

## **52 Ways to Get Unstuck: exercises to break through writer's block**

Being “stuck” as a writer can mean lots of different things. It can mean not knowing what to do next in the plot or when to reveal a critical clue. It can mean not knowing how the heroine should react when she first meets the hero. It can mean writing words you hate and subsequently delete. It can mean the inability to get in The Zone where the words flow easily. It might mean being stuck on a specific element, or it might refer to a general feeling of “everything I write is wrong.” It can mean sitting down to write and no words will come. The reasons for being stuck are also varied, including having an overly critical inner editor, feeling too “in love” with our own words, and being unable to focus, among many others.

Ultimately, to get unstuck it's not essential to know *how* you're stuck or *why*. The exercises in this book can help you get unstuck regardless of the details of your personal version of writer's block. In fact, even when you do know the exact reason you're stuck, attacking that problem head-on can sometimes be less effective than coming at it sideways with a random exercise.

Whichever way you're stuck, and whichever approach you take to getting unstuck, the exercises in this book can help you break through your writer's block.

This book is divided into five sections:

**Part One: Clearing the Way to Write—Getting Your Life in Order**

**Part Two: The Right Place at the *Write* Time**

**Part Three: Character Juice**

**Part Four: Story Mechanics**

**Part Five: Mind Openers—Getting in The Zone**

Whether you decide to select an exercise at random, or to target a specific exercise to combat a specific problem, it's highly recommended that you complete Part One in its entirety *first*.

This is because Part One, Clearing the Way to Write—Getting Your Life in Order, contains five “life prep” activities that help pave the way for a productive writing life. If you attempt an exercise from another section before you've readied yourself and

your life for writing, you're not as likely to be successful getting unstuck and staying that way.

After you've completed the prep in Part One, you'll find that Parts Two through Five each contain thirteen exercises for a total of 52.

### **THREE SAMPLE EXERCISES:**

#### **Step Outside**

When you're stuck writing, one of the best things you can do is step outside.

When author Laura DiSilverio (aka Ella Barrick) gets stuck, her go-to solution is to head outside. Whatever the weather—wind, rain, sun or snow—she takes a long walk in the great outdoors. She says it never fails to blast the barriers away and get her writing.

So step outside. Take a deep, cleansing breath of outside air, go for a walk, do some gardening, or just sit. Whether you're in the big city or the suburbs, at the beach or in the woods, use all of your senses to take in the world around you.

It could be that all you needed was a little fresh air to feed the sputtering creative flame in your mind.

Are you refreshed and ready to go back to work now? Are you unstuck? If not, take this exercise a step further:

Look around you and imagine your character in that outdoor setting. What would she notice? What would she like and dislike about it? What would have prompted her to be there? What memories would it conjure? What regrets? What desires? What fears? Would she wish she were somewhere else?

Once you hit on a question that gets the gears turning in your head, roll with it. Don't stop to ask more questions. Let the thoughts, scenario, or dialogue play out in your imagination until you're so excited about an idea, you're dashing to write it.

For New York Times bestselling author Kevin J. Anderson, going outside to spend time with his characters is an important part of his process.

I like to “get away” from real life and spend time in my fictional universes with my imaginary friends. Too many distractions at home, and I love to go out to walk, to move, to receive input in all five senses as I walk on trails, even on tame bike paths. It allows me to THINK, to have quiet time with my characters, to

save the world (or, in certain circumstances, destroy it). Walking on a trail is like pacing around a room—a time-proven method for pondering—but a thousand times better. Especially if you live in beautiful Colorado. – Kevin J. Anderson, author of more than 120 published books

Whether you step outside to visit with your imaginary friends or just to get a little fresh air, abandoning your desk for the great outdoors can clear away the cobwebs and get you writing again.

### **Ritualize**

In much the same way that children sleep better when they have a bedtime ritual, writers can gear up to write (or revise) with a ritual that achieves the right mindset for writing (or revising).

Most writers I know have some kind of limited routine or series of steps they go through before writing. Some are aware of their habits, some not until asked to think about it. Sometimes the pre-writing routine is more ritualized—the exact same things in the exact same order—while sometimes it's a more casual approach. A beverage is almost always involved: tea, coffee, Mountain Dew, wine, absinthe, and on the rare occasion water.

First step: black tea. I brew a couple of liters a day and make it last into the evening. Usually Singell Estate Darjeeling, but there are several others I like, too. No sugar or honey, just pure tea. Hot, of course. I gather a variety of V5 Pilot Precise pens (black, purple, blue, light blue, green, red, pink), and I start by reviewing what I wrote the day before and marking any changes/corrections needed. By the time I've finished that and I'm well-caffeinated, I'm already into the story and moving forward. The caffeine keeps me energized all day, and once I really get into a scene, it's harder to get back out than to stay in and work. – Martha Gilstrap, *Slitherskins*

Children's book author Maria Faulconer has a very specific pre-writing ritual. She's a "morning person" and gets up early, while it's still dark outside and the house is quiet, to take advantage of her heightened creativity during that time of day. She brews a

pot of tea and heads to her writing space. There she lights a candle with a long match, focusing on the intensity of the flame for a moment while she sets an intention for her writing session. Finally she puts on some soothing music, usually soft piano, and begins to write. She finds that this simple routine centers and grounds her in a way that helps her focus on her story. If she's ever stuck, going through these steps is often all it takes to get her back in the right mindset.

For me, whether I'm writing a first draft or doing revisions, I need to remove everything from my mental and physical space that draws me away from writing. That means I do the chores around me that are nagging, or go to a space where I can't "see" chores. I attend to emails that absolutely can't wait, then turn off my email program, along with all the other programs on my computer except for word processing. If after this I still feel concerned or preoccupied with non-writing tasks, I make a list of all the things I need to do after my writing time, then I tuck the list out of sight. Finally I get a very large, very hot cup of coffee and I open my manuscript document.

While my ritual is the same whether I'm writing or revising, you may find it useful to have a different routine before editing than before writing because of the different mindsets required. For example, re-reading the chapter you worked on the previous day might work well when you're in editing mode, but when you're writing a first draft it could serve to stifle your creativity by engaging your inner critic.

When creating a pre-writing ritual for yourself, there are no required elements (unless you count the anecdotal evidence of a beverage). Rather, your routine should be unique to you, designed to produce the mindset you need in order to write. Think about the way you want to feel when writing or revising, and employ actions that typically evoke those emotions in you. Want to feel energized? Perhaps go for a run. If you're typically anxious, consider meditating or taking a shower to relax. If you're easily distracted, think about things that help you focus: yoga, composing intentions, reading your personal mission statement or logline, clearing your desk.

Whenever possible, select elements for your ritual that can be employed at any time or place. If you must touch the north wall of your office four times before writing, that will make it difficult to write anywhere else. But if saluting the north direction will suffice, you can do that anywhere, walls or not.

Think also about the length of your ritual. I suggest making it as short as you're able without compromising results. That way you have more time to write. Keep in mind, too, the possibility of compressing or expanding the ritual based on how you're feeling at the time—if you go for a walk to get the story ideas flowing, you can shorten or lengthen it to fit your daily circumstances.

Once you identify a routine you think will achieve your desired state, try beginning each writing session with that ritual for ten days. Is it working to get you centered? Is it helping you to be more productive? Can you shorten it and still achieve results? As long as the ritual is working for you, there's no need to change it. But if you ever find you're not in the right mindset after your ritual, rethink your routine with an eye to optimizing each element to achieve the results you desire.

### **Harmonize**

Ask a writer about listening to music while writing and you're sure to get an opinion, usually a strong one. Does it bring harmony? Or discord?

“I must listen to music when I write.”

“I can't listen to music when I write.”

“I always listen to music, but only classical guitar.”

“I never listen to music except when writing a fight scene, then heavy metal is a must.”

Regardless of which camp you're in, what you *usually* do isn't the issue. If you're stuck, what you usually do isn't working. It's time for something different.

Try using music in a different way than normal. If you're a non-listener like me, try listening to music while you write to shake things up a bit. If you're still stuck, try a different song, a different type of music, or a different mode of employment (e.g. radio, CD, Web streaming). If you're a regular listener, try a different variety of music, or try silence (I can almost see you music-listening writers cringing at the thought!). The point is to change your musical writing routine.

Whether you typically write with music or without, any writer can benefit from the way music affects mood. Think about the scene you're stuck on. How is your point-of-view character feeling? What mood are you trying to evoke in the reader? Listening to music that evokes that feeling in you can often get you past the block.

I love how music can instantly transport you and make you feel so many emotions. So when I'm stuck, I put on my playlist and remember what emotions I'm working to convey. Cindi Madsen, *Resisting the Hero*

Jaxine Daniels uses this emotion-evoking technique in a very specific way: she selects a theme song for each book she writes. When she was writing her first novel, *Black Ice*, she played her theme song "Kokomo" by the Beach Boys whenever she got stuck. She'd close her eyes and sing along, allowing her sibling protagonists to come to life in her imagination. The song gave her a boost of emotion and placed her squarely in her characters' lives.

When Jaxine wrote the sequel, *Thin Ice*, the song "Kokomo" no longer worked. She discovered she needed a different song to reflect the new plot, theme, and emotions in the next book, and she found it in Matchbox Twenty's "If You're Gone."

Even years after writing that book, Jaxine says: "Just saying the song title makes my belly clench with the deep emotion that Grant feels in the black moments of that story."

For Jaxine, the theme song gives her a shove into the world of her characters. Once in that world, it's almost impossible for her to stay stuck. The theme song is her shortcut to that mental and emotional immersion in her story.

Sometimes, however, one song isn't enough. Authors Robin D. Owens and Cindi Madsen select multiple songs for one book.

I try various things to become unstuck at various times. Currently I like the "making a soundtrack" approach. Sweeping themes that let me write, picking the right tune that reflects my hero and heroine: rock close to going over the top, but riding that sharp edge; cool, sophisticated jazz. Putting together the soundtrack helps me think of my characters, the beat of their lives, how they

might handle the next crises. And can keep me writing to a beat, too. – Robin D. Owens, *Ghost Seer*

Cindi Madsen tailor-makes a playlist for each of her novels. Not only does she choose songs to fit the mood and theme of each story, she often selects individual songs to go with specific scenes. When the book is released, Cindi posts that book's playlist on her Website for readers who want to play the music that fits the story.

This is Cindi's playlist for *Falling for Her Fiancé*, a love story about two friends who fake their engagement:

“Ho Hey” – The Lumineers  
“Blindsided” – Bon Iver  
“My Life Would Suck Without You” – Kelly Clarkson  
“My Body” – Young the Giant  
“Stubborn Love” – The Lumineers  
“Trojans” – Atlas Genius  
“Afterlife” – Switchfoot  
“It's Time” – Imagine Dragons  
“Shattered” – O.A.R.  
“Ready” – Kelly Clarkson  
“Too Close” – Alex Clare  
“She Is” – The Fray  
“It Hurts” – Angels and Airwaves  
“November Blue” – The Avett Brothers  
“Long Shot” – Kelly Clarkson  
“I'd Rather Be With You” – Joshua Radin  
“Say When” – The Fray  
“Sideways” – Citizen Cope  
“I Want You” – Kelly Clarkson  
“All I Need” – Mat Kearney  
“Just You” – Amy Stroup  
“All We Are” – Matt Nathanson  
“Bloodstream” – Stateless  
“Standing in Front of You” – Kelly Clarkson  
“5:19” – Matt Wertz  
“Running Back to You” – Matt Wertz

Cindi says that the last song, “Running Back to You,” conveys the sentiment that whatever happens, I am running back to you. So when it came time to write and edit the big romantic gesture at the end of the book, she played that song and poured all the heightened emotion from the song into her writing.

Not only is listening to music a great way to slip into the writing zone and avoid getting stuck, it’s also a formidable weapon for attacking writer’s block when you find yourself stuck. Whatever music-listening camp you’re in, give music a try.