set aside time to write, but then I get distracted or do other things

If outside distractions are your main problem, fortunately there are ways to limit them: read the section called *Handling Distractions*. If you find you fritter away your writing time pecking at different projects or doing unproductive things, see *Using Writing Time Well*.

I spend all my time editing

Editing can improve work to a point, but it's often much more productive to write first and edit later, and editing can sometimes be taken to lengths where it actually hurts the piece. Read the section on *Prioritization Errors* for more on these subjects.

I love writing but hate outlining or editing or submitting or your least favorite task here

Since conceiving, writing, editing, and selling our work requires a variety of skills, it's no surprise that some tasks may be more appealing to you than others. Fortunately, there are simple strategies for doing the parts you like least: see *Doing the Parts You Don't Like*.

It's sometimes even possible to get into a powerfully motivated and efficient state when doing these less inspiring tasks: for more on this, see the section on *Flow*.

I'm in the middle of a big project, but I hit a wall

Sometimes difficulties in continuing work on a project come from having taken a wrong turn in the writing, of which more in the next item below. At other times, it may be that you're working with an idea, plan or outline that doesn't fit. Temporarily put aside your plans for the piece and brainstorm some ways it could develop from here. You may find a new approach you want to pursue, or previously unconsidered elements that can bring new life to the approach you already had.

It's possible that you're finding belatedly that your project doesn't suit you well. If this is the case, it will probably need to be abandoned, but before you consider that, read the section on choosing your project.

It's also possible that other concerns are getting in the way of you fully connecting with your writing. Journaling or talking with a friend can help bring these out and make them more accessible for fixing.

My project took a wrong turn and doesn't work any more

There are several ways in which a piece of writing can get off track:

1. The writer let something into the work that doesn't fit with their vision. For instance, a novelist might have had a character do something awful because the plot called for it or because it seemed audacious, but the action doesn't feel realistic and now the novelist has lost faith in the story. Or a non-fiction writer may have introduced a subject that sends the piece off in a direction that doesn't match their real aspirations for the piece. In either case, the solution is to go back, chop off the piece that doesn't fit, and resume writing from there after thinking carefully about what you really want to write instead.

2. It's also possible to lose sight of the original conception for the piece. Review early materials and remind yourself (preferably through discussion with a friend or free writing) what excited you about the work in the first place.

3. If it's not clear what exactly got off track, look forward and see if you can start writing further down the line. As the rest of the piece takes shape, more light may be shed on the place you're currently stuck, or it may be that you forget about the intended next part and replace it with something that goes directly from what went before to the new parts you've written.

4. Although this is always disappointing, it's possible that your project wasn't well-chosen in the first place. Read the section on choosing your project for more perspective on this issue.

5. Open-ended brainstorming about how the piece could change, either in the sections that are already written or in the future of the piece, can offer new possibilities. We have a tendency to stick with one concept for a project at a time; entertaining other possibilities can provide new, more viable avenues.

6. If you just need ideas as to what to write next, visit the section on generating writing ideas.

I stopped working on a big project, but now I can't seem to get started on it again

Large projects that have been left partly finished can take on a disproportionate feeling of foreboding and difficulty. Read "The elephant lurking in the basement" at the end of the section called Organizing Material and Breaking Down Big Tasks.

I don't know what project to start next

When choosing a project, pull many possibilities and ideas from many different sources, then find the possibility that works best with your plans for yourself as a writer and that holds a lot of appeal and interest for you. The section on choosing ideas explains this process in detail.

I don't know what to write next in the project I'm working on

This problem can arise if you need to generate more ideas, if your project has taken a wrong turn, if there's a flaw in your project idea, or for other reasons. Read the two items above called "I'm in the middle of a big project, but I hit a wall" and "My project took a wrong turn and doesn't work any more." Look for a description that most closely matches your feeling about your current work and follow its directions.

My piece isn't fitting my outline anymore

Outlines are wonderful, if you're a person who likes them, but since the real experience of the writing doesn't happen until it's being written, there's no way for an outline to take everything into account, and it may stop fitting. If this happens, the outline can be temporarily set aside, adapted, replaced, or discarded completely. Ask yourself what you would really like to see in the rest of the book and spend a little time brainstorming possible directions it could take. Find the ideas that most attract you forward, and keep, modify, or discard your outline depending on how closely they've fit. Never stick with an outline just because it's the outline, although it's useful to remind yourself why you chose for things to be as you originally designed them and see if that gives you a renewed interest in the outlined events.

If you do discard your outline, consider whether you'd be happier coming up with a new one for the new material going forward or if on the other hand you'd like to try performing without a net for a while.

Alternatively, the “story not fitting outline” problem can sometimes be a disguised version of “My project took a wrong turn”; you may want to read that item, above, for possible remedies.

I thought this was going to be great, but it’s not coming out as well as I’d hoped

If you’re still interested in your project and still have enthusiasm for some of the pieces coming up, it may be best to downplay your doubts for a little while. It can happen that we will get too close to a piece and think it’s not working when in fact it is.

Alternatively, this may be a very good time to get some writing feedback; see the section called Support, Camaraderie, and Mentoring for recommendations on who, how, and why.

I’m getting a lot of negative feedback. Maybe I should just scrap this project

If you believe in your project but no one else who’s seen it likes it, the choice is difficult. On the one hand, writers constantly have trouble seeing their own work without bias, so it’s entirely possible your readers are right. On the other, it’s possible to just get feedback from people who either aren’t good at it or are the wrong audience for your piece, making it possible that you’re right.

If your critiquers have given you advice you value in the past and do read the kind of thing you’re trying to write, there’s a good chance that your work really isn’t accomplishing what it needs to.

However, if your critiquers are unreliable or unknown quantities, and if their comments don’t hit home for you, and if you’re excited by your piece, you’re probably best served not to let your judgement be overwhelmed by others’ opinions.

In any of these cases, though, it’s possible that the reason the piece isn’t working for your readers is that there are parts you have in your head that aren’t on the paper and that are important for getting the experience that interests you about the piece. Review exactly what you’ve written and make sure what’s in your head has gotten onto the paper. It’s hard sometimes for a writer to see what has been written instead of what was envisioned for the piece.

This project is a lot more difficult than I expected—I’m not sure I can do it

Most kinds of complexity in writing projects seem to yield to greater organization: spreadsheets, timelines, index card systems, “bibles” (that is, records of all of the underlying facts for a writing project), etc. However, the question may turn out to be not so much a matter of ability as a matter of desire and outcome. If the project is going to be that complex, do you really want to write it? And do you feel fairly confident that it’s the kind of project you’ll be able to do well at in this stage of your writing development?

The answers to these two questions are related. If the complexity greatly reduces your enthusiasm for the work, the chances of it coming out well are much lower ... and if the project seems as though it might turn out to be something really special due to all of its complexity, that can be motivating to get it done despite that problem.

Answering those two questions honestly based on your new understanding of the project (since the time it turned out to be more complex) should give you some idea of whether you should continue on (perhaps with some additional organization), put the project aside for some future date, or abandon it entirely—as desperate and unpleasant as that last option often is.

If you do go ahead with a complex project, it helps to immerse yourself in it as much as possible. Doing a lot of writing on it in a short period of time allows you to keep more of its elements in mind at once, increasing your capacity for dealing with complexity. See the section on Momentum for more information.

It’s worth mentioning that taking on a particularly difficult project usually pays off in greater mastery of writing, provided the project comes out fairly well (and often even if it doesn’t).

I’m hopelessly behind my word count goal (or other goal)

If you are so far behind on a goal that you don’t believe you can catch up, consider making a new goal from scratch. For instance, if you’re halfway through NaNoWriMo and have only written 10,000 words, you could make your goal 20,000 words for the remaining half. True, you won’t “win” NaNoWriMo

this way, but the only other two options are to push very hard to catch up when it appears you never will, which is a very poorly motivated kind of situation, or to give up entirely, which is even worse.

Whenever you're considering goals, remember that you can't work toward a goal in the past: anything that has happened previous to this moment is something you can't change, so that if you didn't keep up in the first half of NaNoWriMo, that's over and done with. However, we can always work to improve our motivation right now, to push forward with goals that make sense to us. If there is any time left in the current day, the day is not lost: there's still an opportunity to make something out of it, even if everything up to the current moment has been a mess. Motivation is not for yesterday or tomorrow; it's always something we exercise right now, in the moment in front of us.

Some useful resources

Following are some of the resources I drew on in writing this eBook, both from my own work and from others'. I'm always interested in new sources on research, personal experience, and other subjects having to do with Willpower and Motivation. If you have any to suggest, please post them in the Resources section of the Willpower Engine forum at <http://www.willpowerengine.com/forum>.

The Willpower Engine

Much of the material in this eBook was inspired by information researched and gathered for The Willpower Engine (www.willpowerengine.com), where as of this writing I post a minimum of 3 articles on self-motivation each week. A book of the same name is currently in progress and will weave together all of the research and information that go into the most pertinent posts on the site as well as much more into a clear path readers can follow to build willpower and increase self-motivation in practically any area. More information will be available on the site as it becomes available.

Here's a listing of many of the Willpower Engine posts that are most pertinent to writing and writers. Depending on your particular needs and interests, you may find some of the other articles there useful, too; as of this writing, there are a little more than 100 posts on the site.

How Tools and Environment Make Work into Play, Part I: The Example of Scrivener
<http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=680>

How Tools and Environment Make Work into Play, Part II: Letting Your Environment Help You
<http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=690>

Entrepreneurial Motivation and Creating a Business from Scratch: An Interview with Nancy Fulda
<http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=634>

But It Started Off So Well! What Happened?
<http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=582>

Why Knowing Your Next Step Makes Motivation Easier
<http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=440>

7 Key Self-Motivation Strategies for Writers
<http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=299>

Self-Motivation Techniques for Starting (or Restarting) a Big Project You've Been Avoiding
<http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=234>

Hidden urgency: goals and the ticking clock
<http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=220>

How to handle multiple priorities
<http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=140>

What to do when self-motivation comes and goes
<http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=79>

The ReidWrite Writing Blog

I also post from time to time on a writing blog at <http://reidwrite.livejournal.com>, where I talk about description, process, character, writing techniques, the changing technology of writing, memorability, and anything else that crosses my writer's scope. It is updated whenever I'm particularly driven to write for it rather than regularly, but does have a number of substantive articles already.

Writing Tools, Events, and Contraptions (Relating to Self-Motivation)

Write or Die

<http://writeordie.drwicked.com/>

A Web site offering a free, timed writing system that punishes you if you fail to keep writing for the entire time you set.

NaNoWriMo - National Novel Writing Month

<http://www.nanowrimo.org>

An annual event in November when more than 100,000 participants try to write at least 50,000 words in 30 days

Scrivener

<http://www.literatureandlatte.com/scrivener.html>

Mac-only writing software mentioned in the Your Writing Tools section that provides tools for organizing and streaming writing projects, both large and small. It's by far my favorite writing software of all time, costs \$40, and runs on Mac OSX 10.4 and later.

AlphaSmart

The simple, self-contained writing machine that starts up in less than a second. Not fancy, useless for editing, great for cranking out work count.

My post about it can be found here: <http://reidwrite.livejournal.com/6502.html>

The official site is here: <http://www.neo-direct.com/intro.aspx>, but if you want an older, simpler one like mine, you'll probably do best on eBay.

ToDoist

<http://www.todoist.com>

A task management system with a particularly intuitive and effective interface, my favorite task system I've seen. Free for all but a couple of advanced features (and only \$3/month even if you want those).

A Few Other Useful Sites for Writers

Uncle Orson's Writing Class

<http://www.hatrack.com/writingclass/index.shtml>

Free articles from bestselling author and accomplished writing teacher Orson Scott Card, published 1998-2006

Critters Workshop

<http://www.critters.org/>

An online writing critique workshop, open to all, both venerable and well-recommended

Online Writing Workshop for Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror

<http://sff.onlinewritingworkshop.com/>

A seasoned writing workshop that involves some excellent writers; \$49/year

Nathan Bransford's blog

<http://blog.nathanbransford.com/>

Bransford is an agent with the Curtis Brown agency, and at least in terms of offering powerfully useful information to authors online, has got to be one of the most generous figures in the publishing industry. The site is crammed to bursting with information on the publishing industry, how to submit work, how to find an agent, writing contests, and other resources.

Holly Lisle's writing site

<http://hollylisle.com/>

Ms. Lisle has a dizzying array of useful, well-written articles on the business and craft of writing.

There are any number of really excellent writing resources I did not list here because there are much better and more definitive listings online. I just wanted to share a few of my favorites with you, and I probably will smack my head in consternation some time soon when I realize a couple of other real gems I should have mentioned. However, such is life.

Books

Following is a list of books either mentioned in this eBook or of interest to writers wanting to learn more about self-motivation and related subjects. The links are to reviews or mini-reviews of the books on The Willpower Engine, when available, or to Amazon when not.

Character and Viewpoint

Orson Scott Card

<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0898799279?ie=UTF8&tag=thewillengi-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=0898799279>

Writing the Breakout Novel

Donald Maass

<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/158297182X?ie=UTF8&tag=thewillengi-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=158297182X>

On Writing

Stephen King

<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0743455967?ie=UTF8&tag=thewillengi-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=0743455967>

The First Five Pages

Noah Lukeman

<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/068485743X?ie=UTF8&tag=thewillengi-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=068485743X>

The Writer's Journey

Christopher Vogler

Jungian principles applied to story structure. Surprisingly useful material for fiction writers

<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/193290736X?ie=UTF8&tag=thewillengi-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=193290736X>

Brain Rules: 12 Principles for Surviving and Thriving at Work, Home, and School

John Medina

A molecular neurobiologist looks at the implications of major findings about how the brain works on how we live, learn, and work

<http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=665>

Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High

Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler

An extremely practical, research- and experience-based guide to getting to successful solutions when having very difficult conversations

http://www.willpowerengine.com/?page_id=907

Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life

Marshall Rosenberg

An introduction to methods of conducting peaceful communication even in non-peaceful situations, including mediation, etc.

<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1892005034?ie=UTF8&tag=thewillengi-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=1892005034>

Deeper Than Reason: Emotion and Its Role in Literature, Music, and Art

Jenefer Robinson

A philosopher examines the science and philosophy behind human appreciation of the arts, especially literature and music. Eye-opening in terms of providing some explanation of why fiction is meaningful to human beings

<http://www.willpowerengine.com/?p=850>

Emotional Alchemy: How the Mind Can Heal the Heart

Tara Bennet-Goleman

An introduction to schema therapy, a school of psychology that has useful implications both for character development in fiction and for personal growth

http://www.willpowerengine.com/?page_id=909

The Feeling Good Handbook

David Burns

The book on cognitive restructuring (idea repair) by the man who came up with the definitive list of cognitive distortions (broken ideas)

http://www.willpowerengine.com/?page_id=911

A Guide to Rational Living

Albert Ellis and Robert A. Harper

The original book on cognitive restructuring (idea repair), including information on how individuals can apply it in their own lives

http://www.willpowerengine.com/?page_id=913

Mind Wide Open: Your Brain and the Neuroscience of Everyday Life

Steven Johnson

Insights into how we interact with the world based on the structure and function of our brain

http://www.willpowerengine.com/?page_id=896

Outliers: The Story of Success

Malcolm Gladwell

Gladwell examines the mysteries behind the most successful people, digging into the power of practice as well as the influence of family culture and other factors

http://www.willpowerengine.com/?page_id=901

Talent Is Overrated: What Really Separates World-Class Performers from Everybody Else

Geoff Colvin

A brilliant examination of where real mastery comes from (hint: it's not inborn)

http://www.willpowerengine.com/?page_id=905

About Luc

My personal writing site, updated when I have time, is at <http://www.lucreid.com> .

I write very short stories once every week or two for The Daily Cabal at <http://www.dailycabal.com> .

The Web site for my first book, *Talk the Talk: The Slang of 65 American Subcultures* (Writer's Digest Books, 2006) is <http://www.subculturetalk.com>

The writer's group I run, Codex, can be found at <http://www.codexwriters.com> . It's free and open to any writer who has made at least one professional fiction sale (according to our not-overly-strict standards for pro sales) or who has completed a major, by-audition-only writing workshop lasting at least 5 days and run by one or more highly accomplished writers, agents, editors, etc. Members must also be writing regularly to continue to qualify.

Of course, there are also my two blog sites: <http://www.willpowerengine.com> for self-motivation and <http://reidwrite.livejournal.com> for writing.

Writing motivation cheat sheet

This breakdown of pretty much the entire contents of this eBook is designed to be used as a handy reference and a reminder of key points. It can be tacked up on a wall if you find it that useful, and can be reviewed to improve learning of material from the book.

INTRODUCTION

Getting the most from this eBook

- Partly insight into self-motivation, partly self-motivation skills
- Act soon on the things you want to learn well
- Talk with others about writing motivation
- Read and post comments at The Willpower Engine
- Don't let talking about writing displace writing
- The Motivation Troubleshooter provides answers to many writing motivation problems
- This cheat sheet summarizes the key points of the book

Improving learning

- Make sure you understand as you read
- We learn better when information has meaning
- To learn well, start using the information immediately
- Go over the same information several times

HOW MOTIVATION WORKS

Long-term goals

- Not very effective to focus on more than one goal
- Important to understand your goal so as to be able to plan accordingly
- Is writing your top goal write now?
- Do you want writing to be a hobby, a sideline, or a career?
- How does writing fit in with family, job, and other priorities?

Short-term goals

- Immediate payoffs within your control tend to be more motivating than long-term payoffs you can't control
- To improve your motivation, focus on what your efforts will get you immediately or in the short term without having to depend on anything else

Momentum

- Some advantages to quality as well as productivity to write quickly and intensively
- Writing quickly is more immersive
- Writing quickly creates psychological momentum
- To get initial momentum, take any step to further your goal, then take another; different steps toward the same goal are often synergistic
- Develop a habit of writing on a regular schedule

Support, camaraderie, mentoring

- Feedback is essential to getting better at writing
- The way to get better at anything is through deliberate practice
- Passion for an activity usually leads to doing it more, which leads to greater skill
- Response to our work gives us information to improve our practice
- Wise readers are non-writers who give feedback
- Wise readers can provide an audience and deadline in addition to reactions
- Wise readers are likely to give a more reader-like type of feedback than writers
- Writers' groups can be a good source of critique and information exchange
- Some writers' groups are more useful than others
- In-person groups are more personal, online groups more broad-based
- Writing teachers should be people whose writing you like, who have a good publication record, and who are comfortable with the kinds of things you like to write
- Teachers can be helpful, but many writers are successful without them
- When critiquing, problems with the work do not reflect on the writer as a person
- Communication can be difficult when responding to critiques; books in resources section can help
- Writers offering feedback may be helpful or may sometimes talk about how they would write it
- Don't respond to criticism except with "thank you" and questions of clarifications unless you can be completely open and non-defensive
- Planning writing time with other significant people in your life can make family relations and writing both easier

Writer's Block

- Writer's block isn't the inability to write: anyone fully conscious and not physically impaired can write something
- Writer's block is a fear of not writing anything good
- Some people are so afraid of writing something mediocre that they stop writing entirely
- The best cure for writer's block is to write on even if it seems like the results might stink
- If the work isn't good, it might provide the basis for something good or teach you something useful
- Don't write unless you're driven to do it or love it

Prioritization errors

- Don't rewrite a piece to death
- Don't get so attached to your work that you can't see when a project isn't working or a section needs to be cut
- Try hard to finish what you start unless it's a complete lost cause
- Writers will tend to be more efficient when they work on only one project in a given time period, though there are exceptions and qualifications

Writing tools

- Seek out tools that make your work easier, more comfortable, more pleasant, or better organized to your taste
- Scrivener is an example of a writing tool that's very useful to some writers, as it allows you to organize as you go and then stream tasks

Writing environment

- Improvements in writing environment tend to mean more and better writing
- Consider these factors: lighting, space, music while you work, comfort, ergonomics, neatness, organization, beauty, personality, refuge, and some elements of feng shui

Flow

- Flow is a state in which you are absorbed in what you're doing and working with great enthusiasm and efficiency
- Flow works for short-term situations, like writing sessions, but not for long-term situations
- Flow requires clear goals, a strong focus on what you're doing, immediate feedback, and a challenge within your abilities
- During flow, consciousness of self fades, awareness is on what you're doing, sense of time distorts, the work feels enjoyable and effortless, and you feel powerfully in control
- Not everything works with flow: tasks with disruptions and long-term tasks aren't a good fit

PRACTICAL TECHNIQUES

Writing ideas

- Write down writing ideas and keep them somewhere you'll be able to find them
- Research can spawn many writing ideas
- Going to physical locations improves description and sense of place and suggests writing ideas
- Tossing around suggestions with other writers is another good source of ideas
- "1,000 ideas in an hour" is a process in which you ask questions about what the story might be and try to come up with answers
- Some of the best answers arise when you come up with alternatives to the initial answers you give
- Writing ideas can also come from things you've been considering, your favorite books, books you'd like to see, public conversations, playing "what if" with events, combining aspects of two people, asking what the worst thing that could happen in a given situation is, stream-of-consciousness writing, projects you started in the past, or turning a cliché on its head
- Just because you can write a piece about an idea, don't assume that the idea is good: look for ideas with power
- Don't wait for inspiration: it's better to feed your mind raw materials and get ideas when you need them than to only gather them when they happen to arise on their own

Choosing projects

- Choose a project that will further your goal and help your motivation
- Begin by brainstorming lots of project ideas
- Don't choose right off the bat; consider them all
- Consider passion, marketability, originality, what it will teach you, length
- Choosing the right project means you won't be disappointed and you have the best chance of advancing your writing goals with it

Organizing material for writing

- We're designed to focus on only one thing at a time
- To stream writing tasks, we can either outline and take things one at a time or write without an outline and only think about one thing at a time
- An outlining approach: gather all of the ideas, group them, organize groups, organize elements within groups, develop into a story structure
- Big, daunting tasks can be tackled by breaking them down to small pieces

Handling distractions

- Distractions can be disproportionately costly because they require resources to shift attention to and from
- Writing environment should minimize interruptions if possible, but not require a lot of time or effort to reach
- Try to write at times when you'll experience the least interruptions
- To minimize distractions from yourself, commit to the project, focus on one project at a time, and jot unrelated ideas down where you can organize them later
- Stopping to do research may work well for some writers and less well for others
- Manage responsibilities by anticipating and making anti-interruption arrangements before you sit down to write
- Devise rules about how you'll handle interruptions to keep on track
- Erect barriers to block interruptions where possible
- If you are interrupted, make good use of the disruption, but don't use it as an excuse to get off track

Broken ideas and idea repair

- Broken ideas are false things we tell ourselves that prevent constructive behavior
- If you're feeling negative emotions, broken ideas are often at work
- Reflect on your own thoughts to find the broken idea
- Broken ideas may seem true, but they tend to assume too much
- Idea repair is not positive thinking: it's correcting thoughts instead of just putting a happy spin on them
- To identify a broken idea, determine what category it falls under; all-or-nothing thinking, overgeneralization, mental filtering, disqualifying the positive, mind reading, fortune telling, magnification and minimization, emotional reasoning, should statements, labeling, or personalization
- To repair a broken idea, restate it in a strictly truthful way
- Broken ideas may need to be repaired repeatedly until gradually they stop coming back regularly

Tracking your writing

- Keep track of your writing habits to gain insight on how you can write more effectively and productively
- Daily tracking entries are ideal
- Tracking submissions can help pinpoint writing sale possibilities and put efforts in perspective
- Tracking helps keep your attention on writing

Rejection

- Even successful writers tend to get a lot of rejections
- Mozart got rejected all over the place. He finally made it, but then he died, the poor bastard
- Stephen King amassed a ton of rejections as he was gradually becoming more successful
- Rejections still suck, though
- When you get a rejection, learn from it, then if possible send the work out to the next market

Getting more time to write

- Lunch breaks from work can provide more time to write
- Vacations can do the same
- You may be able to adjust your work schedule to allow more writing
- Work schedules of fewer days per week with more hours per day can help make more time for writing
- Organizing your time better can make more room for writing
- For many people, much leisure time could be shifted to writing
- "Down time" may not be as necessary as it seems
- It can be hard to change habits to do more constructive recreation (that is, writing), but it can also be rewarding

Using writing time well

- Choose the right project, minimize distractions, establish momentum, and get into flow
- Set up everything you need beforehand
- If possible, have a reader waiting to read what you've written
- Keep tasks queued up so that you always know what's next
- If you don't know what's next, finding out what's next is next

Doing the parts you don't like

- If there are parts of the writing process you don't like as much, there are ways to make them more efficient and enjoyable
- Remember the purpose of your project as a whole to get in touch with motivation for less desired tasks
- Doing a task in a different way can sometimes make it much more appealing
- Broken ideas may interfere with getting tasks done and make the tasks more unpleasant than they need to be

External motivation

- Not usually as effective as internal motivation, but can have its uses
- NaNoWriMo, National Novel Writing Month, encourages participants to write 50,000 words in 30 days
- Deadlines help provide a specific goal and focus on that goal, but aren't always effective
- Writing ahead of a deadline instead of to meet a deadline can be more relaxing and effective
- Making rules about our writing behaviors can help us channel our actions more effectively based on good decisions we've already made
- Rewards can provide very short-term motivation, but do nothing for long-term motivation
- Write or Die is a site where you do a timed writing and are punished if you don't keep writing

Non-writing habits that help writing motivation

- Certain non-writing habits will improve your mental and physical condition, allowing you to write more and with better quality. These include getting good sleep, being wary of caffeine, exercising, avoiding high-fat and high-sugar foods (especially while writing), and meditation