

IRIA LOPEZ TEJEIRO

# KEYS TO BECOMING A BETTER WRITER

*How to Easily Improve Your Writing Skills*



Literautas

# Keys to Becoming a Better Writer

How to Easily Improve Your Writing Skills



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Translated by Iraide Talavera

Literautas

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# Introduction

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There is a recurring question at the beginning of writing workshops or in interviews with new writers: "Why do you write?"

Many people get out of such a difficult and intimate question the best they can; some others attempt to be original; there are also those who try to be thorough and concise at the same time. Finally, there are a few who tell the interviewer to go to hell. Definitely, it's a tricky question: Why do we writers write? Why do you write?

The reason can't be money. The group of privileged people who make a living from literature is really small; for the rest of us, it's probable that writing never becomes our main income. Is it then for fame and prestige? Is that your motivation? Or do you just feel the need to write? Is it for fun, as a means of personal development, to fill idle time, out of habit...?

There are too many reasons why people devote themselves to writing, and I don't know about you, but I don't like to explain them because they aren't always the same. Maybe one day I wake up motivated by the idea of publishing a new novel and, other times, I just want to express my feelings or tell a story that burns inside of me. Sometimes it's fun or liberating, but not always. The writing process can be painful and require a strong will. There are mornings when I suffer with every word I write and nights when I wake up happy and eager to translate my dreams into words.

The reasons why you write can be many and vary from day to day, so I think the "Why do you write?" question is wrong. Instead of it, I prefer "Do you want to write?" Think about it: despite all the uncertainties, the moments of insecurity, the hard work writing sometimes involves... Do you really want to do it? Do you want to write? If the answer is yes, welcome aboard!

And now, allow me to introduce myself: my name is Iria and I was born 33 years ago in a small village in northern Spain. After working as a screenwriter and audiovisual producer, in 2005 I entered the world of

literature with the publication of my first novel. Today I can say I have published two novels and a book of writing exercises, and I can also tell you that I have thrown millions of words into the wastepaper basket.

In 2012, together with Tomeu, my sidekick and friend, I started Literautas in order to keep learning and improving my writing while, at the same time, helping others on their way. The project began as a blog where we have published all kinds of resources related to writing.

To celebrate the blog's anniversary, we decided to look back and think about all the things we have accomplished. This reflection helped us realize the amount of material we have posted and made us wonder what would happen if we compiled all those articles into a book. The result is the manuscript you hold in your hands: *Keys to Becoming a Better Writer: How to Easily Improve Your Writing Skills*. We hope it will help you further improve your writing in an easy and funny way.

Best wishes,

Literautas Team



# Chapter 1

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## **Inspiration and Productivity**

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# The Key Elements of the Creative Process

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I have always thought that learning how your brain works is one of the best ways to overcome any resistance or fear of writing, as this knowledge will enable you to make the most of your creativity.

This is why I want to tell you about the creative process (also known as the search for an idea or solution to a problem), an internal battle we all have to fight before we start to write.

Every creative process goes through 4 stages: preparation, incubation, illumination and verification.

## **1. Preparation**

This first stage may slightly vary depending on whether you know what you want to write about or not.

Let's take a look at this example: you're not sure about your story's details, but you have decided that you want to write a war novel. In this case, you can begin with the documentation process. It won't be a thorough research (that will come later), as you still know very little about your story, but you can leaf through books and magazines related to the main topic, watch films and documentaries, go to exhibitions, interview people... There's no better starting point.

Now, assuming that you don't even know what you want to write about, the most effective method to find a good idea is to do a free search for information: read, watch, listen to and learn anything that interests you.

During this phase of the creative process, your mind is similar to an

empty cocktail shaker: you can fill it with many different ingredients.

## **2. Incubation**

This second stage is like 'being on holiday'. Your mind is so full of images, sounds and words that you just have to wait for the result of that mixture.

When I reach this phase, I feel like a pot about to boil over: I have many things running through my head, but they are yet unfinished and disjointed.

The solution to this problem is to go for a drink with your friends, cook a delicious meal, go for long walks, play sports, paint... It's up to you! Your subconscious mind works better when you're relaxed.

The only thing you're allowed to do during this stage is to jot down any thought about the direction your story can take, but don't get obsessed with finding it at all costs.

## **3. Illumination**

The illumination comes when all the pieces fit together and you say: 'Eureka! I've got it!'

I'm sure you're familiar with this situation: when you stop thinking about a problem and do something else (have a shower, go to sleep, attend a family meal), the solution reveals itself as if by magic. Intuition is sometimes more reliable than logic!

Needless to say, when the 'eureka' moment arrives, make sure to have a pen and paper handy!

## **4. Verification**

In this final stage, you must put your idea to the test by turning it into a story (gather information about the characters and the setting, outline the plot, develop your research, etc.). Don't worry if you don't know how to do it: I shall return to this topic later.

For the moment, remember to treat your ideas with respect. They'll

come to you all through the creative process, and the worst thing you can do is censor them outright.

Creativity is about being able to dream, imagine and let yourself go like a child.

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# Keys to Becoming a Professional Writer

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Entrepreneurship is on everyone's lips these days. The current economic crisis, the high percentage of unemployment and job insecurity make some people consider self-employment. If you're in this situation and you're passionate about writing, why don't you become a writer entrepreneur?

Think about it for a moment: working from home doing what you love, being your own boss, becoming a professional writer... Does it sound like your dream job? If the answer is yes, this list of tips might help you make that dream a reality:

## **1. Start today**

First and foremost, you must start today. Not tomorrow, not next Monday or next month. If you really want to become a professional writer, start now! Well, you can finish reading this post first.

## **2. Schedule your writing time**

No matter if you're a full-time writer or you have another job that pays the bills, you must create a writing schedule and stick to it. If you leave it to the end of the day, you'll be too tired to write anything. Remember: Now it's your job, not a hobby.

## **3. Don't get obsessed with the idea**

Expert entrepreneurs will tell you that the idea isn't as important as you think. Don't get obsessed with coming up with an absolutely original idea for a novel, as you might get stuck in the process.

Think about how many novels are based on the same topic, but are

different because of the way they have been written. What really matters is that you have SOMETHING to tell and that you do it right. The most important thing is to write.

#### **4. Develop a writing plan**

A writing plan is very similar to a business plan: it's a road map that helps you go through the long and sometimes hard book writing process.

Once you know your novel's main topic, analyze whether you have to document yourself, read similar books to the one you want to write, ask yourself why they are (or not) successful, think about your potential readers and study the publishing market (publishing houses, agents, self-publishing).

It's very important that you have a deep knowledge of the publishing world and that you calculate how many weeks it'll take you to complete each step of your project. Short/middle term goals will make the process much more manageable and feasible.

#### **5. Know yourself**

Look inside yourself and analyze your own writing. Discover your strengths and make the most of them. Find your weaknesses and fix them (or avoid them).

If you have trouble doing this analysis for yourself, you can seek the help of other readers or hire professional services.

#### **6. Invest in training**

Learning how to write well takes a lifetime, so never stop training. Do whatever you need: read books on the craft of writing, attend lectures if you have the chance, explore different genres...

Read fiction, nonfiction and magazines, watch films, go to exhibitions... Fill yourself with stories and experiences. You'll become a better writer.

#### **7. Surround yourself with positive people**

This is very important: you need people supporting you and your

project. This doesn't mean that they should constantly tell you how wonderful you are or how well you write: criticism, if constructive, can be very useful. What you must avoid is the company of those who don't rely on you and make you insecure, for they'll hinder your progress. Stay away from them.

### **8. Look for investment**

Regarding the previous point, you need emotional support, but you also need financial help if you want to devote yourself exclusively to writing. A novel will take you at least 6 months to a year (and, after that, you'll have to promote it).

But bills don't wait for money to come in. If you don't have any savings to survive as a full-time writer, ask your family and friends for support or try to combine your writing with another job.

### **9. Believe in yourself**

You're a writer because you write. Whether right or wrong, you put one word after the other, so look at your reflection in the mirror and say out loud: "I am a writer!"

Say it with conviction. If you don't believe in yourself, why should anyone else? Why should they help you or respect your schedule? Why should they read or buy your books? Now this is your job and you must believe in it unconditionally.

### **10. Make yourself known**

This may sound like the most difficult part, but that's the way life is: you must promote your books, especially if you have chosen self-publishing. You need to make yourself known. Once you have started writing your novel, consider creating a blog or at least a social media profile where you publish information about your work.

This doesn't mean you have to sacrifice writing time for the sake of networking. Being active on the Internet can be something you do to have fun and relax at the end of the day.

## **11. Don't give up**

Don't be discouraged if you don't get it right the first time. Just find out where you have failed and try again. This is an endurance race and you have to remember that, when it comes to writing, perseverance is even more important than talent. If this is your dream... Go for it!



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# Places to Find Inspiration for your Writing

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As Picasso said: 'Inspiration exists, but it has to find you working'. However, sometimes we get stuck and working harder is not enough, either because we can't think of what to write or because once we've started writing we don't find the best way to proceed. When that happens, where do you look for inspiration?

Every writer is different and what inspires me might not inspire you. There are people who need a lot of fuss around them in order to get inspired, while others work better in silence. But the truth is that the muse appears more frequently in certain places. These are my favorites:

## **1. Airports and stations**

There are always people moving, farewells and reunions, emotions bubbling close to the surface, constant changes and lots of energy in the air waiting for someone to turn it into good stories.

## **2. Fitness/sports facilities**

I mean the gym, but also the swimming pool, the promenade where you ride your bicycle, the park where you go jogging, etc.

Exercise is very helpful when you feel blocked: it's relaxing, puts the brain in gear and fills you with oxygen.

## **3. Nature**

I don't care whether it's at the beach or in the mountains, but a walk outdoors is a relaxing and introspective method that helps you think clearly.

#### **4. Museums and exhibitions**

They are perfect places to open yourself to new experiences and to learn new things. Never go there without a notebook and a pen!

#### **5. Concerts**

Music can be a great starting point to find ideas. Go to a concert, choose a CD and play it in the car, put on your headphones while strolling around or laze on the couch and listen to your favorite jazz album. Anything goes!

#### **6. Theatre**

Going to the theatre is a pleasure, not just for the plays presented on stage, but also because the proximity between the actors and the audience generates an energy very difficult to find in other art forms. The theatre is a place that will lift your spirits and fill your head with creative thoughts.

#### **7. Bookstores and libraries...**

...and books in general. Sometimes, when you don't know what to write about, the best thing you can do is close your notebook or your word processor and start reading as many books as you can (fiction, poetry, theatre, essays, etc.) until you've accumulated so much data that you can start producing out of the information you've absorbed.

#### **8. Internet**

Sitting at the computer is like opening a window to the world. Sometimes it can be dangerous because it makes us waste time surfing the internet without a direction in mind, but other times it can be a source of inspiration. For example, there are sites like Free Historical Stock Photos, where you'll find a huge collection of old photographs that will probably whet your writing appetite.

#### **9. Children's books and dreams**

I've put them in a separate section because, sometimes, the best method to avoid writer's block and get inspired is to think differently, in a crazy manner; that 'unreasonable' way of thinking is usually very well

reflected in dreams and in the stories for kids.

To begin with, try reading Alice in Wonderland or Michael Ende's novels. They'll expose you to worlds where things are never what they seem. To immerse yourself in a world that is turned upside down is a fantastic exercise to bring your creativity to life.

### **10. Your pillow**

A very interesting technique to deal with writing-related problems is to go to bed thinking about the problem you've been unable to solve. For example, while you're trying to sleep, reflect on how that character you're writing about should react or on what should happen next so that the plot makes sense.

By doing this, you're sending questions to your subconscious and, while you're asleep, it'll work on the problem on its own. It's possible that it finds the solution and that you wake up in the middle of the night with an 'aha!' feeling (in that case, you'd better have a notebook and a pen near your bed), or that you find the answer to your problem the next morning while taking a shower or eating your breakfast.

This method doesn't always work but, as it doesn't require much effort, don't you think it's worth a try?

### **11. A blank page**

One of my favorite places to get inspired is a blank page where to use the free writing technique. When I'm looking for new ideas, I usually resort to a writing prompt and then write whatever comes to my mind.

Conversely, if I want to know how to continue with a story in progress, what I do is write on top of a sheet the question or questions that need to be answered before I can keep writing and then jot down all the possible solutions. It doesn't matter if some of them sound ridiculous; it's just a brainstorming and I'll later have plenty of time to choose the answer that best adapts to my story.

### **12. A little bit of everything**

Sometimes, it works well to mix some of the tricks mentioned in the previous sections. For example, you can start with free writing and then go for a walk, have a little nap or go jogging. If you can't think of anything, return to the blank page and I bet you'll find a bunch of good ideas awaiting you.

In short, ideas are everywhere. If you have patience, you'll sooner or later find the one you're looking for.

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# How to Overcome Writer's Block

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Have you ever experienced the fear of the blank page? You can't come up with ideas or those you have seem useless. That's when you fall into the vicious circle of not writing because you lack ideas and of not having ideas because you don't write. You fall into the dreaded writer's block.

Years ago, when I myself went through a period of creative drought, I discovered that my problem lay in a mixture of fatigue, stress, fear and insecurity. The best way to solve it was to change some of my life habits and to face my fears.

Even though every writer is different and the same solution doesn't apply to every problem, there are some tips of general application to identify and overcome writer's block. I hope that, in case you need them, they help you as much as they helped me:

## **Don't panic**

Don't obsess over the problem. The more you insist on finding ideas, the greater the mental block. Stop thinking about it because it's not so bad! You've had ideas in the past and you'll have ideas again in the future. So these days you don't have any idea what to write about, right? Well, the truth is nothing happens.

What's more, I'll tell you a secret: you actually do have ideas. Always. Your head is full of them. What happens is that today, for whatever reason, you don't manage to find them or you quickly dismiss them because you think they're crap. Your problem doesn't lie in your capacity to generate ideas, but elsewhere...

Identify the source of the problem

The best way to solve a problem related to creativity is to find its source and nip it in the bud. In fact, it may be the only way.

According to Mark McGuinness, creative business coach, each type of block has its peculiarities and its corresponding solutions, but there's a list of the most common types:

**1. Stress or personal problems.** It's very difficult to be creative under these conditions. If, for whatever reason, you're going through a difficult period or you're very stressed at work, it's likely that you feel your writing isn't flowing well.

When that happens, the best solution is to take it easy. You don't need to stop writing, but don't put any pressure on yourself. If you feel like it, write for a while just for the pleasure of it, as a way to put your emotions on paper.

If you don't fancy writing, it's also okay. The hard times will pass. It's more important that you focus your energy on putting an end to what causes you anxiety so that you can move forward.

**2. Insecurities and fears.** Another common reason for writer's block is that you question obsessively your ideas and what you write. Everything seems bad, mediocre or useless, and you feel really disappointed with whatever you produce. In the end, the only thing you achieve is not writing anything.

This was one of my problems in the past, so I know it well; above all, I know it's hard to overcome since the only solution to conquer your fears is inside you. You must be aware of the fact that the inner ghosts that threaten you when you're writing are just that: ghosts. They ain't real, you can ignore them!

**3. Too high demands on yourself.** Nothing you do is good enough; you obsess with doing it better, with a more brilliant idea. Again, the

only thing you achieve is not writing at all.

The origin of this problem is the same as above. The solution is also similar: stop worrying about the way you write, don't listen to that annoying inner voice. Enjoy the writing process, do it the best you can, acknowledge your strengths (you have them) and try to improve on your weaknesses, but without obsessing over the results.

You neither have to win the Nobel Prize of Literature (at least not yet), nor do you have to prove anything to anyone. All you have to do is enjoy writing!

**4. Tiredness.** If, for whatever reason, your body doesn't get enough rest, your brain won't be as productive as you want it to be. Enough sleep and a healthy lifestyle are the best recipe to lead a creative life. It's that simple, and that complicated sometimes.

**5. Mental exhaustion.** The human brain is wonderful, capable of surprising things, but it also has its limits. After a very productive stage (for example, after writing a novel or at the end of a period of intense study), it's possible that your brain is exhausted and doesn't have the energy to produce more ideas.

**The solution:** Give it a break! It's a good time to feed your brain with books, films, walks, new places and stimuli... This way, it will little by little recover energy and, sooner rather than later, it will be in shape again.

### **Relax and have fun**

Just as your body needs to be rested and healthy, a cheerful and optimistic attitude will also help your creativity flow. The good news is that this attitude is based on habits you can learn.

Begin with a smile. Be aware of your facial expression and turn it into a grin. Smile as much as you can throughout the day until you do it without realizing it. Try to relax and take time for hobbies other than

writing. If you have no other interests, begin the search! By the time you devote yourself to professional writing, you'll need an escape route. The best way not to obsess over your writing when you suffer a block is to do things that distract you.

### **Read instead of writing**

If you're under a stressful situation or if, whatever you try, you feel unable to write, read instead of writing. Read a lot more than usual, as much as you can. Of course, read things you find motivating.

When I find it difficult to start writing anything, I usually resort to the four authors that inspire me the most: Ray Bradbury, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Haruki Murakami and Paul Auster. Find yours and start reading!

### **Try writing therapy**

There's a type of automatic writing that can help you overcome writer's block: it's as simple as writing for the sake of venting out your feelings. It's not about telling stories, but about expressing your fears, your hatred, your anger, your fatigue, your irritation, your frustrations...

Start writing the first words that come to your mind, what is burning inside you. Jot it down without worrying about style or literary quality.

In fact, the best thing you can do when you finish writing is to destroy the text. Well, before destroying it, read what you've written and analyze it to understand what's going on inside that little head of yours. Then, burn it as a symbolic act. Make a fresh start.

### **Write a blog post**

What's that? You don't have a blog? What are you waiting for? It's the best remedy for those days or weeks when your writing doesn't flow: write a post on any topic, not necessarily fiction.

It can be a post about writer's block, about the political situation in the Maldives or about how much you like words accented in the third-to-last syllable. Never mind. The thing is that you write a post of at least 500



words to show your brain that you can still write and that you'll pay no attention to your negative thoughts.

### **Don't overvalue ideas**

In general, we emphasize the importance of ideas, but the truth is they ain't that important. It's a good lesson I've learnt little by little, by listening and observing. There are hundreds of books based on the same topic and very different from each other, so don't obsess over ideas. Try to write anything, even if it looks silly.

If you're at a stage in which you think you have no ideas, put into practice literary techniques to strengthen your weaknesses: descriptions, dialogues... Whatever. Make the most of your practice!

### **Get out of your comfort zone**

If there's a style or genre you feel comfortable with and you always choose for your writing, give yourself the opportunity to try other things: write something fantastic, a detective story, a children's book... Anything different from what you usually do.

If you give yourself the chance, two things can happen:

Your brain might tell you: 'Oh, I don't like this, I don't feel comfortable with it. Okay, okay, I'll stop causing this writer's block if you go back to your usual writing style.'

Or you may feel encouraged by the prospect of something new and your ideas will appear as they did in the past. Any of these options is good for you.

### **Use creative prompts**

Another way to start writing when you have no ideas is to use creative prompts and start writing the first thing that comes to your mind.

For example, take some random words and write a text that contains all of them. Or take a pair of lines that could serve as the beginning of a tale

or a novel and follow the story.

If it helps, here you have a couple of examples from our mobile application 'Ideas for Writing'.

**Five Words:**

Verses, hope, restaurant, honor, carpet.

Detective, meat, hate, power, madness.

Blackboard, invention, omen, beggars, blue.

Maid, shadows, rain, white, dogs.

**First Lines:**

The man in the raincoat heard her voice...

The captain confessed everything...

The old man hid the evidence...

The screenwriter kept the letter...

I hope these tips are helpful for you and, above all, may the muses never leave you!

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