

# *Get Black on White*

**Thirty Days to Productivity and Confidence for Writers**



**by Jacqui Lofthouse**

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# INTRODUCTION:

## About this programme

Way back in 1994, I was offered a job at City University, teaching Creative Writing. Naturally, in preparation, I spent a lot of time considering how I would teach this still controversial subject. I expected that most of my students would be seeking advice on writing techniques, such as characterisation, plotting, narrative voice and pace. Yet during the course of the year that followed, I discovered that whilst these subjects were indeed vital to the students, most of them had a purpose that went way beyond learning the nuts and bolts of writing. They came because coming to class gave them motivation to write. Many of them had been writing for several years, yet still ‘getting stuck’ was a key issue. I soon discovered that the most common ‘problem’ faced by writers was a simple one: how to get the words on the page in the first place.

Perhaps I should have known this. But at the time I was in a state of euphoria. I had just completed my MA in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia and shortly afterwards had been fortunate enough to get an agent and a publication deal with Penguin for my first novel “The Temple of Hymen”. I was one of the lucky ones and I knew it. I had never expected to find myself in that place so soon and I was still pricking myself and wondering quite how it had

happened. On the MA programme, I'd had a lot of support from tutors, including the late Sir Malcolm Bradbury and Rose Tremain, and also from my fellow students. I had wanted to take my writing seriously for so long, that once I was on the course, motivation hadn't been a problem. It was only in later years that I understood that writing does not always come so easily.

Since then, despite the publication of three novels, I have had my fair share of 'Writer's Block'. I am not a fast writer. I have written 5 novels over 20 years. But still, I continue. However slowly it comes, I just keep writing. And I've made it my mission to understand what motivates writers, what is the source of our creativity and what gets in the way of it.

There are many reasons why writers become blocked. It may not be a permanent state of affairs. Indeed, many writers may not be 'blocked' at all. They may simply be, in actor-speak, 'resting'. Conversely, they may be writing, but at a pace that a snail might laugh at.

So many writers struggle with their art. We all recognise the stereotype of the pained artist. I wrote about such an artist in my second novel 'Bluethroat Morning' (Bloomsbury 2000) and spent many hours researching the alleged relationship between creativity and despair. And I'd been there. Many times.

It seems odd, now, to remember the angst I used to suffer in relation to my writing: all those demons that plagued me; how every little setback seemed to hurt and how the opinion of the world at large seemed to really matter. I took reviews seriously. I took sales figures seriously. I took rejection seriously. And I spent far too much time on my own.

Eventually I realised that 'enough was enough'. I gained perspective. I began to understand that 'a writing life' has highs and lows. 'Bluethroat Morning' was excellently reviewed in the UK

press and became a best-seller in the Netherlands, selling 100,000 copies. Yet my third novel did not secure a UK publication deal. It was, however, successfully published by my wonderful Dutch publisher. Should I celebrate or despair?

Thankfully, by that stage, I had discovered coaching and I had begun my studies at CoachU. Coaching turned my attitude around. Whilst I was determined not to turn into some clap-happy evangelist for the coaching movement – indeed whilst I was determined to retain a healthy dose of my British cynicism and humour – I could not deny that the changes in my own attitude towards my work went deep. And they have been lasting changes. Now I no longer judge my work by the opinions of others. I no longer rely on writing for my income. I spend less time alone. But still, the quality of my writing work REALLY matters to me. I still want to write great literature. But I don't judge my self on my writing. And at the time of writing this updated introduction, I am enormously aware of the impact of ePublishing on the writing world. Those old fears of 'will anyone ever publish my work?' seem less relevant now in a 21st century environment that allows us to take our publishing future into our own hands.

But let's return, for a moment, to the writing process – and how my attitude to that has changed. One of my favourite quotations about writing comes from Anne Tyler, in her essay, 'Still Just Writing':

**“After spring vacation the children went back to school, but the dog got worms. It was a little complicated at the vet's and I lost a day. By then it was Thursday; Friday is the only day I can buy the groceries, pick up new cedar chips for the gerbils, scrub the bathrooms. I waited till Monday. Still, that left me four good weeks in April to block out the novel.”**

What I love about Tyler's essay is the way in which she how, despite the distractions, she just

keeps at it. That essay, for me, defines the idea of ‘A Writing Life’.

Yet I understand, also, that achieving continuity is not always easy: especially when we doubt ourselves. Most creative people find it easier to forget what they have already achieved. They find it easy to focus on the moment of doubt, to dwell in fear and lack of confidence in their work.

For this reason, I decided to write this programme, to support others who want to kick ‘Writer’s Block’ once and for all. I want to reveal what is stopping so many writers from achieving their own enormous potential. In my years as a writer, a teacher of creative writing and a coach, I have studied what makes writers productive and what keeps them motivated. In this programme I will set down what I have learned.

At the time of updating this introduction, I have just delivered my fourth novel to my publishers (I mentioned five novels earlier, but the first, completed in 1993 is in a box in the attic!). My latest novel has been edited three times and has been immensely time-consuming. Still, over the years I have ‘just kept writing’. Even slow writers, who keep at it, produce books.

When I first wrote this e-book however, I was determined to prove that a first draft of a book can be written in a very short space of time. I wrote the first draft of this book in 30 days, by posting 1000 words a day on my blog. I wanted to prove that anyone can write 30,000 words in 30 days: even me.

The purpose of this e-book is to enable you to overcome Writer’s Block once and for all and to support you as you move towards being more productive and confident in your work. When I first launched this e-book, I intended it as a 30 Day Writing Programme which would encourage people to write 30,000 words in 30 days (or 100 pages of a standard manuscript). Yet today, my

views on the wisdom of rushing to complete such a writing marathon, have changed. I've never written a NaNoWriMo novel and in truth I have no intention of doing so. (Though one of my clients, Julia Crouch, worked with me to turn her NaNoWriMo novel into the brilliant 'Cuckoo' recently published by Headline). I prefer to see this book as a manual that will challenge your attitudes to your writing life, imbue you with confidence and make you productive in the long-term.

I encourage you to read a chapter each day and to begin each day with the intention to write. The daily exercises are optional. You will benefit however if you put aside thirty minutes to an hour for writing each day. If you miss a day, don't worry. Simply return to the next chapter as soon as you can. This is not Boot Camp. I want you to be productive in the long term and I want your writing life to be sustainable.

I am frequently overwhelmed with what happens when writers lose self-doubt and decide to put procrastination behind them. I have been privileged to witness writers who felt they had no idea where to begin, suddenly discovering their own voices and blossoming as creative artists.

In 'Get Black on White' my original aim was always to distil all I have learnt in my years as a professional novelist, creative writing teacher and coach. If you follow this programme, you will emerge from the 30 days as a different kind of creative artist. Overcoming 'Writer's Block' is only the first part of this programme. I hope you will also experience the following benefits:

- ★ **You will understand your own creative processes**
- ★ **You will know how to get writing, even when you don't feel like it**
- ★ **You will gain self-confidence as a writer**
- ★ **You will have established your own voice**
- ★ **You will be passionate about your writing and enjoy the process**
- ★ **You will have experienced the discipline and enjoyment of working with a writing coach**
- ★ **If you do decide to follow the daily exercises, you will have written 30,000 words of your book – a 100 page manuscript**

As I mentioned earlier, every day, on this programme, there is a writing exercise. If you follow the exercises, at the end of the 30 days, you will have a manuscript of 30,000 words. Days 1-10 are about conquering self-doubt and procrastination. Days 11-20 lay the foundations for a writing life. Days 21-30 enable you to set yourself up for writing success.

I look forward to hearing how this book affects your writing life.

# Part One

## **Days 1-10: Conquering self-doubt and procrastination**

- ★ Day One: There is no monopoly on creativity
- ★ Day Two: Why you must keep writing time sacred
- ★ Day Three: Understanding the 'plot and structure' myth
- ★ Day Four: Why free-write?
- ★ Day Five: What limits do you set upon yourself?
- ★ Day Six: Getting it wrong
- ★ Day Seven: Think Big
- ★ Day Eight: Ten Notes on writing fiction
- ★ Day Nine: Examine the blocks
- ★ Day Ten: What happens if you get behind?

**In addition, if you follow every writing exercise, by the end of Part One, you will have written 10,000 words.**

# Day One: 'There is no monopoly on creativity'

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"There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening, that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and will be lost"

- **Martha Graham**

A belief in the unique creative energy of every individual is key to my work. Yet the phrase 'we are all creative' has become something of a cliché. The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'creative' as: "involving the use of the imagination or original ideas in order to create something". 'Well yes,' you might say, 'we can all do that – but that doesn't mean that my creation has any value – how can I tell whether what I'm writing is any good?'

I spend a lot of time around writers. And I've experienced first-hand the vagaries of the publishing world. What I've learned is this: most writers view the publishing world as harsh, competitive and exclusive. Even seasoned writers who have earned large advances will often speak of feelings of powerlessness and lack of control in their relationship with a publisher. Blogs such as that of the originally anonymous, 'Amanda Mann' bear out this tale. In her 'Confessions of an Author' (<http://fessingauthor.blogspot.com>) Amanda (now revealed as Stephanie Zia of 'Blackbirdebooks' (<http://www.blackbirdebooks.com>)) chronicles the trials and tribulations of being, as she calls it a 'D-list' author. It ain't easy.

Yet as writers, we often get caught up in the idea of others judging our work, whether those 'others' be publishers, reviewers or general readers. We give our power away because we invest so much importance in the opinions of other people. Indeed, Stephanie's own journey from mid-list author to ebook publisher reveals what happens when we take that power back again.

A central message of my 30 day programme is that the moment we allow our fear of the value judgements of others to affect our work, we are lost as writers. My core belief is that it is our duty as writers to reclaim our own self-worth as creative individuals. This means that we write to please ourselves. We find passion in the work itself.

Let me be clear about this. I am not saying that we can write any old rubbish and call it 'literature', then go on to rail about the unfairness of the many publishers who won't accept it. Neither am I saying that we are all misunderstood literary geniuses. To be frank – I know good writing when I see it. However, we all have a right to aspire to writing wonderful work, to learn our craft, to become all that we can be as writers. And we all have a unique, individual voice, that, when combined with an understanding of our craft, can grow into something remarkable. Indeed, I will go so far as to say it is our duty as writers to aspire to do the best work that we believe ourselves capable of – and to always aspire to do better.

What I'm arguing for here is a separation between our work and the value that others place upon it. Essentially, I believe that you, as a writer, have a voice of your own, waiting to be revealed, to be nurtured and to blossom. I particularly like a description by Naomi Wolf in her book based on conversations with her father, 'The Treehouse'. In the chapter entitled "Your Only Wage will be Joy", she writes:

**“My father has written twenty books. Some have done well; others were ignored. Critics liked some and detested others. Sometimes it was hard for him to find a publisher. His method is to focus on the creation, ignore the reception, and get on to the next page. He has no regrets and he keeps working.”**

In 2004, when I first launched my coaching business, I wrote an essay called ‘Validating our Creativity’. In that essay, I argued for a new definition of ‘success’:

**“ I am beginning to understand that ‘success’ as a writer is not always about talent or hard work. It is about, most of all, self-belief, a self-belief that is rock solid, that can face rejection head-on, because our self-definition as a creative artist runs deep, to our core and absolutely cannot be shaken. It is that self-definition that makes us artists, that gives us the right to write, to paint, to compose, to sculpt, to act. Without it, there is no persistence. Without it, we are shaken by every little criticism, every rejection, every damning word that ever fell from the mouth of a frustrated creative, or a short-sighted publisher or a parent who never believed the arts worth studying.”**

My central message for you on this, the first day of ‘The Writing Coach’ programme is this: Every word you write is valid. Every word you write is part of the process. If you do not allow yourself to write because you fear failure, then your unique creative contribution to the world will be stifled before it is born. My request for you today is that you allow yourself to write. And allow yourself to write badly. What matters is not the end product, but the process.

# Exercise One – Day One

(1000 words)

**I will use these figures as a cumulative number throughout the ebook for those undertaking the 30,000 word challenge. However, if you prefer simply to commit to the process of writing, please don't worry about a word count.**

Choose a journal that you will use throughout 'The Writing Coach' programme. Even if you choose to do some of the exercises directly onto your computer screen, a handsome journal will be vital to you as you embark on this journey. Set aside an hour, during which you will allow yourself to write freely. The rule is that you allow your pen or your fingers on the keyboard to keep moving. You are not to go back and revise your words. I want you to keep writing, no matter what comes out.

If you are already involved in a writing project, simply write the next chapter or scene, without self-censorship. If you are beginning a new project, allow yourself to write freely, beginning with these simple words: **'The book I am about to write will be...'**

I want you to explore your subject. What makes you passionate about it? What flashes of inspiration are already present? What do you know about this story/idea already? What is the theme? What you write here is highly unlikely to end up in your final book, but you have to start somewhere. Remember, it is important that you keep writing, even if you're just writing 'I can't think of anything to write'. Get it down.

Once the hour is up, stop writing. Put the work aside. Move away from your desk and do something else: go for a swim; feed the cat; paint the town red. Don't read the work through yet. Remember, in this game, judgement and self-doubt are dirty words.

## Day Two – 'Why you must keep writing–time sacred'

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“I meant to write about death, only life came breaking in as usual.”

- Virginia Woolf, Diary 17th  
February 1922

In my experience, ‘life’ often gets in the way of writing. The trouble with writing is that it always seems expendable. No matter how important we profess it to be, we can always find something else to be doing. Often, anything seems easier than sitting down at the screen and placing a single word on a page.

Of course, we like to mythologize all the ‘greats’ who had such wonderful writing routines. Take Hemingway, for example:

**“I start in at seven in the morning and I always quit when I'm going good, so that I'll be able to pick right up again the next day.”**

It's possible you've even experienced this kind of motivation yourself? But somehow it didn't last for long. You kept it going for a week, but then another few weeks passed by and you realised that ‘things’ happened and got in the way. If you're Anne Tyler, it was that ‘the dog got worms’ or you had to ‘pick up new cedar chips for the gerbils’.

Let me list a few of my own most recent fabulous excuses for not writing:

- ★ I have to prepare a writing class
- ★ I have a website to design
- ★ I only have an hour, so there won't be time to get into it
- ★ My paperwork is in a mess and I have a bill to pay
- ★ My e-mail in-box is over-flowing
- ★ The house is a tip and we have visitors this evening
- ★ I'll do it tomorrow

Yeah, right.

I bet you have your own list, just like that one. In fact, I imagine it's bothering you so much right now that it might be just as well for you to stop reading for a moment and write your list. I mean it, do it – I'll wait for you.

Good. How does that feel? Maybe you feel a touch more organised? But now you're more convinced than ever that the writing just isn't going to happen today? Tomorrow, you'll be quite clear and you can get started, OK?

Wrong. I'll cut to the chase. There will always be a million things you could be doing instead of writing. True, there are some days when life is just so damn overwhelming and busy that there

isn't a shred of time left. (I know about days like that; it's gone midnight as I write.)

So what's the solution? Is it to sit up till the early hours every morning? I hope not. But for the first 30 days on this programme, I want you to find that writing hour each day no matter how you manage it. This is my commitment to you – as I write this book in 30 days - and yours to me.

The first rule of “The Writing Coach” is this:

**“Writing Time is Sacred. No Excuses.”**

What do I mean? I mean that for the next 30 days you commit to finding some time each day to write. If you only have half an hour or an hour, you'll probably choose to ‘free write’ your way through this programme. If you have longer, you can slow down.

For now, all you need to know is that this will be your sacred time. Longer term, you need to find a plan that works for you – whether it be that you write only on Thursdays from 9am – 4am; or on Tuesday evenings and Saturday mornings for 3 hours; or once a week in a café on a Monday from 10am-noon whilst your child is in the crèche. The reason I'm being so specific is that it is this precision that makes the writing time sacred. You need to make a ritual or a routine of it – one that suits you and that you know you will be able to keep.

**I AM AWARE THAT THERE IS NOTHING REVOLUTIONARY ABOUT THIS IDEA.**

However, there is a difference between the idea of a writing routine and taking action to make that routine a reality.

Let me tell you how it used to work for me.

There was a time when I was immensely motivated. I had the time and the freedom to sit down every morning and write: I'll call it 'doing a Hemingway'. I had just finished studying for my MA in Creative Writing; I had a commission to complete my novel 'The Temple of Hymen' from Penguin books. Yes, it was kind of motivating.

But things changed. I had my first child. I didn't have a commission for the second novel. Still I kept at it: 'clatter, clatter' as one of my clients likes to say. After that, I got busier still and life got more distracting. By the time I'd finished my third novel, writing wasn't so easy. There was a second child, a passion for coaching, my desire to teach and build a business...

I began to sketch out time in my calendar to write. I used to colour these sections purple and on the pages I'd write 'Sacred Writing Time'. Only it wasn't so easy as that. If somebody asked me out for coffee, I'd think 'oh, I can just shift my writing time.' But did I honour that? Don't flatter me. The truth is, I stopped writing altogether.

Yet eventually, I came to realise that if I didn't make writing a priority in my life again, then pretty soon I wouldn't be able to call myself a writer any more. "Action is eloquence" as the Bard wrote. I got wise. Now I tell people when my writing time is and I arrange my life around it. I turn down coffee dates and remember not to book in clients. And of course, I switch off the internet.

It's very simple.

Book in a precise date and time for your writing. Show up at the page. Tell everyone and everything else to go to hell.

## A Note about the Daily Exercises

It's time to plan your 30 Day Writing Schedule. If you want to complete the 30,000 word challenge, you will need one hour per day, at a time when you are sure you won't be interrupted. If you are simply looking to gain momentum in your writing, you can opt for a shorter period of time, so long as you commit to spending a little time with your writing each day.

Put your writing time in your diary as 'Sacred Writing Time'. Ask a friend/loved one/coach to hold you to your writing commitment. Now would be a good time to think about a longer-term programme too: to begin to map out your future commitment.

When the allotted hour arrives, you have only one duty: to show up at the page.

On every day of this programme, you will have two options. You may use your writing time to continue writing your work-in-progress. This is Option 1, which is particularly suitable for those already involved in a writing project. If this is the case for you, all you need do is show up and get writing. My main role is to ensure that you've picked up your pen.

Or, if you are new to writing or you are embarking on a new project, you may choose to use one of my two daily exercises for inspiration (Option 2). Sometimes, I will provide one exercise for those writing fiction and one for those writing non-fiction. At other times there will be only one daily exercise as many are applicable to all.

Those who generally choose Option 1 may find that there is something to gain from experimenting with Option 2 occasionally. A writing exercise can take your work in a totally

unexpected but remarkable new direction.

It is possible that when you follow this programme, you may end up with a file of ‘fragments’. This is just fine as later you can edit the fragments and explore how they can fit together as a rough first draft. Alternatively you may write a continuous manuscript. The choice is yours. Use the exercises as stimulation, but do not obey them blindly if your gut instinct is taking you in a different direction. The most important thing is that you write every day.

## **Exercise Two – Day Two**

**(2000 words)**

Your task today is to dive into writing what might be a first chapter of your book. Remember that word: ‘might’. You are free to write nonsense or lies. In fact, the most important rule of this exercise is that the first sentence you write must be unoriginal, boring and not at all arresting. Did you read that right? Yes. I just took some pressure off you. I’m so sweet. I’ll do it again. Whatever you write today will not actually be your first chapter. It’s just a stab in the dark. Aren’t I a darling?

If you go into a clothes shop and try on a pair of jeans, the first pair you try on is unlikely to fit. But you’re still going to try them on, aren’t you? Because you have to get an idea of what doesn’t work before you can find out what does.

## Day Three – ‘Understanding the ‘plot and structure’ myth’

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“I used to consider this lack of imagination a great drawback, because I wouldn’t be able to think of plots that would hold the reader. I worried over ‘plot’ as if every book had to be a detective story, full of twists and turns and with no loose ends. I have heard other people who are beginning to write agonise over the same imaginary difficulty.”

- Hilary Mantel

Most books about writing are packed with advice about plotting and structuring your work. It’s not surprising. A good plot is generally a central component of successful fiction. A non-fiction work needs a strong structure if it is to hold our attention.

However, the myths surrounding plotting and structuring our work are responsible for stifling the creativity of many a potentially remarkable author.

One of the most common statements I hear as a teacher of creative writing is this: “I want to write a novel but I simply can’t think of a good plot” – or, a variation on that theme – “I don’t want to start the actual writing yet because I still have problems with the structure”. It often surprises people when my response is, “You don’t need a plot or a structure in order to begin. In fact, if you plot your writing in advance, it may even damage the work.”

Naturally, in any debate, there are two schools of thought – and there are exceptions to every rule. For example, I tend to say that ‘genre’ fiction is more likely to be plotted in advance than ‘literary’ fiction, which often grows in a more organic way. Yet my friend, the novelist Charles Palliser is the most literary of writers and he plots everything in advance. Like I say – there are no hard rules.

However – I’ll tell it the way I see it. For me, works of art are organic things. They do not, for the most part, appear in the artist’s imagination fully formed. Look at the work of British dramatist Mike Leigh. He works with actors to develop characters over time; he trusts the process of creation. The final script is not a thing that comes fully formed; it involves the actors, the improvisation. Similarly, if you have seen film footage of Picasso at work, think how he paints over his canvases - the first thing he paints soon vanishes beneath more paint; it is a wonderful example of trusting one's creative instincts.

If we accept that when we create fiction, we are aiming to create a world that is somehow ‘true to life’ and characters that readers will love, trust and believe in – then the act of inventing a pre-conceived plot flies in the face of such endeavour. Do we, ourselves, act out our lives according to a pre-destined pattern? If we did, would we be interesting? Would our decisions, the paths we take, have any meaning or value or tension if it were all plotted out in advance? Of course not! It is the same with fiction. We must invent characters that live and breathe – and then we must let them live in our imaginations. What happens in the process is often astonishing and absolutely impossible to predict.

I am saying – *have faith in the process*. So many writers – whether of fiction or non-fiction – become blocked because they can’t see the wood for the trees. But nobody ever said you had to see the whole wood before you started your walk. John Fowles knew this and he used this metaphor to explain his views. In his book about his life and creative processes, The Tree, he wrote, “I do not plan my fiction any more than I plan woodland walks.”

My own experience of writing fiction is one of trust. I trust that the initial point of inspiration will expand into something wonderful. I trust that the journey I embark upon – that woodland, if you like – will be greener, wilder and more fascinating than I might ever have imagined. I often have a simple concept or theme as a starting point, or possibly a single image. For my novel The Temple of Hymen I knew I wanted to write about the quack doctor, James Graham who opened a Temple to Health and Fertility in eighteenth century London. I had researched the Doctor. But I had no story. However, when I read about the Thames freezing over in the eighteenth century – and knowing that the Doctor's Temple was beside the Thames – I imagined a young woman looking from a window, across the river. That was my starting point. I didn't know who she was or where this story might ultimately lead. Nor could I have imagined the richness that followed.

Plotting and Structure have a place in every work. But at the beginning, we don't need to think about it. It comes later.

So how can you get that trust in your own process? How can you stop worrying about the plot and the shape of what you are writing and believe that it will turn out just fine?

Here are a few guidelines that will help you as you make the transition to a more organic way of working:

- ★ Understand that writing is a leap of faith
- ★ Continue to dive into the writing, daily, to focus on the process of uncovering your characters or your themes, and take a decision to avoid concerns about structure at this stage
- ★ Begin to observe, in your journal, what happens when you ‘let go’ like this. See it as an experiment. You will notice that the more you actually write, the more you are thinking about your characters or your ideas. In other words, the book ‘grows’ in a way that it can never grow when it is coldly plotted out as a graph or pattern
- ★ Act on the insights you have about your book when not writing. If you stopped keeping a notebook by the side of your bed/in your bag/your pocket/by the kitchen sink – get back into that habit. Then, when you are at your desk, grab the journal and work on those insights. This is a more instinctive, natural way of working.

## Exercise Three – Day Three

(3000 words)

### Complete Parts One and Part Two.

1. Buy a couple of small notebooks and put them in important places about your person and at home. When you have an inspiration – jot it down. Yes, I know you know you *should* do this. But do you?

2. In your writing today:

**Option 1:** Continue your work in progress, remembering not to be distracted by fears about plot and structure.

**Option 2:**

**Fiction:**

In your writing today, focus primarily on your characters. Put them in a situation of conflict and dive into the action. No preconceived ideas allowed. Think about sight, sound, touch, smell, taste. Let them act out their drama.

**Non-fiction:**

Focus on the meat of your message. Answer this question: What is the first and most important thing that people need to know about my subject? If I had to tell them my most central message in a thousand words, what would I say?

Have you completed the exercise? Fabulous.

Now treat yourself to a nice cup of tea/gin and tonic/fruit smoothie (whatever does it for you – I'm not into clichés about the creative life!)

## Day Four – ‘Why free-write?’

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“The aim is to burn through to first thoughts, to the place where energy is unobstructed by social politeness or the internal censor, to the place where you are writing what your mind actually sees and feels, not what it thinks it should see or feel. It’s a great opportunity to capture the oddities of your mind.”

– Natalie Goldberg – from ‘Writing Down the Bones’

You’ve begun to develop a daily writing habit. But now you may be wondering whether you can keep going and be in it for the long haul. You may also be wondering why you’re doing this ‘free writing’ thing, whether it serves a purpose to write like this, focusing on quantity not quality. What do you have to gain from doing it this way?

Many of you following this programme will be familiar with the work of Natalie Goldberg, Julia Cameron and Dorothea Brande, all of whom have extolled the virtues of the free-writing technique. But for those of you newer to the writing process, I’ll briefly outline what I mean by free-writing, which is effectively what many of you have been doing on the first three days of the programme.

Free-writing is the process of allowing your pen to keep moving on the page (or on the keyboard), no matter what. The idea is that you allow words to flow, even if they aren’t right. You set a timed period, whether that be ten minutes, twenty minutes or an hour, during which time you must keep going. Getting it right doesn’t matter. Getting it down, does. It’s a technique that will help you cut through your fears, but it has the added benefit that what comes out is often unexpected and thus fascinating. It’s about reaching the core of your own subconscious thoughts, the stuff that doesn’t get written down when we’re trying to form a brilliant sentence or find a perfect metaphor. If you trust your instincts and allow yourself to write freely, as you would when writing a journal, you will be astonished at what emerges. I find this all the time in creative writing classes, where the timed exercise often brings out startling pieces of writing that the

students had not expected. They did not know, when they sat down, that this was what they were going to write.

There are times in your writing life when free-writing is the right approach and other times when it's not and I'd like to be clear about that here – because it is important, when you are working through this programme, that you use the right method for you at any particular point in time.

Remember – the purpose of this programme is to help you develop a productive writing habit - and to gain confidence as a writer. By following my methods, you will prove to yourself that you are not a 'stuck' writer, you are not a writer who procrastinates: you are a regular, working writer with an *output*. However, you may also wish to use the programme in other ways. If you have more than an hour a day, you can still use the structure I set out here, but you might wish to slow your writing down a little and allow your conscious mind more input.

**When to use free-writing:**

**Note:** By 'free-writing', I mean writing non-stop, without allowing oneself pause for rewriting a phrase or sentence and without considering whether what one is writing is 'right'.

- ★ When you need to get going on a new project
- ★ When you are feeling stuck with an on-going project
- ★ When time is limited but you feel the need to get words on the page
- ★ When you don't know the story you want to tell, but want to allow it – and your imagination - free-reign

- ★ When you are staring at the screen and feel you have nothing to say
- ★ When you find days are passing and you are not writing
- ★ When you have a desire to be productive in order to get momentum on a work

**When to slow down and consider your words more carefully:**

**Note:** By ‘slowing down’, I mean writing at a more considered pace, but still allowing yourself to be deeply involved with the story. This is probably the most satisfying type of writing, when one is absorbed in the material but writing at a pace that feels natural and right, occasionally pausing to get the most perfect expression of what is imagined.

- ★ When you are working on an established project and it is moving forwards: you are not ‘stuck’
- ★ When you are ‘in the zone’ with the writing; it feels good and free and absorbing
- ★ When your momentum is good and you feel no need for a self-imposed deadline
- ★ When you are relaxed about the work. You know where you are going with it. You are confident in the characters and story
- ★ When you are writing every day and you are making good progress

Now that you can see the difference between the two types of writing, take a moment to pause and ask yourself, honestly, which is the *right* way for you at this time. Which method will work best for you today? And remember, your answer may change from day to day.

You may, if you are experienced, wish to use a combination of the two approaches. Use free-writing daily to keep your word count high, then slow down as you revise what you have written. If you are less experienced however, don't worry too much about exactly what method you are using. So long as you are getting words down, you're in the right place.

Here are a few questions to answer in your journal on Day 4 of the Programme:

- ★ What do I need to ensure that I will be successful on this programme and reach my goal - whether that be a manuscript of 30,000 words or simply a daily writing habit?
- ★ How will I reward myself when I have completed my daily writing?
- ★ If I don't reach my goal on any particular day, what do I need to do to ensure that I don't give up, but remain on track?
- ★ Do I promise not to moan about the quality of my work at this stage and trust that 'we'll come to that'?
- ★ In what ways am I a truly gorgeous, wonderful and delightful human being?

## Exercise Four – Day Four

(4000 words)

### Options 1 & 2:

Experiment today with writing at a slower pace. Put on some of your favourite music to write to. (Mine is Bach's Cello Concertos – I find this music totally hypnotic and write to it all the time).

Aim for a feeling of *involvement* today. Keep the momentum going. Don't slow to a halt, but rather, aim to go deep with your understanding of the scene/idea you're writing and try to be more precise with the words you use than you have to date. Notice how this affects the quality of your writing and whether you prefer working like this. Will you work like this tomorrow?

### Option 2 only:

If you need some ideas for what to write today, try these:

#### **Fiction:**

Write a scene where one character learns an unsavoury secret about another character. This secret will complicate their relationship.

#### **Non-fiction:**

Think of a brilliant story or anecdote or case study that will perfectly illustrate one of your key points. Begin with the story and build the rest of the chapter from this.

# Day Five – ‘What limits do you set upon yourself?’

By Day Five, you may feel buoyed up with the excitement of having written every day. Or you may feel concerned that what you’ve done simply isn’t ‘good enough’. Perhaps you’re looking for advice on ‘how to do it right’? But remember – for the first ten days of this programme, your central focus must be on avoiding self-doubt and procrastination. We’ll come to technique in Part Two.

Today’s focus is the negative voices we hear in our heads. They can take many different forms, but there’s not an artist alive who doesn’t have them. Here are some of the most common ones:

- ★ I don’t have a clue whether I’m doing this right. Who am I kidding? I’ll never make it as a writer.
- ★ I’m not good enough. The words and story simply don’t come out in the way I want them to. I’m not as brilliant as I aspire to be.
- ★ I’ll never get published. The publishing industry is impenetrable. There are far too many books being published. They only publish celebrities. The industry is unfair.
- ★ I’ve published a couple of books. I’m a brilliant author – I know that - but my sales weren’t good and now they don’t want to know. The industry has closed its door in my face. I don’t have a hope.

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“And above all things, never think that you're not good enough yourself. A man should never think that. My belief is that in life people will take you at your own reckoning.”

**- Anthony Trollope**

You get the idea. Now it's your turn. Take out your journal and jot down every reason why you shouldn't write. Get every single limiting thought on paper. Your list may be way longer than mine. My list has been pretty long over the years too. I've experienced fear that it's not good enough, the feeling that I'd never be published again, the hurt of rejection, the feeling of not having any time because my kids come first. I've experienced desperate envy of other successful writers, the sinking experience of a book being published badly and getting no reviews, bitterness about the unfairness of the industry, the embarrassment of receiving negative royalty statements and the hurt of having my precious novels turned down by publishers.

You didn't know? Oh yeah. Plenty.

However – I've also experienced the elation of knowing I'm writing to the best of my ability, the knowledge of my own brilliance. I have walked along Oxford Street beneath the Christmas lights having just learnt that my first novel will be published. I've had reviews that make me weep for joy from writers I idolise and I've had the pleasure of emails from individual readers, raving about my work. I've also had the pleasure of seeing my friends become successful. I've known the wonderful camaraderie of other writers, the joy of my books being translated into four languages, the amazing pleasure of selling 100,000 copies in the Netherlands. And I've also learned how to overcome the negative feelings and fears once and for all.

I get it, you say. You remember all the bad stuff, but you're successful now. It's easy for you. Actually, it depends how you define success. Remember, my third novel was turned down by British publishers and only published in Holland. How do you view that? Glass half empty or glass half full? It's a delicate balance. As I write this revised version, I'm waiting to hear whether my agent likes my fourth novel. I don't know what she'll say. There's a lot of complaining I

could still do, I promise you. But in the process of becoming a coach, I realised this:

It is not success or failure that defines us as writers. It is not a single book that defines us as writers. It is the process of emerging ourselves in *the writing life*.

**We can rail all we like about the industry.** It won't make us great writers.

**We can fear we're not good enough.** It won't make us great writers.

**We can moan about the fact that we're not famous enough.** It won't make us great writers.

The thing is: nobody ever said that the world owed you a living from writing books. Or did I miss something? It's your choice, isn't it? So I'll say this. You'd better damn well love what you do and cherish every moment at your writing desk, else why are you doing it at all? It had better make you a happy bunny, else you might as well go play in the sunshine...

And something else: why define yourself by the idea of success? Is that a RULE OF THE UNIVERSE?

It's time to get your journal out again. Take a look at every single limiting thought. Figure out what's wrong with it. And write another list, headed thus:

**The reasons why I love the writing life and have faith in myself as a writer.**

Once you've done that, I'll leave you with this little formula I figured out.

**I used to believe this:**

Good writing will out. (In other words, if you learn your craft and write wonderfully you will be

published and you will thrive as a writer)

**Now I believe this:**

Good writing + Joy in the process + Self-belief + Long-term persistence will out.

In other words: Learn your craft. Love your craft. Cherish yourself. Keep going.

It works.

## Exercise Five – Day Five

(5000 words)

### Options 1 & 2:

My first coach, Nancy Morris once asked me to keep a gratitude journal. She was convinced that I spent far too much time thinking about a much longed-for future and as a result was losing touch with the pleasure of the present. I wasn't convinced this journal would do me any good but I obeyed! (Nancy is known as the “kick-ass coach with compassion”) In fact, my attitude shifted entirely within a matter of days.

Your task today is to begin a gratitude journal. I don't care how cynical you are, don't skip this one. Just try it for a week and see what happens. Put it by your bedside. Every night before you go to sleep, write down ten things you have to be grateful for in your writing and your life.

### A challenge (Options 1 & 2):

Today I challenge you to find a little more time than you usually would for your writing, even if it's only half an hour. Before you write, spend that half hour thinking about what you're going to write and making notes. This is *not* free-writing. This is planning. Ask yourself this:

What do I want the outcome of this scene/chapter to be?

**Fiction:**

Ask: how will this scene move the story forward? How will the characters change in the course of this scene? What do we learn about the characters? What events will take place? What do I want the reader to feel?

**Non-fiction:**

Ask: what is my central point in this chapter? How will I best illustrate this? What tone do I need to take? How will this chapter progress my argument? How will I involve the reader?

That's it.

## Day Six – ‘Getting it Wrong’

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‘All first drafts are shit.’

– Ernest Hemingway

Hemingway’s maxim is, in my opinion, a vital one for all writers struggling to keep up momentum and motivation in the face of fear and procrastination. I quote it frequently to my clients because I believe the fear of writing badly is the biggest block that most writers face. As writers we spend countless hours staring at the blank page precisely because we are afraid of getting it wrong. Yet if we take Hemingway’s words at face value, we learn that we have to get it wrong before we get it right. We have to make mistakes in order to find out what we really want to say.

When I am teaching, I often use the opening of Paul Auster’s novel Moon Palace to make this point. ‘Moon Palace’ is one of my favourite novels and has a special place in my heart. It begins like this:

**“It was the summer that men first walked on the moon. I was very young back then, but I did not believe there would ever be a future. I wanted to live dangerously, to push myself as far as I could go, and then see what happened to me when I got there. As it turned out, I nearly did not make it. Little by little, I saw my money dwindle to zero; I lost my apartment; I wound up living in the streets. If not for a girl named Kitty Wu, I probably would have starved to death.”**

Auster goes on, in the very first paragraph of the novel, to summarise the main events of the narrative that lie ahead: **‘I took the job with the old man in the wheelchair. I found out who my father was. I walked across the desert from Utah to California.’**

Paul Auster is not a personal friend of mine (sighs heavily). The nearest I ever got to him was sitting opposite his wife Siri Hustvedt at dinner once, but I won't elaborate because that will prove a distraction (if this were a memoir, it might prove an interesting distraction and I would go there, but it is not so I will leave you guessing and accusing me of name-dropping; in fact, I'm just showing you the shitty first draft for once, whereas if I were in editing mode, I would cut it right out).

Let's see the second draft:

Paul Auster is not a personal friend of mine. However, I would bet my annual income on the fact that he didn't just sit at his desk one day and find that brilliant first sentence fully formed in his head. Doubtless he wrote an awful lot of the novel first - explored his characters in depth and discovered, through the process of writing, exactly what his characters would do in the course of that book - before returning to that first paragraph and getting it right.

This is certainly how it works for me. My own processes are somewhat idiosyncratic and fluid. They have been different for each novel that I write. But a common factor is that I spend about 50% of my writing time on the first third of the novel. That first third, for me, is all about finding the 'voice' (of which more later), finding the characters, finding the story. I free-write, I rewrite, I write laboriously, I write on trains, I write anyhow I can, sometimes in fragments, sometimes in continuous prose. And at the end of that time, I have a third of a novel that works for me, that has a consistent tone, voice, characters and story-line. Then - and this is my way, not the highway - I can write the second half more quickly - and at last I can really plot ahead.

I am not saying that you should follow my method. It is evolving all the time. But I do want to make it clear that you won't always get it 'right'. And if you don't get it 'down', there is certainly

no way that it will come alive for you.

You will discover what you want to say in the process of writing. Even if you are working to a standard plot structure, unexpected things will happen as you write. Much of your book is already in your subconscious mind. The role of the conscious mind is a separate one that you will use when editing. But if you don't write, your subconscious mind won't bother to get to work on the novel. If you write daily, half the work will be done when you're not actually at your desk.

In other words: if you don't allow yourself to write regularly because you fear writing badly, then you will write badly. Not writing ensures that you will be permanently disengaged from your work. The process of letting the shitty first draft emerge is vital to your creation. That doesn't mean you always have to write quickly or free-write. It doesn't mean you have to reach the 1000 word target every day of your writing life. It does mean you must engage with your work - for better or for worse - regularly. It means you have to accept that there is a place for bad writing and that place is not the trash-can but the blank page.

Get it down. Trust the work and trust me. We'll edit later. Today we let the story flow, even if the words seem wrong or trite or less than perfect.

## Exercise Six – Day Six

(6000 words)

### Options 1 & 2:

Remember to allow time for planning again today and remind yourself of the questions you asked yourself on Day Five.

### Two rules today:

1. Don't worry about getting it wrong. You are allowed to get it wrong.
2. Write with a sense of direction. During the planning, ask yourself 'what is the purpose of this chapter, how will it hook the reader in and where is it taking the reader? How will this scene progress the whole?'

### Option 2:

#### Fiction:

The focus today is on really fleshing your scene out. Although you may be free-writing, I want you to allow the characters room to breathe. Really dramatise the event you're describing. Don't summarise in order to move quickly forward. Find the drama in the scene, using dialogue, conflict and inner-turmoil. How does this scene mark the character; deepen the character?

**Non-fiction:**

Write one of the following:

- ★ A vivid case-history
- ★ A passionate argument
- ★ A lucid explanation of your central theme

## Day Seven – ‘Think big’

By now, you have learned two things about yourself as a writer: you are persistent and you are becoming productive. In my book, that’s exciting.

Day Seven is all about consolidating what we began on Day Five. There, we looked at limiting thought patterns and how they can affect you as a writer. Today I want you to consider the other side of the coin. What would happen to you as a writer if you not only discarded the limiting thought patterns once and for all, but you also truly embraced your own enormous potential – not only as a writer, but as a human being? What if you actually allowed yourself to become everything you could be?

Is that scary?

Many people find this concept difficult. Especially writers. Writers are particularly good at being cynical. I know. I’m one. You may be drumming your fingers on the desktop by now, saying:

“This is all very well, but when are you going to get onto the nuts and bolts of the writing process?”

In fact, Days 11-20 will contain a lot of practical advice.

But today, I’m assuming that the *real* thing that’s stopping you from getting your book written is the fact that you’re just not working at it/believing in yourself/trusting in the process.

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"Argue for your limitations, and sure enough, they're yours."

- **Richard Bach - 'Illusions'**

Sometimes it is much easier to blame our lack of ‘technique’ for our failure to write, than it is to stare ourselves in the face and accept the fact that we’re not accessing our creative spirit because we’re not allowing it to breathe.

I trained with CoachU (the leading US coach training organisation) for four years. It was life-changing. Coaching is not just about clap-happy positive thinking. The coaching process is about accessing your own potential – taking action for change in your life. When you take action, you get results. Maybe not immediately - you have to be prepared to experiment and to change your approach where necessary - but when you keep focus, it is astonishing what can be achieved.

In art and in life, limiting thoughts create limited outcomes. If you have an idea for a project, don't allow the largeness of that project to overwhelm you. When I first conceived of writing a novel set in the eighteenth century, I had no formal historical education. But in 1992, I saw a couple of paintings in the National Gallery that inspired me and my imagination took off from there. I took action by enrolling on a course in eighteenth century fiction. I allowed my idea free reign.

I grew up in a new town, with little sense of history. I quit studying history aged thirteen. I believe that if I can take a leap like that, anyone can. It takes application and belief in oneself. There is nothing magical about it.

This does not mean, however, that there won't be setbacks. But in every moment, we have a choice about how to think and how to act. Our choices affect every part of our being and our creativity.

## Exercise Seven – Day Seven

(7000 words)

There are two tasks today and they are the same for everyone.

### **Task One:**

Write in your own way, in your own time. No guidelines.

### **Task Two:**

Write a journal entry examining what would happen to you if you were able to fully access your whole potential?

# Day Eight – ‘10 notes on writing fiction’

With apologies to writers of non-fiction, here are 10 notes on writing fiction. I hope they prove useful to you:

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"The test of literature is, I suppose, whether we ourselves live more intensely for the reading of it.'

– Elizabeth Drew

1. The most important part of writing fiction is finding the ‘voice’. If you can find the right narrative voice for your work, you’re halfway there. This isn’t just about what tense you use or whether you use first or third person. You need to find a narrator or narrators that are consistent, believable (or invisible) and engaging. Having said that – first person past tense or a ‘close’ third person narrator (also past tense) are the most commonly used forms. A present tense narration lends immediacy but can prove tiring when used over an entire novel and you need to be certain of your technique if you choose this route. Omniscient narrators are less commonly used in modern fiction although this voice remains an option. Be aware however, that when we choose omniscient narration we dilute our closeness to individual characters – and it is a more difficult form to master. Most of all, work hard on finding a voice that feels comfortable. It really matters. It’s also about remaining true to your self in the writing *and* about writing lucidly and competently.
2. You will only reach that level of lucidity and competency through reading widely and regularly. Expose yourself to as much literature as possible. Read every day. Read non-fiction too; it’s vital for developing a broad personal vision. Develop as much

passion for reading as you have for writing. Fluidity of writing style comes through regular reading and writing. Don't skip the reading. And analyse what you read. Ask questions about how a particular book is working. What does the author do to get this voice to sound so smooth and compelling?

3. Don't limit your experience by spending most of your time at the writing desk. Live a little. Else what will you write about?
4. Put most of your focus, at first, on your characters. Let them live and breathe. If your characters are convincing, the novel will come alive. Think about their appearance: you could even pin images above your desk. Ask yourself questions about your characters, for example
  - ★ 'What do they most desire and what is their central motivation?'
  - ★ 'What would they kill for?'
  - ★ 'Where is their favourite place to be?'
  - ★ 'What fills them with dread?'
  - ★ 'What are the defining moments of their lives to date?'

These are simply examples. The more questions you ask about your characters, the better you will know them. Sometimes it helps to simply plunge into writing dramatic scenes, especially when a scene contains conflict. In the process of writing, we often discover unexpected things about our characters.

5. Don't be fooled by the dictum 'write what you know.' Listen to the author Graham Swift: "For God's sake write about what you don't know! For how else will you bring your imagination into play? How else will you discover or explore anything?" You will need to be brave and you will need to do your research. But if you reach beyond the self, you will uncover more of yourself than you previously believed possible. Even if you are writing autobiographically, ask yourself: how can I stretch this beyond the autobiographical story to make what I'm writing more universal? What can I find out that will deepen what I'm writing?
6. Most scenes will only come alive if you slow down and let us enter into them. Don't summarise or be journalistic in your approach. Let us see a scene unfold in real time, complete with dialogue, interior monologue, gesture, a sense of place. It is better to have fewer scenes that are more dramatic than to pack in the incidents in a sketchy manner. In fiction, we often say that one should 'show' rather than 'tell'. This means: don't tell us that a character is nervous, terrified, happy, in love or ashamed. Instead, reveal that to us through gesture, action and dialogue. Or indeed, reveal it to us with close description. Many people think that 'telling' means describing. It doesn't. Brilliant description can often be a form of 'showing'. For me, 'showing' is about slowing down the pace, immersing the reader in the action and letting the reader come to his or her own conclusions about the meaning of what unfolds.
7. Study plot, if you must, but don't let your plot take over from the truth of your characterisation. There are many books that can teach you the mechanics of what

makes a good plot and explain to you the meaning of phrases like ‘inciting incident’, ‘plot point’ and ‘reversal’. These ‘rules’ are the rules of commercial fiction and Hollywood narrative and whilst it is vital that all writers should have a basic grasp of the rules of plot structure, (read Robert McKee’s ‘Story’ or Robert J Ray’s ‘The Weekend Novelist’), do not be fooled into thinking that if you get the plot right, the book will come alive. I wrote both of my first two novels without ever studying plot. I had an instinctive feel for plot and I went with that. I only studied plot later, when I had to teach a course on screen writing. Wonderful fiction needs more than plot. It needs depth and realism and heart.

8. Remember, however, that ‘story’ is key. Your reader buys your book because they want a story. Don’t worry too much about ‘beautiful writing’. That will come, with time and practice and experimentation. If in doubt, keep the language plain but keep the story moving forwards. Always write with a sense of direction and purpose. Dull description can slow the pace and page-turning quality of a book. When you wish to describe a scene, use the 'scatter' approach - choose a key detail to give a suggestion of character/scene - and let the reader fill in the gaps in his imagination.
9. Don’t imitate. Don’t write what you think is commercial. (It’s a sure-fire way to get it wrong, in my humble view.) Do try to be the best writer you can possibly be. Have high aspirations. Involve the WHOLE of yourself in the writing process. Anything less is the sign of a writer who lacks commitment.
10. Write from the heart and forget perfectionism. We’ll edit later. For now: ‘live this book’.

## Exercise Eight – Day Eight

(8000 words)

### Option 1:

Continue with your work in progress. If you are writing fiction, which of the above 10 points particularly strike a chord with you and how might this affect your work today?

### Option 2:

#### Fiction:

Use one of the following ideas to inspire a scene. It does not have to be a consecutive scene in your novel. It may be something you weave in later – or earlier.

1. A woman is packing a suitcase in the middle of the night
2. A person stands outside a building, observing another person through the window

#### Non-fiction:

How might some of the rules for writing fiction, affect your non-fiction work? Consider this question. Weave your insights into your writing practice today.

## Day Nine – ‘Examine the blocks’

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‘Writer's block ... is simply a failure of ego.’

- Norman Mailer

Our purpose today is to understand why our ego sometimes fails us. In my view, Mailer’s idea is a pretty astute observation. For many years I’ve had a deep curiosity about why, exactly, we sometimes lose faith in our ability to write well. Today I want to get to the heart of our creative blocks. Why is it that so many writers suffer in this way? Is it a real phenomenon or simply a manifestation of our fears?

On Day Five, we looked at the limits we place upon ourselves: our fears surrounding the writing process. On Day Seven, we began to question how a different way of thinking might affect our work. Today, I want you to go a little deeper. I want you to not only acknowledge your fears but to see them for what they are – inventions.

**We need to understand that there is a difference between objective truth and the stories we tell ourselves. It is not our experience that shapes us but the stories we invent about our experience.**

**Sometimes, we believe our personal stories *are* objective truths. Here are a few examples of such stories:**

1. ‘It’s a fact that I wasted time yesterday and didn’t write anything decent.’
2. ‘It’s a fact that I’ve never won a single writing competition and have been rejected by five agents.’

3. 'It's a fact that my father always told me that I wasn't creative, therefore I'm unable to deeply believe in myself.'

**Yet in truth, this is simply a matter of perspective.**

**Try it this way:**

1. 'A bad writing day is just a bad writing day and has no significance beyond that.'
2. 'I haven't yet reached my full potential as a writer which explains why I haven't yet reached my goal of being published.'
3. 'My father was wrong.'

Of course, it doesn't always feel easy or natural to tell ourselves the positive stories. As artists we often believe that being cynical and troubled is a part of the job description. Not so. The writers who are achieving great things with their work are those who have deep confidence in what they're doing. They might have a bad day, the words might not always flow, but they keep at it – and they are never complacent. A good writer is always learning.

Today I want you to go one step further towards understanding the negative voices that play in your head. I want you to take the fear or block that you believe affects you most – in terms of your belief in yourself as a writer – and explore it. A good time to do this is in the evening, when you're relaxed – the exercise should not eat into your writing time.

I want you to connect with your own creative block. Don't just name it. Examine it. This is not an indulgence. I want you to be playful. Your aim is to discover where this fear comes from and

to look at it objectively. Imagine the source of your block as a pebble you picked up on the beach that you turn over in the palm of your hand. Is there some perceived failure in the past, a broken dream or a cruel word from a teacher or parent that made you lose confidence? Whatever it is, get it on the page. Acknowledge it and understand it. That's the first step to moving beyond it. Ask yourself, 'what is the cost to me of not acknowledging the source of my being blocked?' and 'what will be the consequence of my allowing fear to prevent me from facing the blank page each day?'

Once you understand the cost of letting the fear win, ask yourself another question: 'How would my life look if I accepted that I can simply toss this pebble back in the sea and pick out another one?' Journal this. Allow yourself to imagine how your life would look if you got words on the page, not just today, nor for the 30 days, but regularly. How would it feel to finish a first draft; hold your manuscript in your hands; see your book on the shelves? Go there.

It's possible that you are already a published author. If so – how will it feel to have another finished manuscript in your hands? Another book on the shelves? How will that change you?

If you have not yet published, please be aware that being published is not an impossible dream. Being published is not the be-all and end-all of writing. And even if it were, there are so many self-publishing options today that no-one need ever remain unpublished.

**Today's task is vital:**

1. Your central task is to truly understand what is stopping you
2. Don't just name it – examine the block and get to the root of it
3. Now see it for what it is – a matter of perception
4. Find out what the consequence will be for you if you continue to hold that belief about yourself
5. Now choose another belief or attitude and dive into the vision of how your life and your writing would look if you embraced the new attitude or belief
6. Finally - choose to perceive that new reality.

This is *not* simply positive thinking. This is about understanding that you create your reality through your own thought.

**Consider this.**

## Exercise Nine – Day Nine

(8500 words – take it easy)

I'm guessing that you're worried that what you've written, to date, may not be 'right'. Your challenge today is to take a portion of what you've written already and address what you don't like about it. Make it better.

**If you're aiming for the 30,000 words:**

Take a part of your book that you believe you have rushed or got wrong. Rewrite it better and deeper – and yes – longer. Take your time to get it as 'right' as you can. If you only progress your total word count by a few hundred today, don't worry. This is about understanding that we can improve on a first draft. We'll going to catch up with a little free-writing tomorrow.

Go slow.

## Day Ten – ‘What happens if you get behind?’

Congratulations! You have reached day ten of the programme. You have completed the first stage: Conquering Self-Doubt and Procrastination. Tomorrow you’ll begin the second stage of the programme: Laying the Foundations.

Today, however, take a moment to reflect on how far you’ve come.

But first, I want to tackle an important question. What happens if you fall off the wagon? What if you are one of those who wanted to write 30,000 words? You started the programme with huge enthusiasm, got 3-4000 words done in the first four days, then found the weekend a bit more difficult. What happens if you have reached Day 10 with 4000 words under your belt and not 10,000? Is that a failure? Should you give up?

Let’s put that another way:

*If you went on a diet that promised you’d lose 30lb in 30 days but at the end of 30 days you’d only lost 14lb, would you be disappointed?*

I didn’t think so. You’d be slipping into Diesel jeans/a Donna Karen dress/a Ted Baker shirt and partying.

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‘Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come. You wait and watch and work: you don't give up.’

– Anne Lamott, from [Bird by Bird](#)

The truth is, you are never ‘behind’.

If you have written 4000 words to date and tell yourself you are ‘behind’, then in 20 days time, you’ll still have the 4000 words and nothing more. If you understand that you are never ‘behind’ and you just get back on the programme today, you might end up with 24,000 words by Day 30. That’s a quarter of a book!

Now let’s talk about rewards. You’ve earned it.

Can you do something fun today? Curl up with your journal in a café and pretend to be Simone de Beauvoir (or Jean Paul)? Book theatre tickets? Walk in nature?

**Do remind yourself:**

*It is the work itself that matters. If I focus on the work, on the process of becoming a writer, on learning my craft, I will write books that people will love to read.*

## Exercise Ten – Day Ten

(10,000 words)

### Options 1 & 2:

Today, progress your story by 1500 words.

Begin with a 15-30 minute planning session where you decide upon the direction of your scene, using the questions from Day 5 and 6. But unlike Day 6, once you start to write, don't pause.

**Set a timer and sit at your desk for one hour.** Keep your fingers moving on the keyboard/across the page. Discover how many words you can write if you work for a solid hour without stopping once, without going back once to revise.

# Part Two

## **Days 11-20: The Foundations of the Writing Life**

- ★ Day 11: How to write when you're not writing
- ★ Day 12: What about research?
- ★ Day 13: Your personal motivating factor
- ★ Day 14: Understanding your inspiration
- ★ Day 15: Write with a sense of direction
- ★ Day 16: Which side of the brain are you working on?
- ★ Day 17: The importance of the signpost
- ★ Day 18: The plot thickens
- ★ Day 19: When is the right time for editing?
- ★ Day 20: A writer's integrity

**If you follow every writing exercise, by the end of Part Two, you will have written 20,000 words**

# Day Eleven – ‘How to write when you’re not writing’

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“Write while the heat is in you. The writer who postpones the recording of his thoughts uses an iron which has cooled to burn a hole with. He cannot inflame the minds of his audience.”

- Henry David Thoreau

Most people who write have experienced the feeling of being truly inspired: being at the writing desk and feeling ‘in the zone’. It’s in those moments, when there is a flow to our work, that we experience the deepest pleasure that writing can bring. In that heightened state we feel invincible. We are at one with our characters, we inhabit their world – or we feel we have found the perfect expression for the truth we wish to convey; our words flow effortlessly and we know they are the right ones.

The subject of inspiration is a burning one for all writers. Yet in some ways, it has also become clichéd. Here’s a question I’ve been asked more times than I care to remember:

**“Do you have to wait for inspiration or do you just sit down at your desk every day and write?”**

It’s asked over and over again. What the person really wants to know is:

**“Can you make inspiration happen? How can I get it? Will it just magically come to me if I start to write?”**

Yet everybody who writes knows that the muse is fickle and that whilst we all yearn for those ‘Thoreau moments’, we are also simply ‘doing our work’.

So when I'm asked the question, I simply say:

**“You will only get inspired if you sit down at the desk and do the work. Your inspiration will only flow when the work becomes a part of your life.”**

When I was began writing my first novel, The Temple of Hymen, I was writing in a first person narrative voice, the voice that became the character 'Emilia'. I remember sitting at my desk feeling stuck because I felt almost suffocated by the voice. I knew I couldn't write a whole novel from that character's point of view, yet I sensed it was important to keep the voice; I wasn't ready to let her go. But I was getting nowhere, so I decided to get out and take a walk. I was studying at the University of East Anglia at the time, so I walked over to the campus and around the lake. I just 'switched off' from the work. I was enjoying the crisp, winter day and the feeling of being away from the desk.

I was out for around an hour. Eventually, as I began the walk back, down the lane towards the cottage where I lived, something happened. A voice came into my head. It said: "I must begin with a warning." It startled me. Where did that come from? I paused. This wasn't magic. It was simply my subconscious telling me something. Now I began composing. It came easily. "A warning to the fair sex, to be precise, for if this narrative falls into the hands of a lady, she might be forgiven for thinking it a moral work, when indeed that would be far from the case." Now my conscious mind was getting involved. I knew the character's name too – but it was a little weird. Did I invent that? It was 'Vermilion' who became my second narrator. Only later did I realise how astonishing the subconscious mind is. The name Emilia is embedded in the name Vermilion. The two lovers names meld into one.

I tell this story to illustrate what happens when we work on a piece of writing. We start to think about it more. We start to dream about it. And dreaming is a huge part of the creative process.

The more we write, the more time we spend at our writing desks, the more we think about the writing when we are away from our desks. As a result, the ‘Thoreau moments’ occur a lot more regularly.

## Exercise Eleven – Day Eleven

(11,000 words)

### Options 1 & 2:

Take a walk in the park or around town. Before you go, pose yourself a question about your work: a challenge or a problem you can't seem to fix – or a scene you're afraid of writing. Then take that walk.

Or, simply allow yourself to lie down and dream for a while.

The important thing is to allow your mind to enter a relaxed, drifting state. When you return from your walk, or have finished dreaming, get back to your desk and tackle the scene.

## Day Twelve – ‘What about research?’

Recently, as I lay reading in bed, I began thinking about the process of research. I was reading Bill Bryson’s ‘A Short History of Nearly Everything’ and Bryson was hypothesising about the possibility of the existence of alien beings. He noted that if it were even remotely possible that alien beings could see us, they would, in fact, be so far away that the light reaching them would be the light from 200 or more years ago. It wouldn’t be us they were observing, but rather people in the age of the French Revolution, our ancestors in silk stockings. As I read more about the possibility of alien existence and the near impossibility of us ever getting to encounter it, it struck me that this was one reason why I’m not a great fan of sci-fi novels. It’s a subjective thing I know, but my immediate response was that I prefer fiction that is grounded in reality.

I took that thought one stage further. What about magic realism? I realised that I was being narrow-minded. In fact, I’m accepting impossible occurrences frequently in my reading. In my friend Linda Buckley-Archer’s novel ‘Gideon the Cutpurse’ two children travel back in time to the Eighteenth Century – and I am totally convinced. Why? Because the time-travel is grounded in some scientific theory. And, because every other detail of Buckley-Archer’s novel is written in a naturalistic way. It’s the same with ‘The Time Traveller’s Wife’ or any work of fiction where there is an element of impossibility. So long as we ground the majority of the work in realism, we accept the impossible.

Writing in a believable, naturalistic style and drawing the world truthfully is a large part of this. You have to get the dialogue right. The characters have to be fully rounded; they need to come

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“Reimagining implies some measure of forgetting. The actual or factual has to lose definition, become fluid, before the imagination can begin its task of reconstruction. Data transferred straight from the research area to the book will simply remain data. It will be imaginatively inert.”

– **Rose Tremain, The First Mystery**

alive. But getting the detail is key. We all know that. Yet how do we do it?

My first novel was historical, set in the eighteenth century. My second was contemporary, with a nineteenth century sub-plot. So historical research was vital. If I were to give any advice at all to writers who need to do a lot of research, it's to heed Graham Greene's words:

'It's yours to remember and mine to forget.'

In essence, what Tremain is getting at, in her interpretation of Greene here - is that you can't transpose the research directly into the book. You have to let it live in your imagination first. It has to be absorbed, imaginatively transformed – before it can enter into your work. Which takes us back to yesterday's step, “write when you're not writing”.

If you're wondering how this fits in with this 30 day programme, don't worry. I'm not asking you to squeeze specific research into your busy schedule this month, though I do encourage you to read widely – in any spare moment you can. But long-term, research is likely to be an important part of your writing work.

Whilst it is useful to do as much necessary research as you can before beginning a book, it is not essential. Sometimes you may not know what research you need to do in advance. Sometimes, in the act of writing a scene, you get to understand what is necessary and only then can you search out the appropriate book.

When writing my first novel (my first published one, that is), I was lucky enough to be able to write full time. At that stage I used to spend four days writing and one day at the British Library researching in the old Round Reading Room. The background research was complete before I

started the book, but if I had to write a scene on duelling the following week, for example, then I'd spend all day Friday reading about duels in the late eighteenth century.

Now I'm no longer writing full time. As I write this revised version of 'Get Black on White', I've just finished a novel, so I'm thinking ahead to the next one, relishing the idea of the research I'd like to do to inspire me. I'm piling up books at the bedside.

So if – during your time on this programme - you're writing a scene and you suddenly realise you need to know more – just keep writing. Blag it. What keeps readers enthralled, most of all, is the characters and their drama. For non-fiction, it may be rather different – depending on the nature of your material – but there are many instances where you can take this approach, even there. Write a rough draft of the scene first. This will help you understand what research you need to do, in preparation for a second draft. For the duration of this programme, simply make notes about what is required and put the relevant book on your bedside table.

**Don't get it right, get it down.**

I'm not saying you should always write like this, at break-neck speed. But for the duration of this programme, you need to prove to yourself that you can do this. Later, you can go slow and edit.

In the meantime, why not pick up one of those books at night-time, before you go to sleep?

What enters your dreams will prove invaluable and will contribute to the process of imaginative transformation of simple fact.

## Exercise Twelve – Day Twelve

(12,000 words)

### Options 1 & 2:

Order some research related books online, visit the library or find the relevant books on your shelf. Gather the books and put them by your bedside. If possible, pick one up and immerse yourself for half an hour

### Option 1:

Continue with your work in progress

### Option 2:

### Fiction:

Imagine the ending of your novel – you won't yet know what it is, but guess. Now write that ending as if it were the first chapter.

### Non-fiction:

Write a scene that you have been putting off writing because you believed it would require additional research. Blag it. Afterwards, question how much you did in fact know. And make notes on what you now need to discover.

# Day Thirteen – ‘Your Personal Motivating Factor’

Today I want to reflect on the subject of motivation. I want this programme to set you up for a writing life that you love – and I want the effects of it to continue beyond the 30 days.

What is the ideal outcome of this 30 day programme? In my view, this programme will be a success for you if you leave it highly motivated and with a solid confidence in your writing work. It will be a success if you continue writing regularly and keep your writing time sacred - in the long-term.

How is that to be achieved?

A few years ago, I was coached by Master Certified Coach [Carly Anderson](#). At the time, Carly was working on her Intentional Success Program and we talked about the importance of ‘Having a Big Enough ‘Why?’’ Carly explained that having a ‘Big Enough ‘Why?’’ means that you have got to the source of your own *personal* motivation for doing anything. If you have a big enough reason to want something, then you will leap out of bed in the morning, raring to go, wanting nothing so much as to get on with the task you have set yourself.

It seems straightforward, but it’s not so easy as all that. This is your Personal Motivating Factor. If you can discover this, you’re far more likely to keep going with your writing than if you rely on what others want for you - or what you *think* you should want for yourself.

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“The secret of success is learning how to use pain and pleasure instead of having pain and pleasure use you. If you do that, you’re in control of your life. If you don’t, life controls you.”

– **Anthony Robbins** from  
**‘Awaken the Giant Within’**

So what is personal motivation? You may have to dig deep. It's easy to state the obvious:

“My Personal Motivating Factor is that I want to write a book and I want it to become a best-seller. I want literary kudos and financial security.”

But the trouble with this is: it's not Personal. It's the universal answer. It doesn't go far enough.

**Take your journal and spend some time exploring this question:** what outcomes do I really want from my writing? Is it just the published book, or is it something more?

Don't skip these journalling tasks - they'll give you fresh insights that might otherwise be inaccessible.

Carly suggested that one should always go deeper with the questions one asks.

For example: ‘I want to publish a book.’ And what will that give me? ‘It will give me a deep self-confidence that I've never possessed.’ And what will that give me? ‘It gives me the knowledge that I can continue to make writing a part of my life, without guilt, purely for the pleasure of it.’ Your answers will be unique to you, but they will take you closer to understanding the source of your own motivation.

If you can really get to the source of your reason for writing and wanting to finish this project, then spend some time picturing this outcome and how it would feel. This is about holding the vision: seeing what life could be like when you have your completed manuscript or published book in your hands. How would that affect you and how it would change your daily experience? Journal the vision, but find other ways of holding it, every day. For example, make a collage that visually portrays aspects of that life and pin it above your desk. Or write out your

vision and read it every day before you start work.

The techniques I've described above are common self-help techniques and you may have heard of them. But they don't work unless you *use* them

I'd like to add another thought, which is more personal to me – and may be somewhat controversial:

*I believe that the writing life is not about success of fame or even publication. I believe it is about the work we do as human beings. We should not necessarily look to our work to financially provide for us. To do so will compromise the work, both in terms of its content and our attitude to it.*

Let me be clear on this one. Most writers want to make a living from their work. That's good. There are huge opportunities for making money through our writing. You should know the marketplace and understand it and you should learn how to market yourself too.

However, I also believe that we should strive to do work that people will want to read. **When we do that, we are more likely to make money from our work.**

**If you can find a personal motivating factor that has nothing to do with fame or financial success, your motivation to write will be deeper and stronger and paradoxically, you will be more likely to be successful as a writer.**

## Exercise Thirteen – Day Thirteen

(13,000 words)

### Options 1 & 2:

Write whatever you want to write, so long as you *really* enjoy it.

For example: write in a cafe with the a delicious cappuccino at your side; write a scene you know you really *want* to write. Indulge yourself. Tackle something easy. Write for pleasure.

## Day Fourteen – ‘Understanding your inspiration’

There are times in every artist’s life when that artist feels uninspired – or empty. Julia Cameron understood this when she wrote her now famous work The Artist's Way and encouraged writers and artists everywhere to go on a regular weekly ‘Artist’s Date’. Her argument is that we need to ‘fill the well’ else it will soon be empty. She encourages readers to take time out alone, once a week, to visit an inspirational place – a gallery, a local park, a concert – anywhere, so long as its not your own four walls! This is her version of my maxim, ‘write when you’re not writing’. If we, as writers, spend all of our time at the writing desk, how are we ever going to have anything to write about? Part of being an artist is about being alive to the world about you.

If you feel your art is becoming stale, always look outside yourself for inspiration. Rather than mining your own experience, expose yourself to new stimuli. It doesn’t have to be a visit. You might flick through art books or to listen to music: whatever does it for you.

Whether you’re already involved in a project or embarking on something relatively new, being alive to every source of stimulation is key. The more you expose yourself to new influences, the more you begin to understand what is the key to your own inspiration.

For me, there are two recurring sources of inspiration: reading history books and visiting the places where that history took place. When I visit the places where history that has inspired me

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"An artist is not paid for his labour but for his vision."

– James MacNeill Whistler

took place, the ‘imaginative transformation’ that Tremain wrote about (Day Twelve) takes off.

Generally, for me at this stage, a key visual image kicks in. For ‘The Temple of Hymen’ it was a young girl in a yellow dress, staring out across the frozen Thames. For ‘Bluethroat Morning’ it was a woman in a bustle dress, struggling along a Norfolk beach, by the side of her uncle, a dying man who can hardly catch his breath. I had faith in the images that obsessed me; in the fact that they held a personal truth. I have already referred to Rose Tremain’s essay ‘The First Mystery’ (available in The Agony and the Ego – ed. Clare Boylan) and it is worth quoting again here. Tremain’s words speak to me on a deep level, about how inspiration comes and what we do with it. She writes,

**“The imagination conjures gifts; what the ungrateful, unsentimental part of the mind has to do is to unwrap them ... see them for what they are and then alter them.”**

I suggest that you actively seek inspiration. Don’t simply expect it to turn up on your doorstep. Also, if you are struck by a strong image or idea – if you have a powerful gut feeling about an aspect of your book – then follow it.

These instincts are generally creative truths. You may not always understand them, but if you do not follow them – with blind faith if you like – then you are failing to acknowledge inspiration when it is staring you in the face.

**If an idea seems mysterious, it may also be significant. If the idea remains with you and refuses to go away, this is a signal that you must unravel the mystery.**

## Exercise Fourteen – Day Fourteen

(14,000 words)

### Options 1 & 2:

Today I would like you to unravel something that is mysterious to you.

Is there an image, a concept, a key thought – that keeps coming to you, but you have been ignoring it, because although it won't go away, you're not sure of its place in your book?

In your writing today, try to make sense of this image/concept/thought.

**Unravel it.**

## Day Fifteen – ‘Write with a sense of direction’

One of the most common questions people ask me in relation to the ‘organic’ method of writing fiction is this: ‘If I don’t know what I’m going to write before I start writing, how can I tell if its going to be interesting and whether its going to hold the reader’s attention?’

The fear that underlies this question is grounded in the idea that when we write organically, there is no plotting and no planning, and thus the writer is afraid of ‘going off at a tangent’ and ‘waffling’ and ‘boring the reader’. However, with the methods that I suggest, we can avoid all of these potential pitfalls.

First, always remember to plan your writing session. It’s not a good idea to sit down at your writing desk and dive in blindly. Rather, it is important to spend a little time, around 15 minutes, deciding what you’re going to focus on. You may not know the entire arc of the book yet, but you do need to set an intention for the scene that you are writing (or, for non-fiction writers, an intention for your message/argument etc.). Setting an intention for your scene sets you up for a very specific outcome: a scene with a sense of purpose.

Let’s say, for example, you are writing a vampire novel. You have reached the point where a young woman, Sarah, is trapped in the basement of an old church and can’t escape. It is getting close to midnight and Sarah is terrified. You sit down to write. But you have no idea where this scene is going. What do you do? Do you simply dive into Sarah’s fear and trust that your free-

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“I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear.”

– **Joan Didion**

writing will give you the plot twist you need? Or do you set an intention?

For example: “Although I may not know how this novel will turn out in the end, in this scene, I want the suspense to build and at the end of the scene, I want the vampire to show up. Our expectations should be over-turned. Perhaps, weirdly, he’s not after her blood, he just wants to speak with her; we don’t yet know his motives for this.”

In your notes, you might also wish to ask yourself questions, for example:

‘How does she grow as a character in this scene?’

You may then hypothesise that she gains courage as she realises that her fear threshold is *much* higher than she ever imagined possible.

These notes can be vague enough to allow you room for exploration in the writing, but specific enough to give the scene **direction** and **flow**. This planning will also help to keep the action of the scene moving, which in turn, keeps the reader interested.

Be prepared for unexpected things to happen in the course of your writing. You might get carried away with the drama, only to discover that in the end the hero turns up and gets Sarah out of there before the vampire ever shows. Or, the vampire arrives and is about to attack, only to be interrupted by the priest who was unable to sleep. You get the idea. What matters most of all is that in giving yourself a sense of direction for the scene, you have kept the action moving - and keeping the story flowing is essential if you want to keep the reader turning the pages.

It’s the same when writing non-fiction. You need to know what argument you are planning to *progress*. A reader can be turned off if they feel that nothing is moving. A reader wants to be

swept along by the plot or argument.

Is there room, in all of this for ‘beautiful descriptions’? Yes, of course, but not at the expense of plot and story-telling. We need to be deeply engaged with the plot and the characters first if we are to care about the landscape.

In ‘The Red Notebook’, a book of interviews with and essays by the novelist Paul Auster, the author expounds his views on this. He writes eloquently on the fact that when we read, we fill in the details. If we are given a single detail about a room or an individual, then we, as readers, make up the rest. The reader is inventive, so the writer only needs to be suggestive. Auster argues that story is always key – and that if we become too side-tracked by ‘beautiful description’ we will lose the reader.

There is a fine balance to be achieved here – and every writer has his or her unique style. But the key point is not to be fooled by thinking that lush language makes great writing. Just because you’ve read the opening to Dickens’ ‘Bleak House’ or Hardy’s ‘The Return of the Native’ doesn’t mean that you have to strive for the same effect. On the other hand, you don’t have to go for sparseness just because you’ve read Auster. Your style is your style; your voice is your voice.

But if you write with a sense of direction – both in terms of the individual scene and also in relation to having a potential end-point in mind - then you will achieve momentum and pace.

**This will keep the reader turning the pages.**

# Exercise Fifteen – Day Fifteen

(15,000 words)

## Options 1 & 2:

In your planning today, ask: ‘What direction do I wish this scene to take and how will this progress my characters on their journey?’ Or, for non-fiction ask: ‘How will this progress my overall argument?’ Then, dive in, focussing on movement and action primarily. Don’t get bogged down in detail. Let’s have some *events*.

## Option 2:

### Fiction:

A character sees a bus go past in the street and is convinced that one of the passengers he/she glimpsed is a person from his/her own past. What does the character do (what action does the character take?) as a result of this sighting? Keep it dramatic and keep up the pace.

### Non-fiction:

Write an extract with the central intention of keeping your reader engaged in the movement of the scene. How will you grip your reader?

## Day Sixteen – ‘Which side of the brain are you working on?’

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“There are no days more full in childhood than those days that were not lived at all, the days lost in a favourite book ... Nowadays, only when I am writing am I able to find again that complete absorption when all sense of time is lost, maybe once in a year or two. It is a strange and complete kind of happiness...”

– **John McGahern**

What is this state of ‘complete absorption’, described by John McGahern? Do you recognise it? Have you experienced days when you are so involved in your work that the outside world seems to vanish and the words flow perfectly and effortlessly? I know I have. If I were to take that one stage further, I might even say that when in such a state, I feel as if I am being dictated to by some force larger than myself.

We all have different religious beliefs. I consider myself an agnostic and remain in awe at the potential of the human spirit. I take a great interest in coincidence and I know that ‘stuff’ happens that I can’t explain.

I believe that the experience of being truly ‘in the zone’ when we’re writing is in fact a kind of spiritual experience and tends to happen, for me, only when I’m really deeply involved with the characters and the story, at a later stage of the work, once I have fully explored the world I’m writing about.

When we reach this point, our invention has become bigger than ourselves. It has become so real for us that it seems to take on a life of its own. It’s not mysterious even; it’s just a fact that invention can seem real in our imaginations. When we write – in that particular, inspired way - we are drawing on our entire subconscious mind, on every experience, every thought we have ever had. We are making some sense of our experience through story.

This experience is often described as ‘writing on the Right side of the brain’. I believe that when we are in the *process* of writing, it is always our Right brain, the creative, free-thinking side of the brain that we should be accessing. The Left brain should be kept right out of it. The Left brain, as you may know, is responsible for logical thought – and thus for doubt and self-criticism. We need to keep it out of the process of composition. We are aiming, through using our Right brain, to access the story that is larger than ourselves. When we are able to do that, we can get to the point of truly believing in the fictional world we have created.

I experienced this belief when I returned to Cley, Norfolk, five years after the publication of my novel ‘Bluethroat Morning’. As I walked towards the beach, I was aware of the footsteps of my heroine, Alison Bliss, who walked that path towards her own death. It seemed impossible to me that everybody on the beach that day didn’t know this was the path Alison Bliss took – that they weren’t all experiencing the same profound emotions that I was experiencing *Didn’t they know this was where she killed herself? Didn’t they know about Arabella, her husband’s Victorian ancestor who had walked along that same beach, in the bustle dress, in a high wind, just months before she also took her own life?*

In writing, we create a personal truth. When readers engage in our work, it becomes a more universal truth. But we can only reach that stage if we allow ourselves to work using the Right side of the brain – and to work organically. These two things are in effect one and the same.

The following experiences are Left brain experiences:

- ★ Self-criticism
- ★ Desire for perfection
- ★ The editing process
- ★ Plotting the entire novel in advance

The Left brain has a role in writing. Indeed, the interaction between the two sides of the brain is always present in any writing experience. After all, we have to choose the right words, the best words, and naturally the Left brain is always going to be chipping in there.

I suggest planning before a writing session because that allows the Left brain to do its best work. **At that stage we can then lock the door and kick him out until it's time to invite him back inside.**

Perhaps everything can be summed up in this simple fact:

**Dreaming is Right brain activity.**

## Exercise Sixteen – Day Sixteen

(15,000 words or more)

### Options 1 & 2:

For those undertaking the 30,000 word challenge, there is no required word-count today. We'll catch up later. Why? Because although this course has many benefits, having a daily word count target can occasionally induce anxiety. And anxiety is not good for Right brain thinking.

Long-term, as writers, I don't want you to obsess about word count at all. Your long term aim is to be 'in the zone' regularly. Turn up often at your writing desk. That is all.

### **Today, progress your writing work at your own pace.**

Set yourself up for success in any way you know how. Think about your ideal writing conditions: Where do you write best? What props do you need? Music? A clear desk? Scent? Aim to become deeply absorbed in your own creation. Take your time. Focus on being in the moment with your work.

**Option 2:**

**Fiction:**

Open your scene with these words (change to 1st person or change the sex of the protagonist if you wish):

‘Sometimes, when he really thought about it, he understood that people do change. There was nothing he could do to stop them from changing, even though his only desire was to keep everything exactly as it had always been.’

**Non-fiction:**

Write an extract that has a strong visual element. Slow down the pace of your writing. Get the reader to ‘see’ what you see.

## Day Seventeen – ‘The importance of the Signpost’

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“Many (modern novels) have a beginning, a muddle and an end.”

– Philip Larkin

Today we’ll focus on the use of the ‘signpost’ in your writing work. When you use good ‘signposts’, you can more easily avoid the ‘muddle’ that Philip Larkin refers to.

We’re going to continue to consider what keeps a reader turning the page. Naturally, in fiction, great characters and a fabulous, enthralling plot will be vital ingredients. In non-fiction, it’s important that the subject matter is fascinating and that it’s written in an engaging and approachable voice.

**I think of ‘signposts’ as the nuts and bolts of writing.**

Let’s begin with non-fiction. I work with a lot of clients who are writing books as business tools: the writer’s intention is that the books will prove his or her expertise in a particular business.

So many of the manuscripts I read lack clear signposts. I’m talking, here, about the old-fashioned dictum referred to by Larkin above: have a beginning a middle and an end. Tell them what you’re going to say; say it; tell them what you said.

That may seem pretty obvious, but it’s amazing how many writers of non-fiction forget to give directions. You wouldn’t do that of course, *but* we can all take these simple rules one step further. The reader needs to know, at all times, *why* he or she should continue reading.

There are many different ways of placing these ‘signposts’ that will ensure the reader remains engaged. You can think of it as a kind of orienteering and you can use a number of different methods to ensure your reader feels safe and stays with you.

Here are some examples:

- ★ In a business or ‘how to’ book, consider an introduction or preface which clearly states what the reader will gain from reading the book – the benefits to the reader are key.
- ★ Consider prefacing each chapter in such a way that it’s made clear what the reader will gain/learn from that chapter to ensure that they keep reading to get that benefit
- ★ In a different kind of non-fiction book – for example a history book – engage the reader at the beginning of each chapter with an anecdote or story that will really grab their attention. Human interest rather than dry theory is key to maintaining reader interest. This is vital in all non-fiction books – use story to make it come alive
- ★ Always bear the word ‘orientation’ in mind when writing. Is the reader likely to be getting lost? If so, give them a verbal map!
- ★ For self-help books, engage the reader with case histories, examples of outcomes and exercises. Think of the reader as the central character. The reader wants to go on a journey with you and they want an outcome.
- ★ Consider the pattern or structure of your book. Take this ebook as an example. The format of each day is repeated and this gives you a sense of purchase and security. If I suddenly changed the format, you would feel disorientated and let-down.

In fiction, for ‘signposting’ read ‘foreshadowing’. Foreshadowing is vital in fiction as it gives the reader a hint of what lies ahead and keeps them desperately turning the page, eagerly awaiting the event that you have hinted at.

Foreshadowing is effectively the art of the well-placed intriguing comment. For example:

‘I didn’t know then quite how this would affect me – nor did I know that the single action I took that day would have such a terrible outcome for me and for Samuel.’

Or,

‘Later, it would become clear how that moment had been instrumental in changing Morgan’s future; she would look back and understand that her entire fate had been decided in that instant...’

You get the idea. We are telling the reader that something is going to change forever for a character and if they only read on, they’ll be given the juicy details that will reveal all. But for now, they had better stay with us...

I’ll tell you my favourite thing about foreshadowing. You can use it as a cheat: not only to intrigue the reader, but also to intrigue yourself. You don’t have to know ‘the terrible outcome’, you simply have to know that there is one. You, the writer, are kept engaged by the desire to find out the answer for yourself...

## Exercise Seventeen – Day Seventeen

(16,500 words)

### Options 1 & 2:

Don't want you to obsess about the word count today – but you're aiming to write around 1500 if possible.

Free-write but have the idea of the well-placed sign-post in the back of your mind as you work.

### Option 2:

#### Fiction:

Write an intriguing statement, like one of the examples above, that will draw the reader forward and use this as a starting point for your work.

#### Non-fiction:

Consider how the structure of your book might help the reader.

Today, write a chapter or excerpt that makes it clear what the reader will gain right from the start of that excerpt. Write in a reader-focussed way: use human interest, case-study, exercises

Or:

Begin your writing today with a 'story'. This is non-fiction, but it must use a story to illustrate your point.

# Day Eighteen – ‘The Plot Thickens – A note for writers of fiction’

I have argued passionately for putting character first when writing fiction. I have argued against plotting your novel in advance. My reasoning, you will remember, is that I believe it is vital to allow our characters to live and breathe if we are to create stories that will draw the reader in and engage them deeply. If we plot coldly in advance, the characters are in danger of playing out their lives to suit the plot – thus there is no room for character growth and development and little room for the unexpected.

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“When the plot flags, bring in a man with a gun.”

– Raymond Chandler

I believe that we all have an instinctive feel for what makes a good story. We have been surrounded by story all our lives – in the fairy-tales we hear as children, the books we read, the movies we watch. One of the reasons I have faith in the organic method of writing fiction is that I wrote both of my two first novels without ever formally studying ‘plot theory’, yet many times I have been told that my novels are intricately plotted. I went with my gut. I didn’t have a map. Even screenwriting guru Robert McKee (who is heavy on the theory) writes:

**“Story is about eternal, universal forms, not formulas”**

However: in 1999, I was asked to teach a course on screenwriting. At the time I had some experience of screenwriting, having studied on a short course at UEA and having worked with a producer and writer who were adapting ‘The Temple of Hymen’ for the screen. But in truth, I said yes to the job because I wanted to use that year to teach myself the art of screenwriting and to

write my own first screenplay. That was when I first read McKee and Syd Field, Joseph Cameron and others like them. It was the first time I had considered the theory of plotting.

As a result, my beliefs changed somewhat. I now believe that we must allow our characters to come first and we must allow the story to grow organically – BUT if we also have an understanding of theory, then, when we reach a certain stage of the novel – in my case, often a third of the way in – we can step back, get the Left-brain in gear again and say: OK, what does this story need that's not there? How does the theory fit into this?

Equally, if we know the theory, we can ask ourselves a few key questions before we begin writing that will give us the 'direction' that I wrote about a couple of days ago.

This course isn't the place to give you the full theory of plot structure. Indeed, I wouldn't suggest reading McKee when you are mid-way through a novel. (But it's an interesting and challenging 'between-projects' read). However, in the long-term, do aim to read widely on theories of plot structure, as it will benefit your instinctive work too.

In the meantime, today's exercise will serve as an introduction to Hollywood plot structure. Even if you favour a more European art-house style, I'd suggest you try-out the exercise. It may spark something for you, even if that 'something' is a rebellion.

# Exercise Eighteen – Day Eighteen

**(18,000 words)**

If you aiming to write 30,000 words in the 30 days, aim to write 1500 words today.

**Option 2:**

**Fiction:**

## **Steps in Plotting - An Exercise in Traditional Hollywood Plot Structure**

Take this one step at a time – there is no pressure to complete all these steps. These are thinking points/starting points only...

1. What kind of story is this/what genre? Is this a thriller/historical fiction/romance? What's your form - a novel, a short story, a film script? If a short story, how will you ensure that the subject matter is not too large for the form?
2. Consider the central characters. Is there anything you don't yet know about them? What do you need to know?
3. What is the central character's main desire? What is he/she looking to achieve in the course of the story? This will form the story 'arc'.
4. What is the character's conscious desire? What is the character's (often more important) unconscious desire? Often the outcome of the narrative is that the character will achieve his unconscious desire.

5. What event sparks off the story and gets it in motion – we call this the inciting incident. It is often a change or crisis in the character's life. What is the point of departure for the story? If a literary thriller for example, is it a murder? The incident that drove someone to murder? A police officer's personal problems?
6. What is getting in the way of the character's desire? What obstacles does she/he face that will need to be overcome?
7. Begin to daydream about the main events of the story. Let your pen flow. What might happen? You don't have to be committed to these events...
8. What are the major complications in the story? For example, unpleasant events that happen to the character that he or she would prefer not to happen – a block or obstacle. Aim to have a major complication in mind plus some minor ones too.
9. Will the protagonist succeed or fail at reaching his/her objective?
10. At what point does the reader/viewer realise that the protagonist will succeed or fail?
11. What will the 'anti-climax' be at the end of the story – the point where we think it's going to end in one way, but at the last minute it ends in another way?
12. Look at the story again. What are the main 'plot points'? These are the events that occur throughout the story which take the story and swing it around in another direction, forcing the protagonist to stop and change direction. This gives the story its ups and downs and creates excitement and trepidation for the reader/viewer.

If any of these questions take you off at a tangent – great – that’s the idea!

**Non-fiction:**

How might you use the structure of a traditional Hollywood plot to help the structure of your own book?

## Day Nineteen – ‘When is the right time for editing?’

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“In art economy is always beauty.”

– Henry James

First off – Henry James was right. It may seem odd that a person encouraging others to be prolific and to free-write, is suddenly championing the cause of a purist like James. But in fact, I am a purist. Students in my writing class have been known to look at me aghast when, in a lesson on editing, I say things like, “check that every sentence is perfectly formed”.

When I wrote the first draft of this ebook, I wrote quickly, rushing to get the words down. I posted the first draft on my blog and worked for no more than an hour a day. As I edit, however, I see the errors, the things that make me cringe, the repetitions. I do the same when editing my novels. I am a perfectionist (though admittedly not on a Jamesian scale). I write literary fiction and the style of my writing matters to me.

Our focus today is on a practical tip that I’d like to pass on. This tip will pander to the perfectionist in you. Some may use the method already, but to others it will be new. It’s not a ‘rule’. It’s simply something that works for me.

**My suggestion is that you make editing a regular part of your writing life.**

When you are in the process of composition, keep moving forwards, don’t let the critical voices cut in. But when you have finished your writing, print it up and lay it on your desk. Then, either in the evening when you are relaxed or the following morning over a cup of coffee, curl up in your favourite armchair with a pencil and annotate what you’ve written. Get the Left brain in gear

and edit it, make it right. Think about getting the sentences ‘just-so’, making them better; focus particularly on flow.

I’m not suggesting that you cut out great swathes of your work but rather that you make the work you have done better. Then, next time you are at your desk, spend the first 15-30 minutes making these corrections as a way of getting back into the work, before you move forward. (I know, this eats into ‘planning time’ but as you get better at planning, you’ll find that the planning becomes quicker and easier, it happens more subconsciously, or in journals)

It’s important that you find a way of working that is most effective for you. I used to use the printing out/pencil annotating method, but lately I simply begin my writing day by asking myself a few questions about the scene I’m about to write. Then I spend half an hour editing what I wrote yesterday straight onto the screen. There are no hard and fast rules. But I believe that if you incorporate this editing process – making your work, sentence by sentence, better – into your writing routine then you will:

1. Find that you have a regular way of getting into the flow of your work.
2. Understand that you can write well and that the ‘shitty first draft’ is just that – because you see the more polished second draft emerging daily.

**It doesn’t matter if you don’t manage to edit everything you wrote the day before. What matters is that editing forms a regular part of your working pattern, so that you constantly see there are parts of your work that are shaping up beautifully. This helps you to gain confidence and to believe that, in time, the entire work will be this polished.**

## **Exercise Nineteen – Day Nineteen**

**(19,000 words)**

### **Options 1 & 2:**

Experiment with the above methods. Start your working day by spending half an hour reworking yesterday's work. Sometimes this may even mean cutting it, at other times expanding it and letting it go deeper. Then, press forward with new material immediately afterwards.

## Day Twenty – ‘A writer’s integrity’

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‘Tyranny, oppression, moral degeneration, persecution and mass killing have always and everywhere started with the pollution of the language, with making it sound clean and decent where it should have been base and violent (‘the new order’, ‘final solution’, ‘temporary measures’, ‘limited restrictions’) or else with making the language sound coarse and bestial where it should have been humane and delicate (‘parasites’, ‘social insects’, ‘political cancer’ etc.)’

– **Amos Oz** in his essay ‘**The Artist and Integrity**’

Amos Oz’s essay examines the concept of integrity as it applies to both the writer and the tyrant. He also writes, ‘Isn’t every censorship in the world an indirect manifestation of awe and admiration for the power of the writers’ words?’

The concept of ‘integrity’ as it applies to our writing is vital. Oz argues that as writers, we may not be able to be ‘whole’ and ‘intact’ – both definitions of integrity. In his view, we are characterised by our being fragmented. ‘Isn’t the poet or the writer dealing with mosaic rather than with a block of marble? Fascinated by the differential rather than the integral of things?’

I am fascinated by Oz’s views because I have been struggling with the concept of ‘integrity’ for some time. As a coach, it’s a concept I come across frequently, yet I’ve been questioning what it means and whether it is indeed possible to be ‘in integrity’ at all times – both in our lives and in our work.

For example, sometimes I question whether it is ‘in integrity’ for me to spend half of my working life encouraging others to write. I wonder whether there is more “serious” work I might be doing, whether I am too distracted from my own writing work, whether there’s any real value in what I’m doing. ‘Hey’ says the voice in my head, ‘don’t you have a book to write? What is all this ‘Writing Coach’ stuff anyhow?’

Yet my personal interpretation of the idea of being ‘in integrity’ is being entirely true to oneself: acting on one’s gut; doing what one feels to be right.

The truth is that it feels ‘right’ to both write and coach: supporting others to find their voice as I also struggle to find my own.

So it was a relief to me to read Oz’s essay. It helped me to understand that, as writers, it is vital to explore the contradictions in ourselves and in others. It allowed me to feel more comfortable with using different styles of writing. The essay helped me to understand that it is ‘in integrity’ to have contradictions. Perhaps, if we understand the contradictions within ourselves, we will develop deeper integrity. Contradiction is in fact a form of wholeness.

But what has all this to do with your writing?

I believe that if you consistently question your own integrity, you will develop a greater sense of responsibility – to yourself and to others. I believe it is our duty, as writers, to continually question why we are writing what we write. Are we being true to ourselves in our work, for example, or are we simply writing for a market? Are we developing a voice that is our own, or are we just imitating another writer in the hope of following in their footsteps? It’s possible we are indeed writing for a market in order to support ourselves and our family. That decision is ‘in integrity’ too.

I’m not saying you have to write serious political works: you don’t have to be an Amos Oz or a Nadine Gordimer. I suggest that being present in your own work is enough. Be dedicated to finding your own voice, speaking your own truth, whatever that may be.

This process of knowing oneself as a writer takes time. It’s a journey. Sometimes shortcuts are possible. Sometimes a person may write a book in six months that becomes a massive best-seller. Most likely that person had something pressing to say, whether it be a story to tell or a passionate

argument to put forward. That person was writing something so unique and true to him/herself that it stood out to every person who read it. Thus, the book made it through the slush-pile; the publisher sat up and took notice.

As you embark upon (or continue with) a writing life, it is vital however, that you pause, frequently, to consider whether your work is indeed in integrity. Are you doing work that you believe in? Do you get a buzz from it? Are you expressing a personal truth? Is the voice fully your own?

If you don't believe in the work and you don't get a buzz from it and the voice is not fully your own – then I want you to question why. Ask yourself what you're going to do about this?

Today is Day 20 of the 'Writing Coach' programme. As the second part of the programme comes to an end, the foundations are now in place for you to move towards Part Three: 'Setting yourself up for Writing Success'. But before you move forwards, do take some time to get comfortable with how far you've come and congratulate yourself for how much you've achieved. I want you to find an extra half hour today to journal on the subject of your own writing integrity and how you keep integrity central in the work that you do.

## Exercise Twenty – Day Twenty

(20,000 words)

### **Options 1 & 2:**

Write a journal entry on your personal integrity as a writer.

### **Then – a little later in the day:**

Write a scene or chapter that expresses something that you consider to be a personal truth. This does not have to be in diary or memoir form. Rather, in your work-in-progress, get as close as you can to the reason you're writing in the first place.

## Part Three

**Days 21-30: Set yourself up for writing success**

- ★ Day Twenty-One: Reading ‘outside of the box’
- ★ Day Twenty-Two: How to write great dialogue
- ★ Day Twenty-Three: How to develop confidence as a writer
- ★ Day Twenty-Four: Notes on the editing process
- ★ Day Twenty-Five: Do it for love not fame
- ★ Day Twenty-Six: Hone that voice
- ★ Day Twenty-Seven: Cultivate self-love
- ★ Day Twenty-Eight: The advice of Henry James
- ★ Day Twenty-Nine: Be passionate
- ★ Day Thirty: Get support

**If you follow every writing exercise, by the end of Part Three, you will have written 30,000 words.**

## Day Twenty-One – ‘Reading ‘outside of the box’’

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‘Read, read, read. Read everything – trash, classics, good and bad, and see how they do it. Just like a carpenter who works as an apprentice and studies the master. Read! You’ll absorb it. Then write. If it’s good, you’ll find out. If it’s not, throw it out of the window.’

– **William Faulkner**

Congratulations! You’ve made it through the first two stages of the programme and you are now ready to begin Part 3: Set yourself up for Writing Success.

It might seem obvious to encourage writers to read. Yet I once taught a creative writing class in which I asked the students to come along to class with a reading from one of their favourite books. I wanted them to explain why a particular book had such an impact on them. I was pretty shocked when a couple of students asked what the point of the exercise was. ‘Isn’t this supposed to be a writing class?’ they said.

Now, I know that you wouldn’t ask a question like that. But I make wide reading part of the ‘Get Black on White’ programme because if you are ready to develop as a writer, you might want to consider taking your reading to the next level. I want you to read ‘outside of the box’.

What I mean by this is that you should go beyond your comfort zone in your reading. Many writers make the mistake of being narrow readers, reading only in their own genre for example, or only reading one type of book. The fiction writer may only read fiction, the historian only history, the businesswoman, only business books. Of course, having a broad knowledge of your own area of expertise is important. Indeed, it places you way ahead of the breed of writers who claim they

‘don’t need to read in order to write great books’ (Yes, they do exist, believe me). Yet if you’re really ready to forge ahead and become a better writer than you ever imagined possible, then think about broadening your reading.

Reading has never been so popular as it is today. ‘Book clubs’ are springing up everywhere and this development can only be positive. However, do be aware of the traps you may fall into if you allow your reading to be overly guided by others. I’ve been a member of a book club in the past, but one of the difficulties I found was that my reading was following an agenda not set by myself, but by others. You can fall into a similar trap if you end up reading ‘everything that ‘Richard and Judy’ or ‘Oprah’ recommends’; or even ‘everything on the Orange Prize shortlist’. Whilst you’d gain a lot from reading that shortlist - your understanding of what makes good literature would doubtless deepen – you might gain even more if you chose your reading even more carefully.

For me, the most fruitful times in my reading and writing life have been when I’ve read in a way that I call ‘following the trail’. By this I mean, each book leads to another and in this way, one finds that one is on a path of discovery, that one is making mental connections all the time, one’s knowledge of a subject deepens. For example, you may read a novel that fictionalises the life of a particular painter, then you are led to a biography of that painter, which in turn encourages you to read a book about Modernism; there you read a passage about the Spanish Civil War, so you dive into a study of that; you become more engaged in Spanish history but then want to know how that has affected Contemporary Spain... and so on...

The more we broaden our minds and our awareness of the writing styles of others, the better our writing will be. So often, people who want to write are looking for the ‘quick fix’ but they forget that although it is possible to write a book quickly, in most cases, it is better to think about a

‘writing life’.

As we move towards success as writers, our aim should be to constantly develop. We develop as writers by developing our minds and our awareness of the world in which we live: a world which resists categorisation; a world which is made richer by great writing.

My aim here is not to overwhelm you with all that you have not read. Rather, I want you to take your reading, like your writing, in stages.

As Anne Lamott said, about writing: ‘just do it bird by bird’. Focus on no more than one or two books at a time. Be original in your choices and remember to push yourself beyond your comfort zone. Your writing can only get better as a result.

## **Exercise Twenty-One – Day Twenty-One**

**(20,500 words)**

### **Options 1 & 2:**

Make a list of all the books you’d really LOVE to read that would also push you intellectually. Pick up that book from the library and start to read it.

For your writing today, focus on quality, not quantity. Simply continue your work in progress, but slow it down and get in the zone.

## Day Twenty-Two – ‘How to write great dialogue’

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“I just notice a feeling from people. I notice particularly the cadence of their voices, the sort of phrases they’ll use, and that’s what I’m all the time trying to hear in my head, how people word things – because everybody speaks an entirely different language, that’s really what it amounts to.”

– Frank O’Connor

Whether you are writing fiction or non-fiction, writing great dialogue will be a key part of your work. Naturally, writers of fiction will immediately see the benefit of understanding how best to use dialogue in their work; but non-fiction books invariably need a human element too – and engaging dialogue can provide that.

I’d like to share with you some notes on writing dialogue in the form of questions and answers that I developed when I began working as a teacher of creative writing. I hope they prove useful to you.

### **1. What’s the function of dialogue in a book?**

Dialogue is an essential for really bringing a book alive. It not only expresses character, it also enables the reader to get closer to a character, to believe in him or her. It would take an immensely skilful writer to make a book function without dialogue. Dialogue is what brings drama to a scene – often moves a scene from the mode of ‘telling’ to ‘showing’. When we use dialogue, we have slowed the story down to the pace of real life; we allow our characters to live and breathe.

## **2. Should dialogue in a book be the same as actual dialogue?**

If you were to record a conversation in a bar and then transcribe it, it's unlikely it would make good fiction. The conversation may have some great moments, but it is also likely to be repetitive and sometimes dull. In a book, the writer should aim to eradicate the dullness from the dialogue, including dialogue only when it has a purpose in the narrative or really adds something to character development. Dialogue in a narrative should be more than just a banal conversation. The scene must have direction. Through the dialogue, the change that takes place in the character's internal life is often revealed or hinted at.

## **3. How is that sense of direction achieved?**

A fictional scene is often like a kind of intensified reality. In other words, the writer is trying to write a naturalistic scene, yet is actually improving on reality. The writer is looking for the 'essence' of the conversation and the rhythm. Ask yourself – What is the purpose of this conversation? To push the plot forward? To illustrate character? Unless you are writing an experimental narrative, it's likely you are aiming to write dialogue that sounds realistic. This can be achieved through use of the colloquial or through hesitation and specific key phrases a character might use. Yet you are also aiming to 'cut out the fat'. Your dialogue must have a purpose.

#### **4. How can I tell if my dialogue is working?**

Try reading your dialogue aloud, as if you were an actor, rehearsing for a play. If you're aiming to write in a naturalistic style – ask yourself – do I believe this? Does it sound real? Would these characters *really* say this? Or has my dialogue become stilted and unnatural? Reading aloud can give you a perspective on your work.

#### **5. How do I differentiate between characters?**

Characters should not be mouthpieces for authors' views. Remember – in real life, dialogue has many different functions. We use it to communicate, but we also often hide behind what we say – or do not say what we mean. In Kazuo Ishiguro's novel 'The Remains of the Day', the narrator's dialogue rarely expresses his true emotion.

When writing dialogue, try not to use it simply to further plot, but to give us a true idea of how a character would speak. You're trying to get inside of your character (remember – 'a novelist is a person who can live in other people's skins' – EL Doctorow)

The words a character uses can tell us a great deal about that character, as can their rhythms of speech. Is your character hesitant? Does s/he talk without thinking or is every word considered? What kind of language do they choose? Does the character have an accent, use slang or only the Queen's English? (To get the dialogue right for Ern Higham, an old Norfolk man in my novel 'Bluethroat Morning', I visited the National Sound Archive to listen to men just like him, in conversation)

It's important, when drawing your characters, to bear their personal concerns in mind. What subjects are they drawn to? What engages their interest? What kind of metaphors (if any) are they likely to use?

Don't forget – to continue yesterday's theme – when you're reading, consider how other authors achieve great dialogue. What, for you, constitutes dialogue that is really successful?

## Exercise Twenty-Two – Day Twenty-Two

(22,000 words)

### Option 1:

Continue your work-in-progress (1500 words today). Consider experimenting with dialogue.

### Option 2:

1500 words today

### Fiction:

Write a scene in which a character attempts to persuade another character to act against his or her will. The scene must begin with dialogue and we must be plunged right into the scene. The narrator must be denied access to the thoughts of at least one of the characters.

Dialogue must be a key component of this scene, but it should not be written purely in dialogue form.

**A few points to consider:**

- ★ Think carefully about how truthful the characters are being. Is there anything they are not revealing?
- ★ Ask yourself whether the rhythms of their speech seem accurate - allow for pauses and for awkwardness.
- ★ Remember - characters cannot always clearly express themselves.
- ★ Aim for accurate dialogue - think about accent and choice of words.

**Non-fiction:**

Look back at some of the scenes you have written to date. Could any of these scenes be expanded by increasing the human-interest angle? Might dialogue contribute to this? Consider extending your word-count today by adding something to a scene you have already written.

## Day Twenty-Three – ‘How to develop confidence as a writer’

As you have reached Day Twenty-Three of the programme, you have also overcome one of the biggest stumbling blocks to many writers: your own fear. As you move forwards with your writing life, this knowledge – that you need never fear the blank page – will be key and will give you an advantage over many others who believe they ‘have a book inside them’ yet never take action to express themselves.

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"Let every man be respected as an individual and no man idolised."

– **Albert Einstein**

What I want for you, as a writer, is that you will continue with your writing project and perhaps with your writing life, as a writer who is deeply confident and unaffected by the vagaries of the publishing world. I want you to write wonderful books and to have a broad readership. All that is possible and awaits you.

Remember my equation:

Good writing + Joy in the process + Self-belief + Long-term persistence will out.

Where by ‘out’ I mean that you will have recognition. Sometimes it may happen quickly, sometimes it may take longer. But it will happen and the formula works. That persistence may need to include marketing activities, multiple submissions, self-publishing or writing several books. But it will add up to a writing life that has meaning in the world.

Of course, the first part of the formula is an essential one. ‘Good writing’ is vital if we are to have confidence in ourselves and get our books published. I have no magic wand and I’m not saying that confidence, alone, is enough. Rather, we must be dedicated to learning our craft – and understand that this is a long-term and on-going process.

If you are using this programme to write a non-fiction book, you may say ‘but I need to write a business book and I only have six months’. That’s fine. Be clear about your message, get advice from a good literary consultant or coach, and you may be able to fast track the process. It all depends on how clear you are about your message or story and how developed your writing skills already are.

If you are writing fiction, the same may apply. People do write books in short periods of time. My friend and colleague Kate Harrison amazed me when she wrote her first novel using only evenings and weekends in around four months.

There are no rules here. Many people who write first books quickly have in fact been ‘preparing’ for that moment for years, by reading widely and ‘outside the box’, by writing during their working life, by gaining expertise in their sphere. This is all part of being dedicated to our craft. Becoming a writer is a continuous learning process that may involve many aspects, including:

- ★ Wide general reading
- ★ Regular writing
- ★ Study of technique and theory
- ★ Attending writing classes or getting feedback from peers
- ★ Detailed research
- ★ Using a coach or literary consultant to fast track the process

- ★ Building a good website
- ★ Learning about social networking and marketing
- ★ Researching the publishing world
- ★ Understanding e-publishing

If you are doing a selection of the above activities then you know you are on track.

The next stage is to be certain that you do have ‘joy in the process’. The writing life is full of ups and downs and if you do not actually enjoy it, then I highly recommend that you don’t pursue it. Is there something else that you would rather be doing? This may seem an odd question, but it is a vital one. I know several ex-writers who are happier now than when they were writing. Equally, I know many writers who are deeply content. We don’t have to be writers. Nobody said you weren’t free to change your mind.

Do the work you love. Write the book that you want to write, not the book you feel you ought to. If you do that, and you follow the advice above on dedicating yourself to your craft, you can’t go far wrong.

On Day Twenty-Five I will elaborate on ‘self-belief’, under the title ‘Do it for Love not Fame’. Too many writers spend too much time worrying about the publishing world – and this is one of the biggest causes of writerly self-doubt.

But for today, I want you to know that you can have confidence as a writer because so long as you are devoted to your craft, you will become the writer you dream of being. The world may not recognise you today. But remember – that didn’t stop Van Gogh. Was he a lesser artist because

the world didn't recognise his talent in his day? And No, I'm not suggesting you model yourself on Vincent. I take no responsibility for severed ears! I'm just saying that if you receive a few rejection slips, it doesn't matter. It wasn't the right agent/publisher for you. And you have a choice. You can:

- ★ Spend the day sobbing and saying 'I'll never get anywhere as a writer'
- ★ Choose to see this as an opportunity. You have received your manuscript back – great! You can find an agent who might really enjoy it. Perhaps the next agent will give you some useful feedback to help take your writing to the next level

In every situation you have a choice. Every day you make choices.

**Choose to be confident today.**

## Exercise Twenty-Three – Day Twenty-Three (23,000 words)

### **Options 1 & 2:**

Today, choose to be confident. Aim to quieten the negative voices and focus on the work itself.

### **Option 2:**

#### **Fiction:**

##### **A ‘Sense of Place’ exercise:**

Choose an artist whose work inspires you – in particular think about landscape artists.

Look at a few reproductions of the artist’s work and write a response to that work. If you can, find a way of weaving this into your fiction

#### **Non-fiction:**

Is there a chapter that you’re simply longing to write – but you’ve put it off, because it’s not consecutive? Plunge into writing the chapter that makes you feel really inspired.

## Day Twenty-Four – ‘Notes on the Editing Process’

By now you have written enough to be able to take a little time out to sit back and consider what you’ve done. Do not, however, be too ruthless with yourself. Simply be aware that every writer needs time for reflection and revision. You will be able to edit more extensively, later, when the 30 days are over. For now, just play with editing and experiment.

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‘Half my life is an act of revision.’

– John Irving

### Points to consider when editing your work:

1. Have you allowed enough time for the work to ‘settle’ and for you to gain objectivity?
2. Have you printed up the work and are you working with a pen in a comfortable place?  
Many writers feel that scribbling on the manuscript is far better than editing on-screen. It’s a personal thing, but do try it this way. It can give a real objectivity: the feeling that you are editing someone else’s work.
3. Have you looked at the story as a whole and thought about what is working and what is not? Do you need to be thinking about a story-edit rather than a line by line edit?

4. If it is a story-edit, consider whether every scene drives your main narrative or your sub-plot/s forward? Are your characters developing in every scene? Is there a satisfactory and consistent structure here?
5. Do you feel satisfied with your characterisation? This links to plotting – how is character demonstrated through plot – do yours change during the story? What do they learn and how do they grow?
6. Is the Point of View consistent or if not consistent is there a structure to the Point of View?
7. Are there scenes that need to be taken out altogether and are there any missing scenes?
8. Have you asked another person to read your work and give detailed feedback? Have you asked yet another person to do the same? Feedback is subjective.
9. When editing ‘line by line’, look out for dead description (‘hoopeddoodle’) but keep vibrant strong description that shows clear and original observation.
10. Are there passages that would make the reader put the book down? This includes dull description, scenes that take us nowhere, language that is imprecise and tells us little and points where the plot slows?
11. How’s the dialogue? If you read it aloud, do you believe that people would really say that? Are the voices differentiated, not only by their choice of words but also by the subjects they focus on in what they say?
12. Have you cut out every cliché? Look out for phrases you have heard a million times before, unless you are making a point about a character who speaks in clichés (and even then, watch it...)

13. Are you showing and not telling?

14. Most importantly of all – what does your gut tell you about each sentence as you read it?

Is it the best and strongest sentence you can write? Would you feel comfortable in the hands of the writer if you read this in a book?

## Exercise Twenty-Four – Day Twenty-Four

(23,500 words)

### Options 1 & 2:

Don't worry about the word-count today. Your task is to spend some time editing your work to date. Get comfortable and enjoy scribbling with your red pen! Then type up the revised scene. How does it read now?

## Day Twenty-Five – ‘Do it for Love not Fame’

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"A writer who becomes a Star, I think, loses a little or a lot of their equilibrium... They're too concerned with divining what their massive public desires of them...They aren't writing for themselves any more."

– **Paul Magrs**

Personally I don't think there's anything wrong with wanting to be famous. It's an inspiring thought – to imagine one's art reaching a broad audience; having that kind of influence. But to create only with fame in mind is setting ourselves up for disappointment and frustration and it is very likely that in the course of such a journey, one might fall out of love with the art form. Caught up in the desire for success and the validation of the world, we lose our passion. And if the passion goes from the art, what is left?

When I look about me, I see a lot of unhappiness and frustration in the literary world. I believe this stems from a common misconception - that if we are serious 'writers' then we should, by rights, be getting publication, money and critical acclaim – and we should be getting it now! Yet as I've said before, no one ever asked us to write. The literary world does not owe us a living. If we write, it should be because it is what we love to do – and I believe, in time and with a clear idea of the value of our work to the marketplace, the rest will inevitably follow. There is no easy and direct equation here – although never underestimate the power of a brilliant book accompanied by an excellent book proposal! The literary world may sometimes appear difficult to penetrate, but it is not closed. You do, however, have to provide the right product with the right package and you may have to become rather thick-skinned in the process.

The main point I want to make today is this:

**Until you have sold at least one book, don't look to writing books for your income!**

It seems harsh and I want to qualify it. I see nothing wrong with taking a sabbatical to write. Several of my clients have left the corporate world to become writers – and I support them in this wholeheartedly, because in every case they have ensured they have a financial reserve to sustain them through this period. Indeed, I became a writer in this way – by saving up enough to study for my MA in Creative Writing. During that year, I began my second novel (my first was unpublished). The first novel got me an agent, the second secured me a publisher – which meant I did not have to return to work.

I think a yearlong sabbatical is a great idea – so long as you have a financial reserve and you set up support systems for yourself over the course of that year (whether it be a creative writing class, a course, a writing group or a coach). It's also important to be aware that there are no guarantees that you will recoup your money during that first year.

In my view– the sabbatical scenario aside – writers should have some other form of income. We should find our income elsewhere (whether through a part or full-time job, our own business, freelance journalism etc.). This way, we can look to our writing as our art – an art that we can develop, in a non-pressurised environment. Frankly, starving in a garret never did it for me.

I believe that Paul Magyrs is right. We must write, primarily, for our own joy, for the pleasure of immersing ourselves in the process. We are then freer to create, having nothing to lose.

I believe that you should write what is true to you, yet understand how your personal approach fits

into what is out there. In other words – don't write for the marketplace, write what you want to write – but do be aware of the marketplace, and think about how what you do naturally fits into that.

Most rich and famous writers didn't set out with the idea of becoming rich and famous. In most cases, they simply loved writing and wanted to write a good book.

## Exercise Twenty-Five – Day Twenty-Five

(25,000 words)

### Options 1 & 2:

1500 words today.

Also: in your journal: consider ways in which you might continue to support yourself financially as you devote yourself to your writing craft.

### Option 2:

#### Fiction:

Write a chapter as if it were a short story – complete within itself. At the end of the short story, we should be left with the sense that something has changed. Either, we have been moved by events, challenged by what has happened, or simply aware of how the character has very subtly developed in this scene. We come out with a new insight and it leaves us gasping...

#### Non-fiction:

Write an opinion piece that is controversial and flies in the face of popular opinion

## Day Twenty-Six – ‘Hone that voice’

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“One of the most difficult things is the first paragraph. I have spent many months on a first paragraph, and once I get it, the rest just comes out very easily. In the first paragraph you solve most of the problems with your book. The theme is defined, the style, the tone.”

– **Gabriel Garcia Marquez**

Marquez’s words convey the idea that I have written about earlier in the programme: that getting the ‘voice’ for a book is the most essential part of the process.

Naturally, most of us don’t want to work quite so slowly as Marquez (!). However, I believe that now is a good time to pause and think about the voice that has emerged in our work over the last twenty-five days. One of the advantages of writing at this pace is that we have lived with our own writing over an extended period of time and during that time, the voice will have changed, but it will also have begun to solidify.

In non-fiction writing, I believe that the best writing is, without doubt, when the author is telling it straight, putting him or herself fully at the centre of the message. For example, we’ve all read good and bad examples of, say, history books. I was put off reading history for years because of a misconception (engendered by school text books) that history was dull. I hadn’t read authors who knew how to bring history alive with the very real stories that once took place. So when I work with non-fiction writers, I always encourage them to bring in the human element. When I work with other coaches, for example, who wish to write self-help books, I encourage them to consider what the reader wants. For example, in this instance, they may be less interested in your ideas than the practical application of your ideas.

Today I would like you to think about the voice that you have used to tell your story over the last twenty-five days. Have you written consistently in one voice? Have you used both first and third person? Have you sometimes written in past tense and sometimes in present tense? Now is the

time to begin to ‘solidify’ that narrative voice, if you haven’t already done so. Read through some of your earlier work and ask yourself where it is working best? And as you move forward, use what you have learnt and begin to keep the narrative voice more consistent.

Remember, also, that you don’t need to stick with one narrative voice at all times, so long as there is consistency in the pattern you choose. In Small Island by Andrea Levy for example, the author chooses to tell the story in several narrative voices – and one voice doesn’t come in until quite late in the novel. But there is a pattern and a structure that holds these voices together. In my own third novel ‘Boundaries Road’ (published in Dutch as ‘Een Stille Verdwijning’) I use present tense when writing about the past and past tense when writing about the present – so the past events come fully alive and are immediate to the reader.

Your task today is to ask yourself some deep, enquiring questions about your narrative voice in your current work. Think carefully about who your narrator (or narrators) is/are and how you can achieve consistency of narration. Think also about when that voice is at its most engaging. When being intimate? When telling stories? When in first person? Use what you learn from this as you move your story forwards.

## Exercise Twenty-Six – Day Twenty-Six

(26,000 words)

### Options 1 & 2:

Continue with work in progress, focussing on using your learning about narrative voice to make the voice as strong as it can be.

### Option 2:

#### Fiction:

Write a key scene in an entirely different narrative voice. Write a third-person scene in first person. Write from the point of view of a different character. Change past tense to present.

What does this do to the writing? Does it change your perspective? How can you use this knowledge in your writing as you move forward? If the voice is improved, do you wish to develop a new narrative strand or a new way of telling the story?

#### Non-fiction:

Write a chapter using a voice that is as close to your own natural speaking voice as possible. Be 100% authentic. What happens to the writing when you do this?

## Day Twenty-Seven – ‘Cultivate self-love’

It will be clear by now that my work as a writing coach goes way beyond the process of actually writing. In my opinion, getting the words down is only a part of it. My role is in supporting writers to develop writing lives that are not only productive and successful, but also - dare I say it - happy.

Where does my personal mission stem from? Perhaps the easiest way of answering that question is to tell you that my second novel, ‘Bluethroat Morning’ is about creativity and despair and I’d like to point you to a little background reading online: an [essay](http://stubbornworld.typepad.com/the_writing_coach/2006/06/448_psychosis_c.html) I wrote on suicide and creativity, back in 2001, when my novel ‘Bluethroat Morning’ was about to come out in paperback:

[http://stubbornworld.typepad.com/the\\_writing\\_coach/2006/06/448\\_psychosis\\_c.html](http://stubbornworld.typepad.com/the_writing_coach/2006/06/448_psychosis_c.html)

Whilst I was never in that darkest of dark places, experienced by the authors I studied, I have experienced occasional depression in the past and I have also studied the links between creativity and negative thinking. When I took the decision to train as a coach, I also took a decision to help myself and other creative artists and writers, to move away from that kind of negative thinking which has often been seen to be synonymous with creativity.

All human beings experience negative thoughts. We all know what it is like to simply feel ‘flat’ and ‘uninspired’ too. Personally, I don’t believe that ‘not being depressed’ is good enough. Rather, I believe in living a creative and personal life that brings me happiness and excitement.

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"We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be?"

– Marianne Williamson – from 'A Return to Love'

Whatever it takes for you to allow yourself to cultivate self-love, do it. The idea that art has to be born from suffering is a myth. And the idea of the tortured genius is only that, an idea. If you nurture yourself - allow yourself to be all that you are capable of being - you will have more energy for clear thought and creative brilliance.

What I love about coaching is the fact that it is action-focused. Coaching is not therapy or counselling. It does explore the source of particular 'blocks' that an individual may have – but once the source of a problem (or challenge as we prefer to call it) is found, the solution is always action-based. And in taking action, we create change, and in creating change in our situation, our attitudes inevitably shift also.

Today I'd like you to journal on the subject of self-love. Go deep and ask yourself: do I hesitate when I think about self-love? If I find the concept difficult, what is getting in my way? Once you understand the source of any blocks, next ask yourself: what actions can I take to make changes? Break it down into small steps and set up a support system to ensure that you keep on track with these actions.

An easy way of cultivating self-love is to set up 5 daily habits that support you. These habits must not be 'shoulds' but 'want tos'. For example, I wouldn't put 'answering all my e-mail on time' in my habits! But I would put 'evening exercises' because these days, that former 'should' has become a 'want to'. I'd also put daily reading on that list – you can include anything that nurtures you personally and nurtures you as a writer. Clearing out junk is brilliant too.

Today, make one commitment to yourself that will help you to nurture your self as an individual and as a writer. And take action to ensure that you keep to that commitment.

## Exercise Twenty-Seven – Day Twenty-Seven

(27,000 words)

### Options 1 & 2:

Make a commitment to your self-care and follow it through in the weeks to come. Write it down and consider making your commitment public.

### Option 1:

Write 1000 words of your work in progress

### Option 2:

### Fiction:

Have fun with one of the following scenes – aim to fit one into your work in progress:

A woman who wants to leave her lover, yet can't find courage to do so, is making excuses to him, as he approaches her wanting sex.

**or:**

Two individuals having an affair are conducting a public conversation – not an intimate conversation, but one that may enable others to 'read the signs'

**or:**

Two married men, good friends, are embarrassed when they bump into one another coming out of a porn cinema

**or:**

A man wakes his partner in the middle of the night. He has had a strange dream. He dreamt that he was covered in feathers and could fly.

**Non-fiction:**

How can you make your book more sexy? Consider and write accordingly.

## Day Twenty-Eight – ‘The advice of Henry James’

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“Try to be one on whom Nothing is Lost”

– Henry James

For me, James’ advice is about being outward looking. It is too easy for writers to become self-absorbed, to put so much focus on our work in progress that we forget to nurture our intellect, our spirit and our powers of observation.

I have written already about reading widely and have touched upon Julia Cameron’s advice of the ‘Artist’s Date’ in order to ‘fill the well’ of creativity. However, I feel that James’ advice goes beyond this and is broader. James’ advice is, as I interpret it, about cultivating the mind and soul of a writer. If we are not careful, we can get caught up in the day-to-day workings of our plot and our characters, believing that what matters most is the telling of that particular story.

Yet if we are to write well, to really stretch ourselves as writers, we need breadth of vision and imagination. This is acquired not only through experience but also through adjusting our outlook. This advice is, in a sense, a distillation of all that I teach in this programme.

Let’s revisit the EL Doctorow line, ‘a novelist is a person who can live in other people’s skins’. Yet how often do we truly attempt to step inside the experience of another person? And what would happen to us as writers if we did this regularly?

Let’s think for a moment about what it really means to be outward looking. It might help to imagine ourselves as a painter, a landscape artist who must observe the outside world if he is to paint it. To quote the post-Impressionist artist Paul Cezanne:

**“Right now a moment is fleeting by! Capture its reality in paint! To do that we must put all else out of our minds. We must become that moment, make ourselves a sensitive recording plate; give the image of what we actually see, forgetting everything that has been seen before our time.”**

Ask yourself how often you actually do this as a writer? How often do you deeply observe and reproduce in words what you see in nature and in life? Have you fallen into a rut, relying on memory and imagination only? What would happen if you could change your outlook permanently, to become more outward looking?

Being ‘one on whom nothing is lost’ could mean many things – and if you followed just that one piece of advice, your writing would improve dramatically and quickly. It could mean observing the outside world more often, or stepping inside the skins of others. It could mean reading more widely or taking a greater interest in current events. It might mean listening more than you talk. For example, you might make an effort to stop yourself when you find yourself obsessing about your own problems; instead you might take a walk outside and wonder what others are worrying about; you might observe the way the light falls on the rooftops; you might simply buy a newspaper and read it.

If we take the advice further still, we’d see that James says ‘be on whom NOTHING is lost’. What would that mean? What difference would it make to you as an individual if your observation were so sharp that NOTHING passed you by?

## Exercise Twenty-Eight – Day Twenty-Eight

(28,000 words)

### Options 1 & 2:

Decide that from this day you will be one on whom nothing is lost. Ask yourself what that will mean for you and what will change? How will you ensure that this is a permanent change, not just a fleeting whim?

### Option 1:

Write 1000 words of work in progress

### Option 2:

### Fiction and Non-fiction:

Find a newspaper article or an article online which deepens your understanding of a character or a theme in your book. In today's writing, weave that new knowledge into your work

### Or:

Spend some time outside and sit for half an hour in nature, or in the heart of town. Simply sit – in a field, in a café window – and observe. For at least 15 minutes of this time, don't even take notes, just watch and learn. Then for the second 15 minutes, you can take notes. Later in the day, weave your observations into your writing.

## Day Twenty-Nine – ‘Be passionate’

As we come to the end of the ‘Get Black on White’ programme, it is time to reflect on how far you have come in the course of the last month and to consider how you will move forward from this point.

Perhaps you have kept your daily commitment to writing and you will, by the end of today, have written 29,000 words. Or you may have fewer words – but more than you would have had, had you never started the programme. My guess is that you have gained more than the words on the page.

In the course of the last twenty-nine days, you have taken huge strides as a writer; you have put fear and self-doubt behind you and you have understood something of your own uniqueness as an individual and as a writer.

As you continue with your writing life, what I want for you is that you remember the lessons you have learnt this month – about yourself and your own artistry – and that you use your insights as you continue to develop as a creative artist. Take time today to reflect on how far you have come and what you now need to do to take this experience further. The 30 days are only the first step. What comes next is up to you.

Be Passionate in your life and in your art: never allow others to put you down; always treasure

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‘Write something to suit yourself and many people will like it; write something to suit everybody and scarcely anyone will care for it.’

– **Jesse Stuart**

your own uniqueness as an individual creative being. I want to return to Martha Graham's words that I quoted on the first day of this programme. You might like to pin them up above your desk.

**"There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening, that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and will be lost."**

What do you need to do, today and each day, to express the life force that is within you? How can you develop it, intellectually, spiritually, artistically?

There are several ways you might move forwards now. You might, as a result of your experience, decide that a writing life is not for you. You may go to the opposite extreme and, having decided that you want to be a writer, continue to write, every day, as if the act of writing alone is what matters. Or you might take it deeper. You might question why you want to write. What is this passion? How might you develop it? How might you improve your skills and become the best writer you are capable of being?

I remember a talk I attended. The speaker was the coach Aboodi Shabi. He spoke eloquently on the need for us to be 'ontological' as coaches rather than 'transactional'. The easiest way of explaining this is that 'transactional coaching' helps you get what you say you want – you state your goal, the coach guides you to reach that goal. 'Ontological coaching' is where you state your goals and the coach asks 'why do you want to achieve that – what does that mean to you?' – in other words, the coach finds out about 'who' you are, so you can be sure that the goals you say you want, are true for you. It's what I, as a coach, call 'going to the *source* rather than rushing to the *solution*.'

I write about this here, on the penultimate day of the programme, because I believe that if we go to the source of *why* we want to write and *who* we are as writers, then the *what* (that is the writing itself) will be deeper, brighter, and more unique and powerful.

If you choose to, you can create a writing life you love. Remember, every moment is a moment of choice.

Tomorrow, on the last day of the programme, I will write about how you can set up a support structure, to ensure that you will move forwards with ease, confidence and passion.

Today I ask you today to acknowledge who you are and why you write. Think about where you have come and what form your journey will now take.

## Exercise Twenty-Nine – Day Twenty-Nine

(29,000 words)

**Options 1 & 2:**

Write something that feels true.

## Day Thirty – ‘Get support’

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"This year, you are Writers"

– Sir Malcolm Bradbury to the  
new MA Creative Writing Group,  
University of East Anglia 1992

When I began studying Creative Writing under Malcolm Bradbury, I thought of myself as an amateur. Malcolm's words transformed my thinking. If he were taking me seriously as a writer, I would take myself seriously too. For the first time in my life, I stopped thinking of myself as a ‘would-be’ writer, but simply as a writer. It's just a single example of support but a very potent one for me. Once my status as ‘writer’ was established, it became much easier for me to get on with the task.

At that point, I already had one strong supporter, my husband David. David was one of the first people with whom I really shared my writing dream. Shortly after we met, he asked to see my writing and I told him I had a short story in a drawer. When I showed it to him, he said, ‘that doesn’t work as a short story; that should be a novel’ – and so I embarked on my first work.

That year at UEA, I worked with a group of fellow students and we regularly work-shopped each other’s work. Some were supportive; others weren’t. But I treasured those who were and ignored the ones who weren’t; what was the point in listening to detractors? It was constructive criticism I needed and I sought it out.

I have always sought supporters – as I also seek to support others. These days, I am supported by: David; a group of fellow women writers with whom I meet once a fortnight to discuss work in progress; a larger group of writers with whom I meet once every two months socially; some wonderful former students; and, over the last few years, by a fabulous coaching community and a number of very strong coaches.

David gives me ongoing emotional and intellectual support; writing friends give me wonderful constructive criticism and a shoulder to cry on when it's needed; as part of the coaching community, I am constantly empowered by a team of brilliant positive thinkers. As if I weren't nurtured enough I often employ my own coach. I've been coached individually by: Nancy Roberts, Jaye Myerson MCC, Carly Anderson MCC, Karen Knowler and Cynthia Morris amongst others.

I have learned SO much from each and every one of my coaches. For example, Nancy taught me to stop living in the future and to be grateful for each day as I live it (we all *know* this idea, but do we *live* it? When we *live* it, our whole outlook changes). Jaye had me zapping every toleration in my life and encouraged me to take my writing seriously again at a time when it was slipping: to see the 'word count' thing as simply a game, rather than a 'responsibility' – suddenly, with her, my novel was up and running again; Carly taught me to accept that there are some times in your life when you just can't write and at those times, just 'being' is fine; she showed me that my need to be liked was draining my energy too and I learned to be more myself, regardless of what others thought. Karen Knowler encouraged me to write this programme. Cynthia Morris lent me some of her fabulous juju!

What structures might you set up to support you in your writing life?

There are so many ways that you can be supported. Ask yourself what is your future vision of a support network? And how might you take the first step towards making that support network happen? Ideally, you are looking to have people in your life who support both you and your writing. Can you join a local writers' group? Form a small group of writers for regular feedback on your work? Take a look at The Completion Club on my website too:

<http://www.thewritingcoach.co.uk/services/membership>

Equally, if you are interested in individual coaching with me, and would simply like to dip your toe in the water - I am very happy to talk with you about the process and what it entails. Coaching is an individual journey of creative exploration.

Whatever form of support you decide to build for yourself at this stage, I want you to take the time today to do your writing work and then to congratulate yourself for completing this 30 Day programme. It is a HUGE achievement.

All you need to do now is think about how you will reward yourself for completing the programme?

Consider what kind of a support structure you will set up for yourself to ensure that you continue with your writing life. Remember – find a writing routine that works for you. Don't forget to book in regular 'sacred writing time', even if it's only a couple of hours twice a week. The most important thing is that you honour it.

**You are a writer.**

## Exercise Thirty – Day Thirty

(30,000 words)

### Options 1 & 2:

Journal on the subject of the progress you have made on this programme. What support structures will you put in place to ensure that you continue to write and be motivated?

### Option 1:

Continue your work in progress.

### Option 2:

### Fiction:

Write about a moment when a character has to say ‘good-bye’ to something or someone; how does the character realise that there is a positive aspect to letting go? How will you embrace this positive message, without it getting sentimental or cheesy? You could try writing sparsely, like Raymond Carver, for example. Or you could hold back from analysing the emotion and simply tell the story, letting the reader work out the meaning; suggest rather than tell.

### Non-Fiction:

Write an Appendix to your book. Now, work out in what ways this isn’t an Appendix at all – how might it be woven into the overall argument?

## **A Final Note:**

I do hope that you have enjoyed this programme and I am very open to feedback.

I look forward to continuing to connect with you. You can subscribe to the blog on the Writing Coach website and sign up to our newsletter there.

You can find me on Twitter @jacquillofthouse or 'like' The Writing Coach' on Facebook. (Easy follow buttons are at the bottom of The Writing Coach website).

Warmest wishes,

Jacqui