



Writer's Camp



Wrestling with the Muse: The Journey of Learning to Write

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Let me share 7 hints from my writing journey.

Generally when $n = 1$ the research is considered to be neither valid nor reliable. But as my own n , I have learned some things along the journey from “I can’t” to “I can’t not” in writing that might be useful to others. It is a journey, and it does have starting blocks. Here are 7 hints that have helped me in my writing journey.

Escape from “Writing as a Struggle”

I struggled with writing in college composition classes. I am guessing it was in part because it required writing on topics in which I had no interest whatsoever. After college I hired a retired English teacher to read and mark a couple of my essays, which she basically trashed. I continued to struggle as I went into my university nursing program. I had gone to a diploma program in the days when there was no sensible means of following on to a degree or two in nursing. In my physiology class I became intrigued

by the notion that one body part (the great toe) could reveal a world of information about the total body and, with that, I was off and running. In 1974, in its less staid days, the *American Journal of Nursing* published my article as the cover-featured article “Behold the Great Right Toe.”¹ The turning point here was that I had found my own voice and that it was a topic that interested me. Thereafter, I would combine humor or inane connections and academic scholarship in much of what I wrote.

Do Not Hate Your Topic

As I eventually moved into a doctoral (PhD) program in Social Ethics, I learned several important things in the process of writing my dissertation. First, I wrote on what interested me (nursing ethics) although my advisor was only interested in medicocentric bioethics. So, #1, write on what you have a passion for—you do not want to be bored to tears or hate working on your dissertation. Second, no one in the bioethics world was interested in the topic of nursing ethics. I had been extremely well-educated in the new (emerging) field of bioethics, which nursing was bear-hugging, even though those in bioethics largely denied the existence of and had no regard for nurses or nursing. It was like the nursing discipline was begging for bioethics to “Please love me!” Eventually, the history and development of nursing ethics prior to the existence of bioethics would become my stock in trade. Thus #2, do not let the profession’s disinterest in your topic deter you from what captivates you. It might even catch on eventually. Or not.

Understand Your Circadian Rhythm of Writing and Its Neuroses

I found that I needed to write in the evenings, and that everything I wrote in the morning was rubbish. And I found that I ate Cheetos (sorry keyboard) and drank Diet Coke, had the TV on in one room, and the radio in another (to create a din) when I wrote. So, #3, take time to discover and understand your “circadian rhythm of writing,” that is, the time to write that is best for you, when your brain is its clearest and most incisive, when the information has steeped long enough to enable writing, and what neurotic props you need in order to write. If you need Cheetos, and a pencil eraser to chew on, and banjo music to write, this is no time to undertake self-therapy; live into your idiosyncrasies and nurture them.

Steady Drip or Bolus Writer?

When writing my dissertation, all 420 pages on the development of the ANA *Code of Ethics* and the interaction of society, nursing, and the Code (no wonder my dissertation advisor could have cared less), I learned that I am a “bolus writer,” not an IV “steady drip writer.” Just like writing in the morning, my attempts at steady drip writing, 30 or 60 minutes a day, were rubbish. Until I realized that I was a bolus writer, I would beat myself up for procrastinating. So, #4, take time to figure out not just the time of day you write and the props you need, but also whether you are a bolus writer or steady drip writer. Don’t beat yourself up if you don’t do it like other folk. It is important to spend a couple or several weeks discerning the what, how, when of your writing.

Your Writing Process and Some Hazards

Another thing that I learned is that I compose in my head, at least the thesis statement and the first paragraph, verbatim, both of which guide the entire manuscript, no matter the length. I would then compose successive pages in my head. What this meant was that when I sat down to write, it came out complete, first draft as final draft, all at once, having been re-worked repeatedly in my mind. All that remained was a smidge of wordsmithing, checking punctuation, looking for orthographic errors, and the like. So, #6, discover how the words eventually appear on your screen—whether in your head first, on a note pad, from an outline, or completely composed at the computer—this is your writing process. About 25% of writers write in their head, full sentences, even paragraphs and pages; most compose at the computer. The hazard of writing in your head, that is, actual words, sentences, paragraphs, and pages, is that others think “you write fast” when in fact you don’t; it sits in your brain for days, gets edited as it simmers, for weeks or even months before you set it to pen. It just looks fast as it spills out onto the screen so rapidly. However, to some degree, and to be more accurate, the more experienced you become the faster writing might actually become.

Writer’s Block or Simmer before Serving?

There are times when I don’t write. Some have called it “writer’s block.” I don’t tend to think that writer’s block is real. (Okay, it is for some.) I have come to believe that it is, instead, a matter of your brain’s readiness to write. It is not unlike a really great spaghetti sauce. The longer it simmers the better it gets and it is not its best and ready to eat until the simmering time is done, the flavors married, and the thickness is just right. So, #7, if you sit down to write, and can’t, don’t dismiss it as writer’s block. Instead look at whether your brain has all the data it needs to write, or whether there are gaps or connections that need to be made first, and go back to the data or to additional research. If you write in your head, there is another hazard here—your brain will noodle on gaps and connections while you try to sleep; good luck with trying to turn out the synaptic lights.

Conclusion

These are 7 of the first and most basic lessons I learned in beginning the movement from “Ugh, Do I have to? I don’t want to write; I hate to write,” eventually to “I must write; I cannot not write; I love to write.” Later lessons are for another day. I hope these little learnings are useful to you.

Reference

1. Fowler MD. Behold the great right toe. *American Journal of Nursing*. 1974;74(10):1817-1819. doi:10.1097/00000446-197410000-00022

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PEGGY L CHINN

July 31, 2025 at 11:02 am | **Edit**

What great advice!! I particularly like “Do not hate your topic!” This is the main problem, I think, with how writing assignments in courses actually teach students to hate writing! Too often we do not help them even know what topics they actually love, and encourage them to write on those topics instead of the ones we think are important! Your experience related to bioethics is a great example, and illustrates how your professors did not even know that the topic you wanted to write about existed! But you did know – and now your voice has broken through to give all of us a reason to love nursing ethics!

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— Tony Robbins

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