

THE
WRITER'S
PROCESS

Getting Your Brain in Gear

Anne H. Janzer

The Writer's Process
Getting Your Brain in Gear
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PRAISE FOR *THE WRITER'S PROCESS*

“Research-based, hands-on, step-by-step wisdom that can help you wrestle with the lizard brain. Certain to help thousands of would-be writers write.”

Seth Godin

Author, *The Icarus Deception*

“Creativity isn’t a mystery and neither is writing. *The Writer’s Process* gives readers a clear-cut process to distill their ideas and get them down on paper more quickly...but also more powerfully.”

David Burkus

Author, *The Myths of Creativity*

“If you’ve ever struggled with getting your ideas out of your brain and onto something others can access (and who hasn’t?), Anne’s book is for you.”

Ann Handley

Author of the WSJ bestseller
Everybody Writes (Wiley)

“Finally someone has taken the cutting edge research in cognitive science and applied it to the craft of writing. Anne Janzer’s *The Writer’s Process* will give you practical advice on how to beat resistance and get your writing done.”

Tim Grahl

Author of *Your First 1000 Copies*

“This is a fantastic guide for anyone who struggles to get words on paper, and that includes most of us. Writing is not a process that comes naturally to everyone so if you want to make it easier, you need this book. Highly recommended!”

Stephanie Chandler

Author of *The Nonfiction Book Marketing Plan*

Founder, Nonfiction Authors Association

“If I had Anne Janzer’s *The Writer’s Process* 40 books ago, I’d probably have written 80 books by now. There are a lot of good books about writing out there, but this is the first to realistically offer assistance based on writing in partnership with your brain, not in opposition to it.”

Roger C. Parker

NY Times-recommended design author,

Top-performing blogger, *Content Marketing Institute*

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Introduction

The Search for a Better Process

Tolstoy opens *Anna Karenina* with this premise: Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

When it comes to writers and their methods, the reverse is generally the case. Happy writers develop their own unique ways of working; unhappy ones face similar problems.

Writing is intensely personal. Productive writers develop strategies that suit their individual personalities and environments.

When things go well, the words seem to pour from us, and we access thoughts and phrases from the mysterious depths of our minds. Our methods for reaching this state vary; some people prefer scrawling on paper in a crowded café, others type on a computer keyboard in total isolation, disconnected from the Internet. Beyond the act of getting the words down

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on paper, we apply different strategies for exploring and researching, revising, and publishing.

Sometimes the work is slow and laborious. We struggle to find the right opening sentence, or beat our heads against the wall to jar loose unwilling words. Partway through a long endeavor, we question our ability to complete it. Or we end up spending hours on social media, neglecting the work that is so fulfilling for our spirits or essential to our incomes.

I blame it all on our brains.

All writing originates from the same basic tool: the human brain. Although this magnificent and convoluted organ is capable of nearly infinite varieties of thought and expression, we all share certain responses and behaviors. The mental processes that make writing fun and rewarding can sabotage us if we don't know how to manage them.

For centuries, people have searched for ways to access inspiration and streamline content creation. Whether praying to the muses or shutting themselves into dark rooms, authors use trial and error to find the methods that work for them.

What if we could apply cognitive science principles to determine our own perfect methods for creativity and productivity?

Behavioral Writing Sciences

In 2002, a psychologist won a Nobel Prize for Economic Sciences. As a pioneer of the field of Behavioral Economics, Daniel Kahneman explores the nonrational, human variable within economic equations.

Behavioral Economics is a mash-up of psychology, neuroscience, and economics that examines how people make

decisions in the real world rather than an idealized marketplace populated by completely rational humans. (Finally, someone has made the study of economics interesting!) It explains why people make poor financial choices, and offers the hope that by understanding decision-making biases we might lead happier, more successful lives.

Can we do something similar for the practice of writing?

The expanding field of cognitive science sheds more light on the mysteries of human behavior with each passing month and year:

- Behavioral economists explore our irrational decisions in common situations.
- Neuroscientists examine the areas of the brain involved in various types of focus and attention.
- Psychologists study the effects of self-control and mindsets on our success in life.

What can cognitive science reveal about mental states during the phases of the writing process? Would a better understanding of the brain's activities help writers find their own ideal processes and avoid common obstacles?

I propose a new field of academic study: behavioral writing sciences.

OK, that's probably not going to happen anytime soon. Until it does, we can combine the teachings of science with the lessons of real-world experience to answer pressing questions, such as:

- Why do I sometimes become completely engrossed in the words and lose all track of time, while other times I can hardly eke out a single sentence? How

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can I get more of those fun and fluid episodes and fewer of the agonizing ones?

- How can I fit the contemplative act of composition into the whirl of daily life?
- Why do my best ideas come in the shower, and how can I make use of that?
- What should I do when I feel completely stuck and the deadline is almost upon me?

These questions affect every writer: the famous novelist, the entrepreneur drafting a compelling business plan, and the chemist struggling to explain her work to global business partners. The ability to express thoughts coherently and creatively through the written word is a professional asset as well as a personal attribute. It's worth cultivating.

Writing in the 21st Century

While in Boston for a marketing conference, I caught a ride to the hotel using the ride-sharing service Lyft. I mentioned to the driver that I was researching a book, which triggered a lively conversation about writing. He was an aspiring screenwriter who planned to move to Los Angeles to pursue his dream. We spoke about the craft of storytelling and the challenges of finding time to work.

That was the first of several related conversations during the conference. At a cocktail reception, a business marketer told me that she pens short stories in her evenings and on weekends. Other attendees complained of the difficulty of finding accomplished writers who understood their industries, and of creating enough content for their blogs. A respected marketing author and speaker told me that she

finds the study of marketing personas compelling because she identifies as a screenwriter, and plans to pursue that craft later in life.

The world is filled with writers, and it needs still more. The best writing creates moments of communion between author and reader. A story engrosses you, or a turn of phrase resonates deeply with your own experience. In that instant, you connect with another person through words.

Modern life has not dampened the urge to express ourselves and connect with each other. Even with streaming video, Instagram, Twitter, and texting, the written word continues to connect us as people on this planet. There's still a place for nuanced thought and sentences beyond 140 characters.

The world around us interferes with the process of creating in-depth work. Open-cubicle office environments, always-on connectivity, and constant interruptions impede productivity. Even if your job has "writer" in its title or list of duties, distractions and competing demands for attention make the workplace inhospitable to creative contemplation and focused drafting. For those thrust into writing responsibilities without a strong handle on their inner processes, the situation can be unbearable.

This is both the best and worst of times for those engaged in written communications. (Sorry, Dickens.) Three trends are changing the landscape, and us along with them.

Online publishing: With the growth in digital content, everyone can now publish. Gone are the days of submitting self-addressed, stamped envelopes to magazine editors.

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If you have something to say, publish your own blog. Easier still, post your thoughts on Medium, LinkedIn, Facebook, or other sites with a built-in audience. In the world of books, publishing gatekeepers are being marginalized by a rising tide of independent publishers and self-publishing.

There's a sobering downside to this state of affairs: a *content glut* affects both our business and personal lives. There's only so much time in the day to consume content. As readers, we must be more selective; as writers, we risk contributing to the noise and getting lost in its clamor.

The Internet: The Internet is a boon to writers, offering instant access to research and potential interview subjects. Yet it also serves as a nearly constant source of distraction and temptation. Jane Austen scribbled snippets of her novels on tiny slips of paper in the parlor between visitors. How would she have fared in a world of social media? One can only imagine.

The technology of writing: From pen and pencil to typewriters, word processors, tablets, and voice recognition, the technologies that transfer words from our brains to paper inevitably affect the process. Famous authors of the not-so-distant past wrote in notebooks, and cherished specific pens or pencils. Many wrote drafts longhand, then made quick revisions while typing those drafts.

While many authors still outline or draft on paper, eventually technology intervenes. We compose directly within a word processing file, which lets us restructure and rearrange as we create a first draft. A spelling and grammar checker offers instant feedback on mechanical issues. Technology may blur the boundaries between composition and revision.

Each time the world around us changes, we have to examine how it affects our inner, mental processes. Rather than railing against the open-cubicle environment or lack of time for quiet contemplation, figure out how to fit writing into your life. Put aside issues of which writing software to use or whether it's best to compose text online or with pen and paper, and examine the most powerful and important writing tool at your command—your brain.

Finding Your Own Process

Writers have always struggled with the same core issues: getting the work done (productivity) and creating something worth reading (creativity). And, unless you believe that misery is necessary for true art, aim for a third goal: making the process enjoyable, cultivating a fulfilling and happy life that includes writing.

Let's consider this our triple objective: productivity, creativity, and enjoyment. Surely that's not asking too much?

Cognitive science offers rational explanations for the practices that many successful authors employ, like writing in the early hours, on isolated islands, or in special workspaces. Without telling us exactly *what* to do, science may explain *why* these tactics work.

Science also helps us understand the problems we encounter, and where we might go astray. For example, many people struggle with procrastination, or don't identify as "writers" even though they earn their living by summoning words out of thin air. Science offers clues to the reasons for those limiting behaviors and how to bypass them.

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By understanding the mental processes behind the act of writing, we can work in a way that complements the mind's patterns and preferences. We can schedule work and search out environments that suit our personal needs, whether researching, drafting, or revising. When we get to work, we can muster the type of attention and focus that the task at hand requires.

This book is not a guide to grammar, nor is it a style guide. It's not a collection of writing prompts. It's not even an inspirational book, although I hope it does inspire.

Instead, it combines the field-tested practices of successful and productive writers with insights from cognitive science, so that you might master the inner game of the craft in your own particular way. It's a practical guide to what's going on inside the writer's mind and how that affects the work.

My hope is that no matter how proficient and professional you are, you'll find insights into the way you work best, and use them to fine-tune your own processes.

I write nonfiction, so that's my baseline. People tell me that writing fiction is entirely different. Based on the diaries of famous authors, I'm not convinced. Certainly, novelists rely heavily on creativity, and may approach the first draft differently. But in the end, everyone shares similar mental tendencies and obstacles.

This book is about developing productive, enjoyable writing habits. If that sounds like a good idea, read on. No matter your genre, you'll find a great deal that applies to your craft.

The book is organized as follows.

Part One: The Inner Gears offers a quick tour of the cognitive subjects related to the craft of writing. Don't worry, you won't have to diagram and label various parts of the brain. Instead of physical structures, these chapters discuss the mental processes that are highly relevant to the act of writing, including attention, creativity, self-discipline, and flow.

Part Two: The Process, Start to Finish traces the movement of ideas from the mind to the outside world through the act of writing. This part sketches out a seven-step recipe that eerily parallels the process of baking bread. These seven steps include assembling the ingredients, shaping the content into an outline, drafting, revising, and publishing, with additional periods for rest and incubation.

Part Three: Writers in the World offers guidance for using the seven-step process in the context of daily life. We'll look at how to address common challenges such as finding time to write, overcoming writer's block, and sustaining the long effort of authoring a book.

There's no single way to write. Things work or they don't, depending on what you're doing and how your brain operates. But by the time you're done reading this book, I hope you will have found ideas you can experiment with to improve your writing life along three critical dimensions:

- 1. Productivity.** Fit tasks to your abilities, environment, and schedules. Make progress during times you're not actively sitting at the keyboard or desk. Lose track of time while drafting. Manage multiple obligations without going crazy. Protect yourself from procrastination.

2. Creativity. Schedule incubation and invite inspiration. Learn to listen to ideas and insights happening below the level of your conscious, narrating mind.

3. Enjoyment. Create an environment that matches the work, minimizing distractions and inviting the state of flow. Approach the writing process with a growth mindset. Remain resilient in the face of setbacks and doubts.

The first step toward achieving these goals is getting a better understanding of exactly what's going on in your brain.

Part One:

The Inner Gears

Schools and universities teach the mechanics of writing: grammar, vocabulary, and the essay form. Creative writing classes teach character development and story structure. But most literature and composition courses lack instruction about the most powerful writing tool of all: the brain.

As students and working writers, we are left to figure out how to put everything together without understanding what's going on in our heads. We observe our behaviors and come up with rituals and routines, hoping for the best.

You hone the craft of writing through practice; it does not arise from understanding the mind alone. But the practice is easier and more enjoyable when you approach it in a way that complements your mind's behavior.

The chapters in this section discuss the mental activities and behaviors that are most critical to writers: attention and focus, flow, creativity, self-discipline, and mindset. Each chapter summarizes the cognitive concept and its application

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to writing. Most include ways that you can experiment with those concepts to get your brain in the right gear for the work at hand.

Cognitive science is a complex subject. To make sense of the various mental systems involved, I'm resorting to a little fiction. In the next chapter, you'll encounter two characters engaged in an ongoing collaboration in the writer's brain: the Scribe and the Muse.

Chapter 1

The Scribe and the Muse

Can you become a better skier by reading a book? Unlikely as it seems, the answer is yes.

My father started teaching me to ski when I was small enough to snowplow with my skis inside his. Dad was an old-school alpine athlete who believed in long boards and sharp edges. You could spot him on the slopes by his signature carving turns. His informal lessons focused primarily on the technique of edges, weight, and stance, with a sprinkling of philosophy.

Despite this excellent instruction, I remained a middling, timid skier well into adulthood. I understood the concepts, but rarely seemed to put them together on challenging slopes.

When my children were in elementary school, Dad would visit us annually during the February “ski week” in their school system, and we’d all head off to the mountains. As this

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was often my only ski trip of the season, I wanted to make the most of it. One year, I read the book *Inner Skiing* by W. Timothy Gallwey and Robert Kriegel in hopes of finding clues to better performance on the slopes.

Inner Skiing describes two selves: Self 1 and Self 2. In an athletic endeavor, Self 1 is the logical, rational mind, and the part I'd been learning with. Self 2 is the *physical* intelligence that controls the body. And when you're sliding down a steep incline at high speed, the Self 2 physical intelligence takes over—in my case, experiencing hesitation and fear.

The rational Self 1 understood that, when starting down a steep bowl, the skier should lean down the hill. But when fear set in, the rational mind was overruled by the instinct to back off. And as I demonstrated repeatedly, when you lean back on a steep slope, your skis keep moving forward and you skid downhill on your backside.

The book offered ways to get these two selves working together by paying attention to and labeling how things felt in my body. It helped me understand how thoughts can interfere with physical performance. When Self 1 and Self 2 collaborated, putting the concepts into practice, I started skiing with more assurance and enjoyment.

The “inner game” series started in 1974, when Gallwey published a book titled *The Inner Game of Tennis*. This book sold more than a million copies and spawned others covering additional sports as well as music and business. Clearly, Gallwey was on to something with the idea of the two selves.

If we have multiple selves participating in sporting activities like tennis and skiing, then certainly they are present in other parts of our lives as well.

The Myth of the Rational Self

Have you ever read a novel with an unreliable narrator? You read along happily, only to discover growing numbers of inconsistencies, or worse, that the narrator committed the murder. (A few Agatha Christie readers might feel my pain here.)

We're the authors *and* narrators of our own life stories. Our thoughts provide constant commentary, claiming to own the experiences and our very identities. We may mistake our thoughts as the triggers for our actions, rather than after-the-fact rationalizations. Psychologists can prove that, like the unreliable narrator in fiction, the voices in our heads aren't telling us the whole story.

The first lesson of cognitive science is that there is more—much more—going on than appears on the surface of your thoughts.

Your brain is like cable television, with
hundreds of channels but only a few worth
paying attention to.

For example, how do you make important decisions? We may imagine ourselves drawing rational conclusions based on evidence. Behavioral economist and Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman argues otherwise. He suggests that often, without being aware of it, we rely on cognitive shortcuts to save ourselves the effort of analysis.

In the book *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Kahneman explains our decision-making processes using two fictional entities:

- System 1 is automatic; it relies on gut feelings, shortcuts, habits, and heuristics to make decisions, sometimes very effectively, and in other cases with suboptimal results. System 1 is terrible at assessing probability, as any statistics teacher will tell you.
- System 2 is effortful, engaged when we concentrate to compute math problems or give someone detailed driving directions. This system consumes a great deal of energy, so we avoid using it as much as possible.

Both decision-making systems are vital for our survival. The modern world presents an abundance of choices for everything from the route to take to work to the type of coffee to order. (Decaf? Macchiato? Venti or grande? Colombian or Sumatran?) We would exhaust ourselves before breakfast making rational decisions if we approached everything with our effortful, analytic System 2.

The key is understanding *when* to use each system and which decisions merit deeper analysis.

The written word is the output of the thinking mind. Productive and creative writers learn to tap into the automatic, intuitive processes as well as the intentional ones. We'll borrow from Kahneman's System 1 and 2 to create a similar two-part model of the mind.

Our Two Writing Selves

Brains are complex, interconnected networks.

You have probably heard of the left-brain, right-brain distinction. The left hemisphere of the brain lines up with our

analytical and verbal skills, and the right hemisphere with creative, intuitive, and nonverbal activities.

Mapping activities to brain regions may be too simplistic for complex tasks like producing written language. According to Dr. Daniel Levitin, professor of Psychology and Behavioral Neuroscience at McGill University and author of *The Organized Mind*, “Language ability does not reside in a specific region of the brain; rather, it comprises a distributed network—like the electrical wires in your house—that draws on and engages regions throughout the brain.”¹

Knowing *where* a mental process happens doesn’t tell us *how* to activate it. The brain is hidden, but we can perceive our thoughts and behaviors. Rather than focusing on exactly where things happen in the brain, let’s label groups of mental processes that we can activate when needed.

On the one hand, writing requires focus and discipline. We’ll refer to the mental systems behind these behaviors as the **Scribe**. In ancient times, scribes were the people who wrote things down. In societies in which few people knew how to read, the skill of writing itself was highly valued. Scribes were not always the authors of the words they recorded.

Within each of us, the Scribe summons our verbal skills to find the right words, assembles them in grammatically correct sentences, and creates sensible structures. The Scribe manages deadlines and gets the work done.

But writers also access intuition, creativity, and empathy. These processes are the domain of the **Muse**.

No matter what genre you work in, the Muse fills a critical role, finding unexplored connections and fresh ways of

approaching subjects. The Muse accesses the freewheeling, associative parts of the mind to uncover impressions and infuse our words with vivid detail or inspired metaphors.

I don't mean to suggest that writers suffer from multiple personality disorder. Rather, our minds are complex assemblages of connections, glued together with dynamic shortcuts and working in ad hoc systems. By understanding the various contributors to the process, you can figure out how to deal with them. The Scribe and the Muse are shorthand labels for describing intentional and intuitive mental processes. As the chapters that follow explore topics of creativity, attention, flow, and self-discipline, we'll look at how the Scribe and Muse participate in these subjects.

Schools typically teach lessons that apply to one system at a time.

- Academic instruction favors the analytical, intentional processes. The Scribe learns the essay form, grammar, spelling, and sentence construction.
- Creative writing programs offer advice that applies to the Muse, such as using prompts to spur original thoughts.

We learn through experience how to make the two systems function well together, when to engage each, and how to keep them from interfering with each other. When the Muse and the Scribe collaborate, the work becomes fast, fluid, and fun.

Writing with Both Minds

This book could have been titled *Writing Fast and Slow* to pay homage to Daniel Kahneman's two selves. Just as we depend

on the two decision-making systems to survive, our successful careers depend on balancing the Scribe and the Muse. When the two don't work together well, the writer suffers.

Consider the tortured novelist, forever toiling in obscurity on a manuscript that never finds its way into readers' hands. This writer lives almost solely in the domain of the Muse (the intuitive and impulsive), without the discipline of the Scribe.

If you are all inspiration and creativity with no discipline and focus, then your wonderful ideas never make their way from the brain to the world. And, to be completely honest, not everything the Muse comes up with is practical or worthwhile. The Scribe functions as a critical filter.

However, working as a Scribe can be very dull without input from the Muse. If you do not tap into the intuition of your inner Muse, the effort of composing may be difficult and tedious. You have to find the right words and struggle to understand the reader's perspective through sheer determination.

You can work this way, but it's not much fun.

To be a happy and productive writer, you need to switch gears between the Scribe and the Muse gracefully. But they often get in each other's way.

Have you ever found yourself staring at the blank page, focusing intently to find the perfect word or the best way to approach a certain topic? The harder you try to summon the answer through sheer willpower, the more frustrating the experience. Then you go do something else, and the right word or approach pops into your head. The effortful focus of

the hardworking Scribe blocks the input of the Muse, which only gets a word in edgewise when you give up on the task.

Or, you try to work on a dull task and other, unrelated thoughts keep popping into your head. That's the bored Muse, pushing the Scribe aside.

To streamline your writing process, you need to know when and how to access each of these mental systems. That's the subject of the next chapter.

Resources

To delve into the multiple selves mentioned in this book, check out the following:

Thinking Fast and Slow, by Daniel Kahneman, is a treasure trove of insight into the multitude of mysterious ways that we make decisions.

Dan Ariely's *Predictably Irrational* debunks the myth of the rational self, while demonstrating the consistency of the automatic systems.

¹ Daniel Levitin, *The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload* (New York: Dutton, 2014), 40.

Chapter 2

Attention

Attention is the connection between our inner selves and the outer world. Focus is the act of directing our attention.

For writers, control over focus is more critical than mastery of the fine points of sentence construction or grammar. We can always find an editor to fix the grammar or word choices, but we are the sole pilots of our focus.

Why do so many authors report that they rise early to write, or stay at the task late into the night? When darkness silences the demands of the world, it is easier to focus attention on the act of writing.

The external environment cannot bear all of the blame; we are often our own worst enemies, our minds flitting to other things we'd rather be doing. With smartphones and constant connectivity, we're only one click away from friends' social media posts or the latest trending topics on Twitter.

Attention and focus are essential skills for
writers in a noise-filled world.

We cannot always control the world around us, but we can manage what's going on in our own heads. The previous chapter described the inner Muse and Scribe, two key actors within the writer's mind. We move between those systems by directing our attention.

The Science of Attention

In the book *Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence*, Dr. Daniel Goleman describes two primary systems regulating focus within our brains.

The top-down mind is effortful, intentional, and the seat of self-control. It exercises **focused attention**, as in "I'm going to shut out the world and work on this task for a while."

The bottom-up mind as described by Goleman is automatic, intuitive, and impulsive. Like the automatic decision-making self described by Kahneman, this system helps us navigate complex environments while preserving our energies and sanity. The bottom-up mind operates through mind-wandering, **open attention**.

Everyone understands the concept of focused attention, because we work to achieve it. Open attention happens when we daydream, or when our minds aren't focused on any particular task.

When you take a walk, go for a run, or pursue everyday activities that don't require effortful focus, your mind can enter a state of open attention. During these periods, other

parts of the brain can be heard above the stream of intentional thought. Ideas often appear out of nowhere, or we suddenly remember important, unfinished tasks we had forgotten.

Society values the ability to maintain focused attention, but we rely on open attention for other critical behaviors, including:

- Noticing changes or threats in the environment
- Detecting other people's responses and body language
- Making connections between unrelated areas or ideas

You don't want to go through life without healthy doses of open attention.

Writing and Attention

The two attention systems map well to our inner writing heroes, the Scribe and the Muse.

- The Scribe deploys the top-down, effortful mind. We access the Scribe with focused attention.
- The Muse inhabits the bottom-up, intuitive mind. We connect with the Muse through open attention.

The focused attention of the Scribe gets authors out of bed in the early hours of the morning, or keeps us toiling even when we'd rather do anything other than the work in front of us. We value the ability to focus. But in our urge to get things done, we often neglect the importance of time spent doing nothing, with our minds wandering.

Open attention is how we connect with the Muse and the cognitive processes going on beneath our intentional thoughts. And our brains are filled with interesting connections. What can we offer as writers, if not our unique slant on the world? That slant includes thoughts beneath the obvious ones. Even nonfiction authors choose the right stories, metaphors, and angles, inspired by the Muse.

In his book *Focus*, Daniel Goleman makes the connection quite clearly: “Open awareness creates a mental platform for creative breakthroughs and unexpected insights.”¹

By making time for open attention, you can invite your brain to ponder and play with ideas or topics even when you're not actively drafting or making notes. This subconscious work primes the brain to contribute words fluidly and easily when the time arrives to draft.

The Muse delivers the ideas and inspiration that fuel the Scribe. Without the Muse, writing is drudgery.

Experiment with Focus

Attention is at the root of many common writing ailments. Writer's block, for example, might happen when you neglect open, mind-wandering attention and thus lose touch with the Muse. Procrastination and distraction are failures of the Scribe's focus.

By mapping attention types to phases of the writing process, you can become more productive and creative. Everyone uses different methods of balancing the Muse and the Scribe. Experiment with the following suggestions to see which work for you.

Alternate periods of focused writing with open attention. Accept that your mind *will* wander and make that part of your master plan. After working intently for a while, take a break away from the desk for a less mentally taxing activity.

Most people get more done in three one-hour blocks of work separated by breaks than in one four-hour stint.

Consider using a method like the Pomodoro Technique[®], which was initially developed as a time management strategy by Francesco Cirillo. Work without stopping for 25 minutes, then take a five minute break. Use a timer to keep track of the segments. It's like interval training for focus.

Switch between the Scribe and the Muse by
shifting from focused attention to open
attention.

Build open attention into the schedule. If you owe someone a blog post, don't wait until the day it's due to think about it. You can probably finish it faster and with less stress if you start researching and considering the topic as early as possible. Let it sit for a day or two while you ponder your approach during periods of open attention.

I like to think of this as creative procrastination. You delay the first draft without feeling guilty, but you start thinking early, giving the brain time to work on a strategy as you do other things.

Find the right environment for focus. Some people can only concentrate in total silence. Others prefer the buzz of conversation or the hiss of espresso machines. Figure out the

environment that works for you, and retreat to it when the work requires focused attention.

Be careful about what you bring with you. Even when you intend to focus, technology can sabotage your efforts. A cell phone next to you on the table can grab your attention with notifications of emails or texts. Facebook on an open browser tab can steal your focus when the Scribe is at a loss for words.

Technology is most tempting when the work is difficult. If you need to focus, put these distractions aside.

When you get stuck, take a break for the Muse. The answer to a problem often appears when you stop laboring to find it. The next time you're stuck, think explicitly about the problem you want to solve to prime your thought processes, then walk away. Find your favorite method for entering a state of open attention.

If it's late, get a good night's sleep. The brain connects and processes materials from the day during the Rapid Eye Movement (REM) phase of sleep. If you're commuting to work, turn off the radio or podcast and let your mind wander. (If you're driving, pay attention to the road, of course!) Even if an answer doesn't strike you immediately, it may arrive when you next sit down to work on the problem.

Invite the mind to wander. Inviting the Muse may be as simple as taking a walk outdoors, gardening, bathing, or exercising.

For Madeleine L'Engle, author of the beloved children's book *A Wrinkle in Time*, playing piano was the path to open attention. In an interview with famed psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, she revealed the role of music in her

personal process. “If I’m stuck in writing, if I can I sit down and play the piano. What it does is break the barrier that comes between the conscious and the subconscious mind.”²

Navigate around the trials of daily life; let your mind wander to unresolved issues while waiting in line for coffee or sitting on an airplane. Look for opportunities to give the Scribe a break, inviting inspiration, intuition, and roaming connections. As Daniel Goleman puts it: “A mind adrift lets your creative juices flow.”

Cultivate slices of solitude. The mind wanders most freely when you are not engaging actively with others, during periods of solitude.

If you live in a city, people are everywhere. But you can often find mental solitude in a crowd. Try sitting alone in a coffee shop, or walking down a city street.

Virtual companions can interrupt your solitude as well. Even when you don’t see them, other people are with you, courtesy of your cell phone. Rather than being alone with our thoughts, we often reach for those tempting devices and their promise of instant companionship and inclusion. Because we are social animals, talking or texting with others absorbs our attention, and prevents the kind of mind drifting that lets the Muse work.

MIT Professor Sherry Turkle has studied the effects of our connected culture on empathy, conversation, and solitude, and summarizes her findings in the books *Alone Together* and *Reclaiming Conversation*. She claims that digital devices are eroding our tolerance for solitude. “These days, we may mistake time on the net for solitude. It isn’t. In fact,

solitude is challenged by our habit of turning to our screens rather than inward.”³

For proof of this, look no further than the research study from 2014 in which study participants preferred to shock themselves rather than sitting quietly and thinking.⁴ Solitude is becoming that unnatural.

Put the cell phone in a different room, turn off chiming notifications, and distance yourself from the online world when you want to experience open attention.

Resources

In *Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence*, Daniel Goleman has assembled a terrific breadth and depth of research on the topic of attention, and presents it all in an inspiring and accessible way.

Daniel Levitin's book *The Organized Mind* discusses the challenges of managing our attention in an information-dense world.

For insight on the impact of modern technology on solitude, and how to counteract it, read Sherry Turkle's excellent book *Reclaiming Conversation*.

¹ Daniel Goleman, *Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 42.

² Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1996), 253.

³ Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015), 61.

⁴ I first heard Sherry Turkle speak about this study at the B2B Marketing Forum in 2015. The research can be found in Timothy Wilson et al., “Just Think: The Challenges of the Disengaged Mind,” *Science* 345, no. 6192 (2014): 75–77.