

Awakening Your Inner Storyteller: Three Simple Steps to Start Writing Today

By Meredith Bailey

Writing can sound like a wonderful idea . . . until you confront the blank screen or notebook page. You may feel overwhelmed about where and how to begin. Perhaps you become distracted by other priorities in your life or experience self-doubt about whether you can produce anything worth reading. As a working writer myself, I am familiar with these obstacles and how difficult it can be to overcome them. What follows in this guide is some practical advice that is designed to help you move past self-doubt and distraction and break down the process of awakening your inner storyteller into manageable steps. I'll begin by talking about a common misconception when it comes to writing.

The Writer's Life

What do you picture when you think of a writer?

Perhaps a scene like this: This writer, let's call her Margaret, wakes early in the morning before her alarm. She feels refreshed from a full eight hours of sleep. As she leaps out of bed, she smiles because there's nothing she'd rather do than settle in front of her computer for another glorious day of writing. Her house is quiet. Her cat purrs at her feet. She sits down at her desk and gazes at the serene expanse of forest outside her window. Robins hop about pecking for their breakfast, and a lone deer steps out of the woods to nibble on the sweet grasses in her backyard. Inspired, Margaret sighs happily and stretches her fingers. The moment she touches the keys, words spill across the screen. But not just any words. The right words. Spectacular words. Words that weave a compelling, wildly imaginative tale no one has ever heard before or believed could be written.

Does Margaret's experience bear any resemblance to your own? Probably not, because she doesn't exist nor do the perfect conditions under which she writes. If Margaret were real, she'd most likely be called Maggie. After pressing the snooze button twice, she'd get up still feeling tired because her husband snores and her cat somehow takes up more space in the bed than a full-sized adult. She has an hour to write before she has to go to a meeting, and writing is the last thing she wants to do. In fact, she contemplates tossing her computer out the window just so she can go back to sleep. But Maggie gets up anyway and sits down at her desk, which looks out upon her neighbor's overgrown yard. She can hear her daughter talking loudly on the phone, the annoying *beep*

beep beep of a truck backing up, and the landscaping crew across the street unloading a fleet of leaf blowers. Maggie places her fingers on the keys and writes a sentence she doesn't like. She starts to erase it, but stops. She stares at the screen for a while, bites her nails, notices how crooked that picture on the wall is, spies a new stain on the carpet, and contemplates the tower of dishes in the sink that needs washing. She returns her attention to the screen. She writes another sentence. This one isn't so bad, so she writes one more.

For most of us, this is how stories are born—one sentence at a time under conditions that are less than ideal.

Step One: Choose to Write

There will never be a perfect time in your life to write. There will always be spouses, boyfriends, girlfriends, children, pets, noise, dirty dishes, crooked pictures, and stains on the carpet, all vying for your immediate attention. The trick to writing is that there is no trick. Either you make time to write or you don't. The first step to awakening your inner storyteller is to choose to write. How do you do that?

1. Make the time. Think about what is a reasonable time commitment for your life and devote that time to writing. This will be different for everyone—maybe it's twenty minutes a day or an hour three times a week.

2. Start small. It's best to start off with a small time commitment, so there's less pressure. A good rule of thumb when you're first beginning is to write for at least fifteen minutes but no more than an hour at a time. You can always increase your commitment as your confidence builds and your schedule permits.

3. Write it down. Put this time commitment in writing and tape it to the top of your computer screen and in other places highly visible in your home. These reminders will help you stay on track when you feel other priorities luring you away.

4. Honor your commitment. Once you've committed to this time, remember it's as important as anything else in your life. Consider it an appointment with your imagination and treat your imagination as you would your best friend. Would you stand up your best friend? Would you answer your phone or check email while she's telling you a story? Probably not, so treat your imagination with the same courtesy.

Step Two: Write Terribly

So now you've blocked off the time. Perhaps you're worried you'll sit there and type something that's just plain terrible. The first step to getting around that is—accept that you can't get around that. You will likely write several mediocre, boring, dead-end sentences before you type the one that inspires you, and that's okay. In fact, those awful sentences are important because they allow you to get to that one gem, that one idea or memory that you want to explore, that moment of joy that makes the whole frustrating experience worthwhile.

Even published authors who have been at this for years seldom find that their imagination spits out the perfect sentence the moment they sit down to begin something new. So don't expect that your experience will be any different.

1. Let go of your expectations. Give yourself the freedom to write sentences that aren't any good.

2. Keep writing. Once you've written these sentences, don't erase them. Now is not the time to edit—just keep going. Write more sentences, as many as you can.

3. Trust yourself. Your imagination is your best friend, right? So trust her. Trust that she will lead you in the right direction. It's like cultivating any relationship in your life: The more time and attention you devote to your imagination, the more rewards you will reap: Your sentences will begin to improve naturally. Your ideas will flow faster. Stories will begin to emerge.

Step Three: Begin with an Exercise

Whether you've never written a story before or you have twenty books under your belt, the prospect of sitting in front of a blank screen can be intimidating. What in the world are you going to write about? How come you had ten ideas for stories last night, but today there's nothing but tumbleweed rolling through your head?

Especially for beginning writers, it can be helpful to have structure, an exercise or assignment in mind when you sit down to write. There's no one magic exercise to get the creative juices flowing—this is just one example.

1. Set a timer. This is a fifteen-minute exercise, so it can be helpful to set an alarm.

2. Begin the exercise. Start with the phrase, "I remember . . ." and write whatever comes to mind. It could be as mundane as what you wore yesterday or what you ate for breakfast. It could be something you remember from childhood, the first car you ever drove, or the first time you read your favorite book. Once you start writing—keep writing. Don't stop to edit yourself. If you get stuck, start over with "I remember . . ." Keep going until the fifteen minutes is up.

3. Go for it. There is no right or wrong way to do this. The only way you can fail at this exercise is to not do it.

Below is a sample:

I remember eating fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and coleslaw for dinner. The whole family was there. I remember my older brother looked tired, probably because his son hadn't slept well the night before, and he'd spent all afternoon cooking. My sister-in-law had just gotten back from a conference and was in high spirits. My cousin was home from college for a few days. We hadn't spoken for a while, not since our disagreement. I

wondered if he was still mad. I remember . . .

Next Steps

So you've completed a writing exercise—what's next? First, take a moment to celebrate. You have overcome a big hurdle: You started writing! So don't stop now. Below are some options for moving forward.

1. Continue writing on your own. You may decide to work by yourself and there's nothing wrong with that. If that's the case, you could repeat the "I remember" exercise or re-read what you have written in search of an idea or sentence that you would like to explore in another piece. When you're ready, move on to a new writing exercise. There are numerous websites and books with writing exercises that can help you develop your discipline and skill.

2. Join a writing/critique group. Writing groups abound in the Seattle area. Joining one can help you maintain your commitment to writing, provide an opportunity to network with other writers, and receive feedback from your peers. Check with your local library or bookstore or search the web to find a group that's right for you.

3. Enroll in a writing class. Similar to critique groups, there are many classes available in the Seattle area to help you hone your writing skills. Many of these are based on a workshop-style approach where you discuss your writing with your classmates and the instructor. To find the class that's right for you, check with your local community college or university. You can also search the web for those offering small private classes.

4. Call me for a free consultation. I would love to chat with you about your experience with this exercise. We can also discuss whether hiring a writing coach is the best option for you given your personality, budget, schedule, and goals. My approach is not a perfect fit for everyone, and this will give you an opportunity to decide if it's right for you. My contact information is available at www.MeredithBailey.net.

These options aren't mutually exclusive. You may decide a combination of the above is ideal for you. Regardless of what you choose, keep going and remember—no one can write your stories but you.

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