



HOW TO WRITE WITHOUT FEAR

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INTRODUCTION

Why does writing scare us?

If you've ever had to sit down to write anything, you know writing is hard. Everybody from Fiverr freelancers to the founders of Grammarly has come up with a way to alleviate or at least profit from this problem. If you're reading this eBook, though, you're likely not looking for help with writing mechanics. You're likely wanting to know how good writing works, why the process is so overwhelming, and perhaps how you can learn to overcome that fear. If so, we're glad. That's the stuff we're interested in, too.

Whether you're a changemaker who wants to impart your vision, a business owner who wants to engage customers, a creative who wants to write an essay, or a thinker who wants to put words to your rich inner world, this eBook is designed to help.

Keith Hjortshoj of Cornell University writes about his work with university students experiencing writer's block. His experiences reveal that most writing blocks are far from permanent. One student might feel comfortable writing a biology lab report, but apprehensive about writing a book report. Another might confidently tackle a paper about the sociology of gender, but delete and start over twenty times when composing an email to a cute classmate to suggest a coffee date. Writing overwhelm is situational.

Most of us seek a "flow" state when we write and get discouraged when we don't reach it. What this means is we lose out on opportunities to grow. "Flow" is both a possibility and a myth because writing will always come with obstacles. Just because we can't get into flow every time we sit down to write, doesn't mean we never will, or that we're bad writers. Thomas Mann published more than fifty literary works in his career. Did a flow state inspire each one? Unlikely, considering Mann transitioned to new kinds of writing constantly. He wrote plays, essays, novels, speeches, novellas, pamphlets, and memoirs. In fact, Mann is famously quoted to have observed, "A writer is someone for whom writing is harder than it is for other people." We often face obstacles when we're transitioning to new writing roles or to new kinds of writing. The struggle is normal. It means we're learning.

To beat writing overwhelm takes communal effort, though. If you want to get out of a rut with something you're writing, then get constructive feedback from supportive people. Inviting others into the process often pulls us out of the vicious cycle of overwhelm, allowing us to think clearly. As such, those who are brave enough to seek constructive feedback have fewer stressful, daunting experiences with writing.

Self-mentoring is a powerful way to be able to write just about anything. It teaches us how to be good stewards of our creativity, strengthens our communication, and gives us the guts to share our ideas with the world.

Writing is no longer a discipline only for professional writers. The rest of the world is beginning to understand that entire cultures are being shaped by individuals who put their ideas to words and share them. Business owners are starting to wonder how they can incorporate more written content into their communication methodology. And they will all benefit from doing so.

Thankfully, finding a writing process that works for us is a skill we can all learn. This eBook introduces those who want to de-stress the writing process to the most fundamental principles of working through imposter syndrome, fear, and other writing blocks.

Our hope, then, is you better connect with your voice and mission, and the good things you're trying to bring into the world will flourish as you find new and authentic ways to tell about them.

PART ONE

Three unnerving writing metaphors

GIVING BIRTH

“If thinking is incubation, then writing is birth.”

As a person who has had two children, I (Rebecca) intimately understand that a pregnancy cannot be sustained indefinitely. At some point, I can neither contain nor sustain my child alone; they must begin their dance with the outside world. The liminal state of gestation in its ever-evolving fleetingness is, nevertheless, crucial to both parent and child.

When we commit acts of creation, we give over a part of ourselves to the process. We must nourish what grows within us, while not neglecting what sustains us.

The space between the conception and the birthing of our new understanding is a liminal time of witnessing the development of an idea that isn't quite ready for expression.

It is dependent on us sheltering it, going gently with ourselves as we expand and transform to make room for ideas that have never been expressed in exactly this form before to come into the world bearing the unique mark of our DNA.

JOINING THE DANCE

Quiet reflection is vital to integrating wisdom. So much of this work can only be done in silence, embracing the honesty of our shadows and integrating their power to sustain us on the adventures that come in the wilderness. Attending to the stories of others and our own selves offers a depth of understanding that is impossible to create on highways and busy paths.

Sometimes, though, we begin to identify only with that listening, learning role.

Rather than rooting and blooming where the wind takes us, it can seem easier to take a step back and observe just one more time before we make a comment or join a discussion, read just one more book or article before we put our own thoughts to paper, share just one more meme or post before we add our own take.

We insulate ourselves from connection for the sake of correctness.

In the dance of communication, we make ourselves wallflowers instead, enjoying the music and observing others' interactions. The problem is, the longer we stand along the wall subtly tapping our toes, the more high-stakes getting out on the dance floor feels. Because we are not already in the mix, we imagine that we are uniquely unworthy of acceptance.

But what if that is only baggage from the past? What if impostor syndrome arises not from a feeling of incomplete knowledge or skill but from a feeling of incomplete belonging? And what if now is the time to create belonging by inviting ourselves back in?

What if we're dimming our light, fearing it's unwanted by the very people who would love to know they're not alone peering into the dark?

What if that feeling of impostorship is holding us back from making the transformative connections we're all wishing for, the ones that make big changes possible together?

Belonging involves not only seeing but being seen. And being seen feels risky when we feel alone. But it doesn't have to be that way. Sometimes, we're incredibly fortunate to be welcomed into a healthy community, replete with leaders who show care and insight and have a place ready for us at the table. But sometimes we have to build our own.

BRAVING THE WILDERNESS ALONE

Our contention is that listeners make the best leaders because they are already leading themselves. Writing through the wilderness is about being willing to go off-trail into the places that need to be explored in order to embrace the journey life sends us on. But where we must make our own trail, we need to be our own guides. And to do this, we need to first embody self-mentorship.

PART TWO

The questions I ask to overcome fear

In our writing course, [Writing Through The Wilderness](#), we have an exercise that focuses on exploring our relationship to not only received feedback but anticipated feedback. One of the biggest blocks in taking a leap forward is the stories we tell ourselves.

I'd like to invite you to test out a couple of different scenarios. In the course, we'd take about a minute to reflect on each scenario individually, write down some thoughts privately, and then share what came up together as individuals felt comfortable. I'd like to suggest that you take the time to write (on paper or typed up on your phone or computer) your responses to the following scenarios as you read them so that you can refer to the first two in the third. If you are reading this book alone and have a trusted person with whom you could share your reflections, you might find that exchange gives you new perspectives as well.

Scenario 1: You are writing about a topic you care about. You expect your audience to be critical or dismissive.

1. How does this impact the amount of effort you put in?
2. How do you account for their anticipated negative feedback in the writing product itself or in your writing process?
3. How do you feel when you think about writing and self-editing this piece?

Scenario 2: You are writing about a topic you care about. You expect your audience to be enthusiastic and collaborative.

1. How does this impact the amount of effort you put in?
2. How do you account for their anticipated positive feedback in the writing product itself or in your writing process?
3. How do you feel when you think about writing and self-editing this piece?

Scenario 3: You are writing about a topic you care about but you do not have an audience in mind yet. You are your only audience so far.

1. How do you feel when you think about writing and self-editing this piece?
2. Do those feelings more closely resemble your responses to Scenario 1 or Scenario 2?

3. What overlaps from each and what is new?

Oftentimes, when we are trying new things, we are haunted by the ghosts of past feedback. But we are our own first audience. How we treat our own efforts matters.

Ira Glass has a fantastic quote in which he reminds young creators that the feeling of frustration that they experience when they first begin to hone their craft is not despite their talent, but because of it. Being able to see the difference between our efforts and our results is the surest sign that we have taste and potential, exactly the kind of thing a good mentor would nurture.

PART THREE

Practicing self-mentorship

To practice self-mentorship while writing, we must take care of our needs as writers as we would someone we were taking under our wing. Those needs range from sufficient understanding of the content of the piece to effective understanding of the desired outcomes of the project and social connection to the value and meaning of the work, both personally and in connection with others. So when we hit a snag in our writing process, it can be helpful to check if our basic writing needs are being met.

Specifically, we can ask ourselves:

- 1. Have I researched, received, or reflected to gather all the information I need to clearly understand the topic and purpose of this project?**
- 2. Have I created manageable goals, scope, and action steps?**
- 3. Have I found the values that drive this piece and the people with whom I can share my in-process writing and concerns?**

For instance, if I find that I am unable to make a clear connection between my original idea and my conclusion, perhaps I need to reflect or research more.

If I am attempting to collaborate with someone else or write up something on someone else's behalf, have they provided all the relevant information and expectations, or do I need to ask for further clarification?

If I am writing a multipart document, have I crafted an outline that allows me to effectively assign ideas to their appropriate sections? Am I using an effective method to manage drafts and to share documents with collaborators?

If I am hitting a wall, are there other people who are (or are willing to be) invested in this project with me to provide perspective?

If I am struggling to publish, which of my values support my goals, and are there any I need to address before pushing on?

If we have picked up negative or even punitive messages about writing, we may struggle to offer ourselves these basic courtesies, but we can choose differently going forward.

CONCLUSION

Taking this brave approach to ourselves gives us a resilient foundation to face the world. Our course takes it even further: how do we evaluate our work effectively and actually put ourselves out there with courage?

If this framework appeals to you, we hope to see you at the next live workshop.



content that delivers

Have something to say but feel overwhelmed by how to say it? It's likely because you lack the right tools to navigate the writing process.

The Writing Through the Wilderness workshop is designed to offer you the tools you need to pathfind your own writing process. In the three sessions you'll spend with Rebecca Bruning, Amy Francis, and an intimate cohort of fellow creators, you'll learn the tools you need to trust yourself in uncharted creative terrain, navigate around your writer's block, and collaborate in a supportive community.

Sign up for a workshop amyhopefrancis.com

