

CREATE A WRITING HABIT

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Create a Writing Habit

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BY ROCHELLE MELANDER



DREAM KEEPERS

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Create A Writing Habit

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INTRODUCTION

So you want to write a book or a blog or even an article.

First, you need to create a writing habit. You need to have a dependable time each week when you curl up with pen and paper and jot down ideas.

This tiny how-to book is adapted from my bigger book, *Level Up*, and will help you vision your writing life, set goals, and create a writing habit.

Level Up grew out of my frustration with the current cookie-cutter how-to trend. While I believe and teach some best practices for writers, I also know that trying to follow someone else's process can be frustrating. As novelist and psychologist Karen E. Peterson said, "What works for one writer becomes paralyzing for the next." I've coached writers for more than ten years. My clients often ask me questions like, "When do you write?" or "How do you overcome procrastination?" I've noticed that when I do share my experiences or offer advice, the information rarely helps my clients succeed at becoming more productive writers. Instead of providing a plan, I invite my clients to observe their habits, record their challenges and best practices, and then examine the data. When they treat their life like a science project, they often make exciting new discoveries. They learn from their own life and establish habits that help them ditch distractions and write more.

This book presents a series of quests, short adventures that challenge you to investigate your life and habits to discover and use your own best practices.

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WHO CAN BENEFIT FROM THIS BOOK?

I wrote this book for my clients: writers and entrepreneurs, professionals, and creatives who write as part of their business. Ideas for projects swirl around their brains but focusing on a single project from beginning to end can be challenging for them. Each struggles with a different part of the process and sometimes faces multiple obstacles as they work a project from start to finish. They worry over which project to choose, wonder if they're good enough to write this book, or get distracted by the demands of life.

Because I primarily work with people on their writing projects, I use the term "writer" when addressing the reader. I also tend to refer to the work in terms of writing and writing projects, including blogs, articles, novels, and nonfiction books.

But you don't have to be a writer racing against a book deadline to benefit from the quests in this book. No matter what your role or project, if you struggle to get things done—this book is for you. Anyone who takes on projects and then feels overwhelmed, gets derailed, or procrastinates can benefit from this book. You might be a project manager at a company, a graphic designer working on your own, or a student trying to keep up with your assignments. This book will help you discover your vision, detect your strengths, focus on your work, overcome obstacles, and accomplish more than you ever thought possible.

WHY QUESTS?

Every summer, our local indie bookstore has a Find Waldo scavenger hunt. Players pick up a passport from the bookstore and then hunt for Waldo at various local stores. Completed passports are entered into a drawing for prizes. But the real prize is the quest. The year my

daughter and I competed, we had great fun searching for Waldo in our neighborhood shops, including a small pet store, a coffee shop, and the bookstore. We enjoyed traipsing from store to store, asking fellow players and shop owners for help finding Waldo. We got hooked by the game, enjoying the adventure. After playing for a few hours, we felt a bit like real detectives, following the clues to find Waldo.

Think back to the last time you played a game. Whether you were playing against the game or another player, you were probably excited about scooping up power-ups, defeating the villains, claiming your treasure, and moving up to the next level. Challenges like National Blog Posting Month, which encourage participants to write a blog post every day for a month, work because they're set up as games. We're much more motivated to achieve something if we're battling against time, competitors, or for a prize.

In Jane McGonigal's book *Superbetter*, she tells the story of how gaming helped her recover from a head injury. After several months of dealing with the symptoms of a concussion, McGonigal had become frustrated and depressed. Then she had the thought that would transform her life: what if she turned her recovery into a game? She created a secret identity, recruited allies, battled bad guys, and used power-ups. McGonigal shares why being gameful worked for her—and will work for you:

Being gameful means bringing the psychological strengths you naturally display when you play games—such as optimism, creativity, courage, and determination—to your real life. It means having the curiosity and openness to play with different strategies to discover what works best. It means building up the resilience to tackle tougher and tougher challenges with greater and greater success.

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In this book, you'll take on short quests or games to tackle your creative challenges and discover your best practices. You'll also adopt a secret identity, recruit allies, identify villains, and create your own playbook. Because you'll be using a gameful approach to shaping your creative life, doing these quests won't be a chore. Instead, you'll be able to play with possibilities and maybe even have some fun along the way!

GET YOUR GAME GEAR

Most games require gear. Football players need special protective gear, like helmets and shoulder pads. Video gamers must have game consuls. Chess players need a board, clock, and timer.

In addition, games require a bit of set up. Football players study their playbook and learn the key maneuvers. Video gamers design their avatar. Chess players claim their color and set up the board.

For these quests, you'll need to get the appropriate gear and set up your life to play. The following tools will help you treat the quests as games, adventures to conquer on the road to developing a productive writing life:

ADOPT A SECRET IDENTITY

A few years ago, I was out for a walk when I saw a man struggling to clean up after his dog using a ripped poop bag. I happened to have two unused poop bags in my pocket, left over from a morning walk with my dogs. I offered them to him. He looked at me in surprise and said, "Wow. Thank you. How great to meet the Guardian Angel of Poop Baggies." I laughed, happy to have helped.

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But his comment got me thinking: how much better would life be if I had a secret identity, like one of my favorite fictional heroes, Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Use your imagination, your favorite superheroes, or online name generators to develop your own secret identity for your work on this book.

CREATE YOUR PLAYBOOK

Many of the quests in this book require the use of a journal. As you record your habits and reflect on your life in writing, you'll discover your best practices. Think of your journal as your individual game playbook, your unique how-to guide for writing and life. (I will use the terms journal and playbook interchangeably.) You can use your journal to track your progress as you work through this book and move forward on your current project.

RECRUIT ALLIES

During National Novel Writing Month, thousands of people aim to write a 50,000-word novel in 30 days. I've participated for over ten years, and still believe that it's the camaraderie with the other participants that makes the month valuable. Instead of simply sweating over a manuscript alone in my office, I can join writing sprints online, visit write-ins at local libraries and coffee shops, and connect with fellow writers on the message boards. We become allies, cheering each other on and offering advice to help each other move forward. When NaNoWriMo ends, I feel more alone.

But it doesn't have to be that way. We can recruit allies to help us succeed in achieving our goals throughout the year. It might be helpful to have a few allies to work through this book with you.

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UTILIZE POWER-UPS

Power-ups are simply the activities that increase our sense of wellbeing. When we take a walk, get help from a friend, or eat a healthy snack, we are using a power-up to increase our energy.

LEARN THE DRILLS

Every sport has drills that players learn and practice to learn the fundamental skills necessary for playing the game. Players sprint, pass, and balance to develop the agility they need for the game. These drills help coaches see the players' strengths and weaknesses and adjust the plays accordingly.

When it comes to developing a life that supports writing, the quests in this book will help you examine your past, pay attention to your present, and vision your future. Many of the quests use journaling exercises to help you collect information, analyze the data, and figure out what works for you. The exercises use the following key methods to help you understand your habits and imagine new ways of living:

MIND MAP

A mind map is a visual way of making lists or recording ideas. This can be a helpful tool for brainstorming writing projects, collecting ideas, gathering memories, and imagining possibilities for your life.

Write your topic or idea in the middle of the page. Radiating from the word, like spokes on a bicycle wheel, note categories of thought that support the topic: stories, images, themes, sensory details, examples, facts, statistics, and so forth. For each category, record your

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information, stories, and ideas. When you've written down everything you know, you'll have a visual map to help you solve whatever issue you're working on.

FREE WRITE

Don't think about journaling as a traditional writing assignment, with a beginning, middle, and end. Write what comes to your mind, just like when you are brainstorming or talking through an idea with a colleague or friend. When you don't know what to write next, write that down. Repeat ideas as necessary.

LIST

Lists come easily because we are used to making lists for daily plans and shopping trips. Instead of worrying about writing paragraphs or even complete sentences, list ideas, questions, concerns, or anything else that comes to mind.

LETTER

Journaling can feel forced and self-focused. For people opposed to naval-gazing, it can be difficult to write about oneself. Sometimes it is easier to write a letter to someone about our lives. Address your journal entry to someone you respect and admire. You might even choose to write to a favorite historical person or fictional character. What might Benjamin Franklin or Xena the Warrior Princess advise you to do?

TRACKER

We live in a world obsessed with tracking. Fitness trackers help wearers count steps and analyze their sleep patterns. Apps like 42Goals and Momentum help users track their habits and focus on a single goal. And bullet journal creators use analog charts to track

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everything from the books they read to the water they drink. Many of the quests in this book invite you to create a tracker to examine your life and work habits. You can use an analog version like a chart, a computer spreadsheet, or an app to track your habits.

READY, SET, GO!

Level Up provides an opportunity for you to discover your strengths, helpful habits, and best practices. As you work through this book, you will be dedicating time to taking care of your creative life. And each quest will help you spend time creating the work you care about. May you have a most excellent adventure.

VISION YOUR EPIC WINS

Be careful what you wish for because you might not be dreaming big enough.

– Dar Williams

When I was a kid, I wished for a crystal ball to tell me what the future held. But I didn't have access to fancy magical instruments, so I used a Magic 8-Ball. Remember those? We'd ask the ball a question, shake it, and then look for the answer: "Reply hazy, try again." or "Yes - definitely."

These days, I'm more interested in creating plans to accomplish my own visions. But before we can draft the plan—the road map to our heart's destiny—we need to understand what we desire. I often work with clients who are overwhelmed by multiple ideas and possibilities for writing projects. They flit between projects, wondering which one will be the sure thing or worrying about how to proceed. They come to me, hoping that I have the ability to tell their fortunes, predicting which path will lead to gold. Instead, I invite them to dream big, imagining where they'd like to be in 1, 5, or 10 years. This vision will unearth their dreams, help them set goals, and create a road map.

In this quest, you will vision your epic wins. You'll write about what your life will look like when you have accomplished all of your goals. Psychology professor Sonja Lyubomirsky discovered that writing about one's *best possible future self* improved moods, health, and ability to set and achieve goals. When you vision your best possible future self, you'll feel

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like you have peeked through a crystal ball. Once you've seen what you hope the future could look like, you'll be able to plan how to get there.

THE QUEST

This quest invites you to consider your future life:

Imagine yourself [INSERT FUTURE TIME FRAME HERE]. Everything has gone as well as it possibly could. You have worked hard and succeeded at accomplishing all of your goals. Write in the present tense about your life. What does it look like?

When you do the quest, write in the present tense as if everything you've envisioned has happened. We'd normally write about the future like this, "I hope by the end of the year to have finished writing my nonfiction book on garden snakes." For this quest, you'll write about your goals in this way: "I finished a draft of my nonfiction book. I am celebrating with my writing group at my favorite taco place." Use as much sensory detail as possible. After stating that you finished the draft, describe how it felt. Record the details of your celebration. How do the tacos taste?

In the original study, participants wrote about what their lives would be like in five years. Because we're working on plotting a writing life in the here and now, it can be helpful to create a vision that imagines what might happen in the next month, quarter, or year.

Take your game playbook to a coffee shop or park and spend 10-20 minutes doing this quest. Do the quest four times, in four different places. Each time, imagine a different scenario for your life. Play with wild and crazy possibilities. Or imagine the same scenario

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in four different ways, trying different writing forms like a list or a personal artist statement.

As you do the quest, pay attention to how you feel. If you feel especially energized and engaged during parts of your writing, note what you are writing about. What plans excite you? If any plans leave you feeling drained, jot that down, too.

REFLECT

When you've finished writing all four of your visions, review what you wrote and look for themes.

- What are the 3-5 consistent themes that show up in your vision?
- What activities or plans consistently energized you?
- What goals appeared out of this practice?
- What creative projects showed up?
- What steps do you need to take to achieve your vision?

GAME PLAY TIPS

- Think about creative ways you can do this quest: write an acceptance speech for a coveted award, a profile of yourself for a television news show, or an interview for a popular magazine.
- In the original study, participants did this quest four times. I found that the first time I tried this quest, I was so tethered to the present that I could not envision the

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future. The second time around, my tether was looser. Each try brought bigger dreams. Do the quest at least twice—and leave time between tries.

- It's important to do this quest away from home. It's hard to see the seeds for your beautiful life when you are staring at piles of dirty dishes or the stacks of unpaid bills. One of the most persistent villains, the inner critic, will use this information to try to derail you: *How can you accomplish anything when you can't even clean your house?* Defeat that villain by getting out of the house. Go to the art museum, a coffee shop, or library and write there. You will be able to dream bigger dreams.

FOR THE WIN

The minute you scribble your vision in your journal, you've entered the winner's circle. Just articulating your vision increases positive emotions like hope and optimism. But writing about your best possible life will also make you more likely to participate in activities and connect with people who are part of your vision. Once you've written about your heart's desires, you can take the first small steps toward your goals.

[illegible]

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Imagine yourself [INSERT FUTURE TIME FRAME HERE]. Everything has gone as well as it possibly could. You have worked hard and succeeded at accomplishing all of your goals. Write in the present tense about your life. What does it look like?

[illegible]

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Imagine yourself [INSERT FUTURE TIME FRAME HERE]. Everything has gone as well as it possibly could. You have worked hard and succeeded at accomplishing all of your goals. Write in the present tense about your life. What does it look like?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

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Imagine yourself [INSERT FUTURE TIME FRAME HERE]. Everything has gone as well as it possibly could. You have worked hard and succeeded at accomplishing all of your goals. Write in the present tense about your life. What does it look like?

[illegible]

WRITE GOALS THAT WORK

When you discover your mission, you will feel its demand. It will fill you with enthusiasm and a burning desire to get to work on it.

– W. Clement Stone

I work with a lot of people who approach me because they can't accomplish their goals. They want to write a book or launch a blog, but they can't seem to get around to it. Life gets in the way.

Once you've chosen your project, it's time to write your project goal. And believe me, the way you phrase your goal matters. A poorly worded goal gets stuffed in a journal and forgotten about. But a well-worded goal can be used every day to help you achieve your dreams! This quest will help you write goals that work.

THE QUEST

Goals that work are:

- Driven by your passion and purpose
- Defined in specific and concrete terms
- Connected to a plan

When you phrase your goals to include a plan—when, where, and how you will achieve them—you increase your chances of success. You know what steps you need to take to achieve your goal. You have a clear sense of what you need to do and when and where you will do it.

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WRITE

Compose a goal statement using the following formula:

[When], *I will* [where and what] *so that I can achieve my goal of* [state goal].

Here are some examples of goal statements that include these elements:

- *After work each day, I will stop at the coffee shop and write for an hour so that I can achieve my goal of writing my book on public speaking.*
- *Every Saturday and Sunday morning, I will sit at my sewing machine and make scarves so I can achieve my goal of finishing enough scarves to have a table at the school's annual craft sale.*
- *Each night before bed, I will sit in my writing chair and write a scene so that I can achieve my goal of writing my novel.*

GAME PLAY TIPS

- To make your goal more useful, at the end of your goal statement add a note about WHY you're writing a book. For example, you might write:
After work each day, I will stop at the coffee shop and write for an hour so that I can achieve my goal of writing my book to help my clients learn how to overcome their fear of public speaking.
- When you finish writing your goal, copy it onto a big sheet of paper or large index card and post it somewhere you can see it every day! (Or go to a site like Canva and make a graphic that you can post on your computer!)
- Keep a copy of your goal statement near your desk, datebook, and in any other place that might be helpful. When you receive offers to do something else during your

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writing time, it will help to know that you are already booked, working hard at accomplishing a goal.

FOR THE WIN

Once we've created a goal with all of the elements—what, when, where, and why—we have clarity. We not only know where we're going but how we're going to get there. We can set up our lives to help us achieve this goal, easily dealing with the tasks and problems that threaten to get in the way.

This image shows a full page of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page, providing a template for handwriting practice or general writing. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the page.

DEVELOP A LIFE PRIORITY LIST

Never say 'no' to adventures. Always say 'yes,' otherwise you'll lead a very dull life.

– Ian Fleming

Most of us know what we're never up for. Here's part of my list: roller coasters, cats (I'm sadly allergic), and proofreading. Though I've been known to take on a proofreading project when I'm desperate for extra money, it usually leads to overeating chocolate and binge watching *Veronica Mars*.

But despite having a clear idea of what we don't want to do, many of us don't make time for the activities we're passionate about—like writing. We do what we have to do to make a living, and then take care of the tasks necessary to make a life. With the energy we have left over, we fulfill our wants. But often we're too tired to remember to connect to the activities that bring us joy or lead us closer to living our vision of the ideal life.

In my book *Write-A-Thon*, I talk about how using a life priority list can help us say yes to what matters. A life priority list or “absolute yes” list are the five activities that we are so passionate about we will always say yes to them. The tool comes from coach Cheryl Richardson's book *Take Time for Your Life*. This kind of list makes responding to invites much easier—if it doesn't fit the list, it gets an immediate, “no.” Here's a quote from my book:

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For years, I have made use of a life priority list—a list that names the five people and activities I will always make a priority. My list is: Self, Writing, Family, Friends, and my Coaching business. Any invitation that fits within this list frequently gets a yes. Any activity not on the list needs to prove its worth before I can say yes.

In this quest, you'll create your own life priority list.

THE QUEST

If you've worked through this book in order, you've done several quests that have helped you vision your future and write goals. If you haven't done those quests and you have difficulty with this quest, you may want to do those quests first.

WHAT DO YOU VALUE?

Ask yourself: *What people, events, work, and recreational activities are most important to me?* Make a list.

CHOOSE FIVE

If you end up with a list of ten or fifteen items, then it's time to choose five. And yes—although some people suggest you could have up to ten things on your list, don't! Respect your own boundaries and limit yourself to five. Here's how:

Review. Look at your "Vision Your Epic Wins" vision statements and goal statements. What items come up repeatedly?

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Combine. Are any of the items on your list activities or interests that could be combined? Maybe you have plays, concerts, and movies on your list. This could be combined under Arts Events.

Challenge. If you really want to write or make art and you have more than five items on your list, ask:

- Would I say yes to this instead of writing or making art? If not, dump it!
- Would I say yes to this if I had to do it for free? If not, take it off the list!
- Would I say yes to this if I wasn't worried about pleasing others? If not, cut it.
- Would I say yes to this if I had to pay to do it? We pay for what we love doing, but often forget that when we give up our time, we're paying in a different way.
- Would I say yes to this if I had a year to live?
- Do I need this to be an "absolute yes" or could I make it a "maybe?" Remove the maybes!

EXPLORE

Whew! You did it! Now that you have just five items, add a few sentences to describe what each item means for you. It's helpful to be specific here. For example, while family is definitely on my list, and part of that includes helping out at my children's schools, I am clear that I want to help in ways that allow me to use my strengths. That means I usually teach a writing class or two a year but never volunteer to take on administrative tasks, like being class parent.

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PRACTICE

The absolute yes list means nothing until you act on it. Take that absolute yes list on the road. And by on the road, I mean take it to your calendar, your desktop, and anywhere else you do work. Next time someone invites you to do something, check the list. And don't say yes unless the activity fits with one of your priorities and does not conflict with your primary goal—see “Eliminate Conflicting Goals” ([12](#)).

GAME PLAY TIPS

- Challenge the yeses, especially if you are a people pleaser.
- If you use the absolute yes list and still say yes even when you want to say no, use the challenge questions when you have a decision to make.
- Consider how your Secret Identity can help you say no to the tasks and events that are not on your life priority list. While you might have trouble saying no, maybe The Magnificent Magnetic Master loves to dismiss anything that doesn't have the magnetic power to woo!
- Change it up! If you use the list for a few weeks or months and it doesn't feel like it's working, it might not be. Major life events or simply changes in seasons can shift the items on our list. Review the quest again and revise your list.

FOR THE WIN

The absolute yes list works because it takes the angst out of making decisions. We've pre-decided what's important to us so that when someone asks us to do something, we can

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consult our list. Of course, many of us will agonize anyway—it's a bad habit that we need to learn to break. And the list will help us do that.

THE LIFE PRIORITY LIST WORKSHEET

What people, events, work, and recreational activities are most important to me? Make a list.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Choose five.

Circle the five events and activities that you can't live without. (Combine similar items.)

What's on your list now?

[illegible]

DETECT YOUR GENIUS TIME

I have nothing to declare except my genius.

– Oscar Wilde

According to scientific research, our bodies peak for physical, social, and intellectual tasks at specific times of day. Researchers offer broad suggestions about when we do best at various activities. For example, many of us do well at intellectual tasks during the late morning while we excel at creativity in the evening when we are tired and more open to new ideas. But even scientists admit that peak working times are different for each of us. Though some people can be classified as early birds or night owls, many people don't fit easily into any category.

This is where genius time comes in. Genius time is that part of the day when you are best able to work on your primary purpose. This quest will help you discover your genius time and the practices that support you in your creative process. My primary purpose is writing—and my genius time is mornings. That doesn't mean I cannot write at other times of day; it just means that I don't write as easily in those hours. I don't want to waste my mornings with email, social media, or meetings. I need to use those precious hours to write. But your primary purpose might be making art or coding computer games. When you examine your life, you might discover that your genius time is in the afternoon or just

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before bed or over the lunch hour. Your job is to protect and nurture your genius time no matter what happens. This multi-step quest will help you do just that.

THE QUEST

Use your journal, datebook, the form in this ebook, an online app, or a combination of the these to complete this quest.

STEP ONE: MAP YOUR ENERGY

During the next week or two, keep track of your tasks and performance. Throughout the day, list what you do. At the end of the day, review the list and note the type of task you were doing throughout the day (if it's not immediately evident). Examples include writing, creating, thinking, social media, social engagement, physical activity, watching television, and so forth. After you have a complete list of what you accomplished, then record your energy level for each task. You can note your energy level with a simple + for engaged energy and a – for negative energy. Or, you can use terms like H (high), L (low), and M (medium).

You might also want to experiment with working on writing at different parts of the day and recording your experience.

Review your most productive days. Note when you've performed like a genius at social, intellectual, creative, and physical tasks. When did you tend to be most productive as a writer? When did you tend to be most productive at other tasks? Can you build your time around these energy shifts?

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Pro Tip: Your genius time for each type of activity will probably be at different times of day. I'm a writing mastermind at 7:00 AM but don't make me talk to anyone. (*Mornings: Social Dolt, Writing Genius; Early Afternoons: Social Wannabe, Writing Dolt*). You might also have genius times that overlap—perhaps you're good at both social and intellectual tasks in the mornings. This is okay. Just get it all down on paper, real or virtual.

STEP TWO: CHOOSE AND SCHEDULE YOUR PROJECT

What's the one project you want to make progress on this week during your genius time? Maybe you want to work on your book, blog, or stories? Or perhaps you have a major business presentation coming up and you need to use your time to prepare for that. Choose one project to work on during your genius time.

Before you launch headfirst into the week, working like crazy on the tasks you need to accomplish, create a schedule. If possible, match your one project to your intellectual and creative genius time. When I say schedule, I mean more than “think about it”—as in, *I think I might write tomorrow after work*. Note the following information in your calendar or journal:

- *When* will I work on this project?
- *Where* will I work? Is the setting conducive to what I need to do? Do I have what I need to get work done?
- *What* will I work on? You know the big project you want to work on, now choose the chunk that you will work on each day—or at least for the first day in your schedule.

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- *How* will I handle interruptions or distractions? What might interrupt your plan? How will you deal with that? How will you stick to your genius time when the kids are screaming or friends invite you out for drinks or a client needs you or you're weary and just want to take a nap? Decide now.

STEP THREE: HONOR THE GENIUS TIME

Put that butt in your chair and work on your project. If something happens and you miss a day, forgive yourself. And show up again the next day.

GAME PLAY TIPS

- Solidify your plan to use your genius time for your creative work by repeating a mantra like: *When I get home from work, I will write for 20 minutes on my nonfiction book.*
- Record your mantra on paper and post it where you can see it. (Cheesy—yes. But it works!)
- Set up your workspace ahead of time—like you might set the table for dinner—so that when it's genius time, you'll be ready to create.
- Throughout the day or the day before, imagine yourself in your space, successfully creating.
- It can help to schedule your other tasks according to your energy flow. Once you get used to this, you'll never go back!

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FOR THE WIN

It has taken me a long time to honor my genius time and NOT feel guilty. You may need to accept that you're going to feel like a fraud when you tell people you cannot meet for a networking event because you are writing or creating. If it helps, don't tell them what you'll be doing (and definitely don't confess that you can't take a meeting because you've got "genius time"). Just say: I can't meet. I'm in another meeting. And you are: with your muse.

Daily Schedule Worksheet

Daily Schedule

(Add a +/- to note energy)

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Daily Schedule Worksheet

Daily Schedule

(Add a +/- to note energy)

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Noon	
12:30	
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7:00	
7:30	
8:00	

Daily Schedule Worksheet

Daily Schedule

(Add a +/- to note energy)

6:00	
6:30	
7:00	
7:30	
8:00	
8:30	
9:00	
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10:00	
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11:00	
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Noon	
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6:00	
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7:00	
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8:00	

DISCERN YOUR BEST PRACTICES

One hasn't become a writer until one has distilled writing into a habit, and that habit has been forced into an obsession. Writing has to be an obsession. It has to be something as organic, physiological and psychological as speaking or sleeping or eating.

– Niyi Osundare

After coaching and teaching people about writing for many years, I've noticed that every person has unique practices to support their work.

One writer I met made it a daily practice to copy a work of poetry or the chapter of a favorite book into her journal before each writing session. This practice eased her into writing and inspired her creativity. Aaron Sorkin, the creator of *The West Wing* and *The Social Network*, paces and acts out his own dialogue. One of my colleagues writes the first draft of her novels by hand in a notebook. She uses the same composition book for character sketches and plot notes.

Each of us has habits that support our productivity. Our best practices may come from our education, our day job, or our work as a writer. And we may not even be aware of what we do. No more! In this quest, you'll detect your best practices.

THE QUEST

You will need your journal or the worksheets that follow for this quest.

Create a Writing Habit

STEP ONE: COLLECT THE DATA

Select three of your most productive work sessions. If you have difficulty remembering these, review your calendar or your recent tracking sheets for examples. Or take a look at some of your finished projects—what were your most productive sessions leading up to completing those projects? You can also look at your writing sessions for school or work, work sessions for other creative projects, or journaling.

In your journal, list each session. Write only on the left side of the page, leaving a blank column on the right side of the page. Leave enough room for each entry so that you can write a short description of what happened and answer the following questions:

- What project were you working on?
- Was the writing project for someone else or yourself?
- How close were you to the deadline?
- When were you working?
- Where were you working?
- What was going on externally? (What was happening around you?)
- What was happening internally? (What were you feeling physically and emotionally?)
- What did you accomplish?

Create a Writing Habit

- What habits, practices, and tools helped you do your work?
- What did you have difficulty accomplishing and what did you do that helped you overcome the challenge?
- What distracted you and how did you overcome distractions to move forward?

STEP TWO: DECODE THE DATA

You now have tons of information about what works for you. You may even have an intuitive sense of what your ideal working situation looks like. Now it's time to see what the data has to say.

Review the records of your most productive work sessions. Use a colored pencil or marker to underline concrete or key information for each question above.

Use the right column to note words and information that summarize what you discovered while underlining. Comments might include, *I produce the best work in the morning!* or *Walking helps me write better!*

When you're done, make a list of the situations and practices using the categories in the example below. You can also add your own categories.

Example:

Best Possible Situations and Practices

What: If your best writing sessions are spent working on a specific kind of project, record it here. E.g., book chapter, short story, speech.

For: Note whether your best sessions were for someone else or for yourself.

Create a Writing Habit

Deadline: Did your best sessions come with or without a deadline? Did you work better generously ahead of or up against a deadline?

When: Record your most productive times of the day to write.

Where: Where were your best places to work and their characteristics. E.g., Is it a public place or somewhere in your home? Are you alone or with people?

External: What external elements helped you write? E.g., You were working towards a deadline or you were completing a project for a class.

Internal: What internal elements aided your productivity? E.g., You were in a good mood or you felt engaged by the material.

Practices, habits, tools: What practices did you use when you wrote most? What practices did you use to overcome writing blocks and other challenges?

Note: Many of the practices and habits that helped you write, overcome blocks, and plow through challenges are called power-ups. You'll be taking a look at this information in a later quest. For now, you might want to star any practice that boosts your energy.

GAME PLAY TIPS

- When you're finished, take the above information and create a personal how-to guide for writing well—a handbook of best practices. Don't overthink this! Create a quick list of your top tools or practices and post it where you can review it and use it regularly.

Create a Writing Habit

- If you have difficulty remembering your best writing sessions, consider keeping a writing journal. After each writing session, note what worked and what didn't work. Reflect on some of the prompts above, collecting information on the places, habits, and practices that work best for you. After a few of these sessions, review them and create your list of best practices.

FOR THE WIN

Hopefully this quest helped you see what practices work best for you. Most of the quests in this book have the same goal: helping you discover the practices that make you a happy, productive writer. As you work through the book, feel free to add any of the tools you find to your handbook of best practices. For now, celebrate that you are a creative who has developed your own best practices—yay you!

BEST PRACTICES WORKSHEET

Project: _____ **Self or assignment:** _____

How close were you to the deadline? _____

When were you working? _____

Where were you working? _____

What was happening around you? _____

What were you feeling physically and emotionally? _____

What did you accomplish? _____

What habits, practices, and tools helped you do your work? _____

What blocked you and how did you overcome it? _____

TOOLS THAT WORKED

BEST PRACTICES WORKSHEET

Project: _____ **Self or assignment:** _____

How close were you to the deadline? _____

When were you working? _____

Where were you working? _____

What was happening around you? _____

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What did you accomplish? _____

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When were you working? _____

Where were you working? _____

What was happening around you? _____

What were you feeling physically and emotionally? _____

What did you accomplish? _____

What habits, practices, and tools helped you do your work? _____

What blocked you and how did you overcome it? _____

TOOLS THAT WORKED

RECOGNIZE YOUR STRENGTHS

Identify a person's strengths. Define outcomes that play to those strengths. Find a way to count, rate or rank those outcomes. And then let the person run.

– Marcus Buckingham

One of my teaching mentors gave me this advice about managing a challenging class, “Encourage and reward the positives. Even if they’re small.”

In school, I learned key critical thinking skills. They’ve helped me earn degrees, master new topics, and write books. These same critical thinking skills support me in helping clients overcome obstacles and write more. But sometimes, my analyzing gets me stuck in a critical mindset. Instead of writing, I analyze every single problem and misstep in my writing and life. I can barely get a few words on paper before my inner critic is launching an attack.

After learning how important it is for students to hear what they’re doing right, I realized that those of us engaged in the challenging task of writing have the same need. I wondered: What might happen if we paid attention to what went well and did more of that? What if we noticed, encouraged, and rewarded our own positive steps forward? And what if we recruited our strengths to support us when we were struggling with a task?

Create a Writing Habit

My guess? Noticing the positive would help us write more and do it with ease. Here's an example from my work with students at the library. One of my students struggles with the technical skills of writing and, because of that, he's often reluctant to join us at the Dream Keeper's writing table. But this young man loves to draw. Once, when we were writing about how we'd change our community for the better, I invited him to draw his idea. He dove in, sketching out the details of how he'd have police officers collect guns from criminals. I asked him to write a few sentences about what he'd told me. After drawing and explaining his idea, he easily wrote the sentences. Of course, his sentences still had some technical errors—but I could see his pride in finishing an assignment. I'm certain this student will approach his next assignment with a little less fear—partly because he knows he can organize his ideas by drawing them.

This quest will help you notice what you do well—and then use those skills to level up your writing life.

THE QUEST

In the quest, “Discern Your Best Practices,” you examined your best working sessions and noted many of the practices, habits, and tools that help you write. In this quest, you will examine the data from that quest and search for your strengths.

What is a strength? A strength might be a trait like curiosity; a skill like research, drafting, or editing; or a knowledge base, like health.

This quest might be challenging. It requires a lot of work—thinking through best writing sessions, identifying strengths, and imagining how they might support us in our writing life.

Create a Writing Habit

It would be easy to skip the quest and “wing it” instead. But that would be a mistake. The beauty of this quest is that discovering your strengths and then learning to apply them will help you work in a way that is most helpful for you, your habits, and rhythms.

STEP ONE: RECORD

Take your journal to a coffee shop, library, or park bench. Pull out the notes on your best writing sessions and reflect on the following questions. When you jot down your answers, use as much detail as possible.

- What writing or other creative tasks do I find to be easy or do well (or both)?
(Examples of tasks: organize ideas, interview sources, write anecdotes, tell stories, persuade readers, research, write rough drafts, revise, etc.)
- When was I engaged with my work? What project was I working on at the time?
What task was I doing? What were some of the circumstances around my work?
(E.g., was I working alone or with others?)
- When did I feel most energized by my work? What project was I working on? What task was I doing? What were some of the circumstances around my work?

STEP TWO: ANALYZE

Review your answers to the above questions and reflect:

- What practices add to my productivity? (Please define productivity in any way that works for you: writing more words, beginning and completing pieces, putting in a certain amount of time, etc.)

Create a Writing Habit

- What practices or situations challenged my ability to be productive?
- What traits emerge as my strengths? If you have trouble putting your strengths into words, search online for lists of “strengths” or “character traits.”

STEP THREE: TRANSFORM

Change happens when we allow what we do well to transform our writing and lives.

- Based on the above data and analysis, what kinds of projects would you like to do more of? Less of?
- How can your strengths and positive practices improve your writing sessions or other creative work?
- How can these strengths and practices support you in overcoming your blocks or challenges?

GAME PLAY TIPS

- If you get stuck, take a look at your secret identity. What are his or her character traits or strengths? How do they relate to you and your strengths?
- You may have difficulty looking at writing experiences and seeing strengths in what you do or how you do it. Part of that is because we don't value our own daily habits, it's “just what we do.” It might be helpful to ask a close friend or colleague to help you find the strengths in the way you do your work as well as in the work you do.

FOR THE WIN

Your strengths are evident in everything you do—from cleaning your house to writing a book. But most of us review our life to uncover our weaknesses. We think that if we can get a handle on our faults and fix them, we will be more successful. In doing that, we often ignore our own superpowers—the strengths that we use to make a difference in the world. But today you changed all that. You reviewed your own life and named your strengths. Now it will be easier for you to remember and use them.

RECOGNIZE YOUR STRENGTHS WORKSHEET

What writing or other creative tasks do I find easy or do well (or both)? (Examples of tasks: organize ideas, interview sources, write anecdotes, tell stories, persuade readers, research, write rough drafts, revise, etc.)

When was I engaged with my work? What project was I working on at the time? What task was I doing? What were some of the circumstances around my work? (E.g., was I working alone or with others?)

When did I feel most energized by my work? What project was I working on? What task was I doing? What were some of the circumstances around my work?

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When did I feel most energized by my work? What project was I working on? What task was I doing? What were some of the circumstances around my work?

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When did I feel most energized by my work? What project was I working on? What task was I doing? What were some of the circumstances around my work?

DISCOVER FAVORITE POWER-UPS

Renew energy, revive strength.

– Lailah Gifty Akita

When we play a video game, power-ups provide extra abilities or add a benefit. When Pac-Man eats a power pellet—a large flashing dot near each corner of the game board—his enemies turn deep blue, reverse direction, and he can eat them. But when the ghosts flash white, the player knows that Pac-Man’s special power is fading. The ghosts will soon become dangerous again.

In real life, power-ups function much like water stops in a marathon. We need them to perform well. In the book *SuperBetter*, author Jane McGonigal defines power-ups as “any positive action you can take easily that creates a quick moment of pleasure, strength, courage, or connection for you.” She notes that power-ups can boost our resilience in many areas of our life: social, physical, emotional, and mental. For many of us, power-ups like exercise, healthy food, and connecting with others support us in getting through the day. For writers, power-ups boost energy, help us blast through writer’s block or simple exhaustion, and work through the challenging parts. Power-ups can mean the difference between quitting and succeeding.

Create a Writing Habit

In writing lore, power-ups have been portrayed as unhealthy and even illegal habits. T.S. Eliot took Benzedrine (an amphetamine) every morning and Seconal or another sleep aid every night to go to sleep. While writing *The Power and the Glory*, Graham Greene took on a second project—a thriller called *The Confidential Agent*. In order to finish both books quickly, he took a Benzedrine tablet at morning and noon. Science fiction writer Philip K. Dick used hallucinogens and speed-like drugs to pump out fiction fast.

Other writers confess to habits that are fully legal and equally addicting. We use caffeine to get going in the morning. When our energy lags, we boost it with coffee, chocolate, and sugar-laden substances (donuts!). The extroverts among us—I know you're out there—take to the internet like workers visit the water cooler, hoping for encouragement, camaraderie, or concrete information.

And those on the wannabe list—we wannabe writers but we're still working out how to do it—often wait for the elusive inspiration power-up to hit and ignite our writing sessions.

After writing professionally for more than 20 years, I recognize that certain types of power-ups have helped me write more than 15 books and many articles. And although I love coffee and chocolate and pie, none of these substances have helped me write more. What power-ups have worked? Simple tools like exercise, journaling, and accountability have given me the energy boosts that keep me focused and productive.

In this quest, you'll examine your own life to discover your most helpful power-ups.

Create a Writing Habit

THE QUEST

Power-ups can help us feel energized, attentive, witty, powerful, calm, happy, healthy, and strong. Consider what helps you access these emotions or states of being. Make lists of any experiences, exercises, activities, places, songs, quotes, mantras, advice, photos, movies, videos, habits, food, memories, volunteer activities, people, or anything else that boosts your energy and supports you in writing.

If you've been working through this section in order, you've already examined most and least productive writing sessions as well as detecting your strengths and weaknesses.

Review the information you uncovered in each of these quests and note any power-ups that you regularly use to renew your energy before or during your writing session.

Look at the practices you use to restore energy in other parts of your life. What do you do at work when you're feeling burned out or restless but you have a project due that day? How do you recoup your energy when you come home from a long day at work and need to cook dinner? How do you gather energy when you're tired and need to care for children, a friend, or pets? Add these power-ups to the list.

GAME PLAY TIPS

- Connect with a friend or writing colleague and ask what helps them to write when they feel stuck or confused. Swap tips.
- Review the power-up list at the end of this book and note which ones you already use and which you'd like to try. Add your favorite power-ups to the list.

Create a Writing Habit

- Post a list of your power-ups where you can see them throughout the day. Next time you feel stuck, try a power-up.
- Commit to using at least one power-up a day.

FOR THE WIN

Now that you have your super-duper list of power-up tools, you can find the power to focus and write whenever you need to. When you feel stuck or uninspired, ask: would a power-up help? Then check your list and use one!

IDENTIFY YOUR ALLIES

This is what we can all do to nourish and strengthen one another: listen to one another very hard, ask hard questions, too, send one another away to work again, and laugh in all the right places.

– Nancy Mairs

As a spokesperson for Weight Watchers, Oprah Winfrey promotes one of the cornerstone secrets for successful weight loss: connecting. She said, “The journey is even better when you take it together.”

Neuroscientist Moran Cerf said that we can reduce stress, increase happiness, and make better choices by connecting with the right people. Cerf based this theory on three research-supported concepts. First, we make hundreds of decisions a day, from when to get up to what to eat to how we’ll spend our time, and the act of choosing drains our energy. Second, when we make choices, we’re not always rational. Our biases, emotions, and social connections cloud our judgment. In other words, when it comes to choosing whether to have dessert, we might be swayed by our belief that hard work needs to be rewarded or by a friend’s encouragement to indulge. Finally, we often make decisions based on what the people around us do.

Create a Writing Habit

We choose wisely when we surround ourselves with people who make good choices.

Motivational speaker Jim Rohn said it this way: “You are the average of the five people you spend the most time with.”

Choosing healthy companions can affect our writing life as well as what we eat or how much we exercise. Psychology professor Robert Boice examined the habits of productive and unproductive faculty writers. He found that writers who belonged to peer writing groups received the following benefits:

- Maintained momentum to complete a project
- Produced more work
- Developed more creative ideas
- Improved the quality of their writing
- Identified sources for publication

Wow!

In game language, the people you connect with are your allies. This quest provides you with multiple options for connecting with potential allies. Try out a few of them and measure which has the most positive impact on your writing life.

THE QUEST

Review the following models for connecting. Under each category note your current allies and star the types of connecting that might work best for you right now.

Create a Writing Habit

FRIENDS AND FAMILY

The people you connect with regularly can be some of your best allies. Friends and family members can help you celebrate your successes, cheer you up when you're struggling, and support you through it all. People who are also working on creative projects can be especially helpful allies.

COACH

A coach will help you vision, set goals, create a plan, overcome blocks, and stay accountable. You might hire a coach for help with a single challenge or to be an accountability partner for the whole process.

ACCOUNTABILITY PARTNER

An accountability partner can help you maintain momentum in achieving your goals. In this sort of relationship, it's helpful if both people are working toward achieving a goal and need accountability.

Pro Tip: When you're both working on a writing project, it can help to make a deadline pact. Promise that by a certain date you will each write a set number of words, finish a project, or complete a portion of a manuscript. To make it more fun and easier to succeed, make a bet. Perhaps the loser can treat the winner to dinner!

Create a Writing Habit

SUPPORT GROUP

For years, I've met with small networking and support groups for accountability. When I wanted to quit, these connections have helped me to leap forward. During these meetings, we ask questions like:

- What are you creating?
- What do you hope to be creating?
- What's working?
- What do you need help with?

CRITIQUE GROUP

Professional writers study great writing—and know what works and what doesn't work. When you invite other writers to read and critique your writing, you expand your understanding of good writing. And, you learn about your blind spots. From complex comments on structure and voice to technical lessons on commas and run-on sentences, a good critique can strengthen your writing. Plus, having a critique group often provides you with the deadline you need to finish a draft of your work.

CLASS

When you cannot make progress even with the help of a coach or coaching group, you might consider taking a class. With the help of an instructor and colleagues, you'll receive

Create a Writing Habit

assignments, due dates, feedback, and accountability. In addition, paying a fee can sometimes help us work harder.

FIND AND CONNECT

After reviewing and reflecting on the above possibilities for connecting, you will have an idea of what kind of connection would work best for you at this time. If you're developing a writing habit or starting a writing project, it might be most helpful to get a coach or accountability partner to cheer you on and help you when you hit roadblocks. Or maybe you're feeling ready to submit your work but would like some feedback on your work—then it might be time to connect with an editor or critique group.

Once you know what kind of connection you want, brainstorm people who might make good allies. If you get stuck, ask current allies who they would recommend. Search online for additional opportunities—coaches, critique groups, and classes. Then connect!

GAME PLAY TIPS

- When you try a connecting tool, track your progress. Choose a goal you want to accomplish—perhaps increasing your weekly word count, discovering tools to overcome writer's block, or finishing a project. Note your progress on the goal as well as how the group or partnership affects you. Does it increase or decrease your energy? Do you feel more or less confident? This reflection will help you find connections that work!

Create a Writing Habit

- Give each connecting tool time to work. One coaching session or one critique group session can be helpful, but several can be transformational. It takes time to develop trust, and transformational relationships are built on a foundation of trust.
- You may need to try a few coaches, accountability partners, or groups before you find one that suits you.

FOR THE WIN

Creating can be a challenging game. Writers work alone for months or years to produce a product they're satisfied with. But that's just the opening match. Whether we sell our product to a publisher, packager, or directly to a reader, the process can be a lengthy and frustrating experience, filled with rejection and stumbling blocks. The successful creatives find and connect with allies. We cheer each other on, not only when we cross finish lines but also when we're starting a new project, facing challenges, or feeling discouraged. When we have allies, we're winners no matter what happens.

DEVELOP A WRITING HABIT

First forget inspiration. Habit is more dependable. Habit will sustain you whether you're inspired or not. Habit will help you finish and polish your stories. Inspiration won't. Habit is persistence in practice.

– Octavia E. Butler

Wannabe writers tend to depend on inspiration to cue them to write. Unfortunately, inspiration comes most frequently while we are writing and not before. Many famous writers talked about the power of making writing a habit. In the quote above, science fiction writer Octavia Butler reminded her readers that habit sustains us long after inspiration has disappeared. When novelist Haruki Murakami is writing a book, he sticks to a strict schedule of rising early, writing for 5-6 hours, and then going for a run.

Flannery O'Connor also believed in the habit of writing, saying: "I'm a full-time believer in writing habits... Of course you have to make your habits in this conform to what you can do. I write only about two hours every day because that's all the energy I have, but I don't let anything interfere with those two hours, at the same time and the same place."

In his book, *The Power of Habit*, Charles Duhigg gave the concept of habit a structure with three distinct steps: cue, practice, reward." This habit loop might be as simple as brushing your teeth:

Create a Writing Habit

Cue: It's bedtime.

Practice: Brush teeth

Reward: Ohhh! My mouth feels fresh and clean.

To succeed at writing, we can adopt the habit loop and use it as a tool to make our own writing a habit. When we do that, it increases our productivity. In this quest, you will determine your cue, practice, and reward and then put it into place.

QUEST

Once again, we will examine our lives for the practices that help us.

FIND A CUE

Keith Donahue, author of *The Stolen Child* and *Angels of Destruction*, wrote both novels by hand on his subway commute to and from work. His cue was getting on the train. If you schedule when and where you will write, you will know your cue. I've nurtured my writing habit by creating a morning ritual. Before I check Facebook or email, I look at my writing task of the day, left on my bullet journal next to my computer, and write. Once I've put in my writing time, I reward myself with a trip to Facebook or a walk around the block.

DESIGN YOUR PRACTICE

Know when, where and what you will create. If the blank page scares you, do a prewriting exercise like a mind map, list, or free write to jumpstart your writing session. (The *Know Your What* chapter below will help you find a prewriting tool that works for you.) If you

Create a Writing Habit

need research materials like books or special supplies, gather them together before your work session.

PLAN YOUR REWARD

For many writers, the effort of having written feels like a reward in itself. Whew! But if that's not quite enough for you, one way to keep your butt in the chair is to promise yourself a delicious reward. Famous writers have rewarded themselves in unique ways: Anthony Burgess used the Martini Method. When he had completed his word count, he would relax with a dry martini and enjoy the rest of the day with an easy conscience, and normally in a bar. I suggest more healthy rewards. A walk in the park. An hour reading a good book. A trip to the library.

GAME PLAY TIPS

- Mine the past to discover what cues and rewards you used during your most productive writing sessions.
- If you have difficulty finding a cue that works, piggyback on an existing habit, the tasks you do every day or week. Even when you're swamped with work or overwhelmed with tasks, you do a few things every single day: get up, brush your teeth, eat breakfast, check email, take a snack break, go to bed. You also do a few things every week at the same time: go to yoga class, pick up kids from school, or visit a family member in the nursing home. Take one of these constants and attach writing to it, either before or after.

Create a Writing Habit

- Review and revise. Try out a cue, practice, and reward for the next few writing sessions. At the end of each session, note what worked and what didn't. After several sessions with a single cue, review your practice and revise anything that isn't working well.

FOR THE WIN

We don't need elaborate cues or rewards to get to our creative projects and complete them. And once we know what cues work for us and practice honoring them, we'll be well on our way to creating a writing habit, which is the best way to increase productivity and finish projects!

TAKE SMALL STEPS

When asked, “How do you write?” I invariably answer, “one word at a time.”

– Stephen King

I’ve been meaning to clean the basement for some time. Every week, I dutifully scribble, “clean the basement” on my to-do list. And every week, I look at that entry and my stomach sinks. Before I pick up a single box, I’m overwhelmed.

Of course, that’s not the only thing on my to-do list that sends my stomach into back flips. Every week for some time now, I’ve also written: “revise the novel” and “write new book.”

You can guess how much progress I’ve made on both the basement and the books: zero. Here’s why: my brain cannot cope with the thought of doing a huge task like “clean the basement.” I might as well have added to my to-do list, “reverse climate change.”

Lots of coaches talk about the Big Hairy Audacious Goal (BHAG). Write the book and clean the basement count as BHAGs. And here’s what I’ve learned over many years of coaching: having a big hairy audacious goal is a huge hurdle to accomplishing anything.

Humans do not do well with giant steps or drastic changes. Why do you think so many of us fail at these lifestyle-changing diets? The fear part of our brain freaks out. Instead of cleaning the basement, revising the novel, or eliminating sugar, we’ll do just about anything to avoid that big, scary goal.

Create a Writing Habit

Think about your own writing life and tackling that big project you've wanted to take on for years. Or consider cleaning out one of the places you've packed to the gills with stuff (the attic, garage, car trunk). Did your stomach just sink a bit? Maybe you had a sudden urge to eat chocolate or get a root canal, anything to avoid "the big task."

Don't worry. Take a deep breath. I have a solution for you: take a small step. According to Robert Maurer, author of *One Small Step Can Change Your Life: The Kaizen Way*, we avoid that sinking feeling by taking absurdly small steps toward our goals. Instead of filling our to-do list with big chunks like, "write book" or "clean house," we list tiny actions like "write a paragraph about taking small steps."

This quest will help you divide a big goal into small steps and tackle them, one tiny turtle step at a time.

THE QUEST

Use your journal to work through the following steps.

STEP ONE

Choose a current project and break down the tasks into absurdly tiny steps. So instead of "write book" try something like:

- Brainstorm chapter topics
- Choose a chapter topic
- Brainstorm ideas for topic

Create a Writing Habit

- Write a sentence explaining the topic

STEP TWO

This week, when you schedule writing time, note the step (or steps) you will work on during each time slot.

STEP THREE

Tackle a single small step at a time during each writing slot.

At the end of a week or two, reflect on how small steps have supported your writing progress.

GAME PLAY TIPS

- Pay attention to how you feel as you record or work on each step. If you feel overwhelmed, blocked, or panicked, the step may be too big. Break down the task into even smaller steps. So “write an hour each day” might become “write fifteen minutes each day” or “write for five minutes about the first session with my running coach.”
- Small steps are a power-up, too. They’re also a great tool for defeating the lizard part of your brain, who freaks out whenever you take a big step. Take an even smaller step, and the lizard brain will calm down.
- Call on a power animal for inspiration and ideas. When it comes to taking small steps, it helps to have a power animal to get inspired and learn how to move forward. Think about spiders spinning webs, ants carrying food back to their nest,

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or a turtle foraging for food. All of these creatures tackle their projects at their own speed. What can you learn from their habits? How might they inspire you? Use their work as an example or inspiration and take even smaller steps toward your goal.

FOR THE WIN

Often movies or television shows portray the stories of people who took dramatic action. When we compare ourselves to them, we may feel like we can never measure up. But just because the movie doesn't show all the small steps the protagonist took to achieve her goal, including the multiple missteps, doesn't mean they didn't happen. Victory is achieved one small step at a time. Embrace it!

KNOW THE WHAT

The blank page is God's way of letting us know how hard it is to be God.

– G.K. Chesterton

Many writers have talked about their fear of the blank page. But there's a perfect solution to facing the blank page: don't.

Prewriting—brainstorming or mapping out ideas before writing—eliminates the blank page. This tool comes from my training with the National Writing Project. Students write better if they can start with some sort of prewriting. You will, too.

Before we write the paper or the scene, we jot down our thoughts, without any pressure to get it right. The process of exploring the idea in writing can help us identify our core ideas, develop illustrations and details to enrich our writing, and organize our thoughts. When it's time to write, we no longer worry about the blank page—we have a map to follow. This quest offers you several tools to try as prewriting tools.

THE QUEST

Knowing what you will write each day—even jotting a few notes about it, will help you write with ease. On the day before your next scheduled writing session, choose a small step to complete during that session. In your journal or computer document, note your topic.

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Then brainstorm how you might write about the topic in any way that works for you. Here are some possible tools for prewriting. Use one or combine several together for your prewriting.

Mind map. Write your topic in the center of a piece of paper and, like spokes on a bicycle, record any anecdotes, facts, data, or examples that will help you write about the topic.

List. Create a list of potential topics, stories, ideas, and more.

Free-write. Write anything that comes to mind about the topic.

Ask questions. Formulate questions about the topic including what you want to know about it, how you will present it, or anything else that helps you move forward.

Draw pictures. For people who feel more comfortable using images, drawing pictures about an aspect of your topic can help you move into writing. Some people use pictures when they create a mind map.

Create a rough outline. Some people like to have a map for moving forward with their project. Developing a rough outline can provide that road map.

Create a to-do list with tiny steps. An outline can also be thought of as a big to-do list, with the steps written in order of presentation. For this to-do list, write anything that comes to mind—and don't worry about the order.

Use a prewriting chart. For a scene it might have categories like: characters, setting, main conflict, emotional conflict, etc. For a nonfiction article, it might identify: main point, central ideas, supporting data, anecdotes, details, etc.

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After 10-15 minutes of prewriting, put away your work until your writing session. Your subconscious will continue to work on the topic and when you get to your writing session, you'll have no trouble writing!

GAME PLAY TIPS

- Play with various types of prewriting methods until you find one or two that work for you. Know that the prewriting tools that work may vary with the type of project you're working on.
- The quest suggests prewriting the day before your writing session. Feel free to adapt this—and see what happens. Prewrite each morning for that evening's writing session or simply prewrite at the beginning of your writing time.
- If you prewrite and still don't know how to begin the section you're working on, don't sweat it. Set aside that prewriting for a future writing session. Take a look at your list of potential topics and select a topic seems the most engaging. Brainstorm ideas and try writing on that. If neither of these tools work, take a break. The solution may appear to you in the middle of the night, while folding laundry, or at tomorrow's writing session.

FOR THE WIN

Writers have taken drastic measures to overcome their fear of the blank page—including taking drugs and consuming large amounts of alcohol. Prewriting will eliminate fear better than drugs, wine, and chocolate! And there are many types of prewriting tools to try. If brainstorming doesn't work, then try mind mapping or making a list of questions. At some point, you'll be able to start writing.

OVERCOME FEAR TO WRITE NOW

What she said was:

Dear Otto,

We're all scared, most of the time. Life would be lifeless if we weren't. Be scared, and then jump into that fear. Again and again. Just remember to hold onto yourself while you do it.

Sincerely, Etta

– Emma Hooper

What's keeping you from writing your book?

My clients hire me because they have a deep desire to write a book but they've bumped into an obstacle that keeps them from writing. Here's what clients tell me about the blocks they face:

- *I'm stuck. I don't know where or how to start.*
- *I struggle with procrastination.*
- *I can't seem to find the time to write.*
- *Every time I try to write, my ADHD kicks in. I get monkey mind and can't focus.*
- *I get so overwhelmed by the process.*

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- *I've started several books, but I can't seem to finish them.*
- *I wonder if I'm too old.*
- *I've got so much research to do before I can start.*

This book is packed full of tools to overcome every one of these challenges. But when the tools don't work, I know that these blocks are simply hiding a deeper issue: fear.

Wait! Wouldn't fear feel like we're facing down a dangerous beast? Wouldn't we have a racing heart, sweaty palms, and a flopping stomach?

Sometimes. But fear can be sneaky, and it often masquerades as:

- Perfectionism (*I have to make this piece perfect before I can share it.*)
- Excuses (*I'm too tired to write.*)
- Procrastination (*Before I can write, I need to clean the house, take a class, finish this research.*)

Though each of us experiences fear in different ways, we all get the same result: we don't write. Or, if we write, we don't share our work. We hide behind excuses and blocks.

So how do you know if your obstacle or writer's block is really fear? If you have reviewed and revised your external challenges to writing (e.g., found a time and place to write), tried to manage your mindset and still cannot write, chances are you're dealing with fear.

Here's the thing: if our core issue is fear, then strategies are less likely to work. We can have the best software, the perfect schedule, and an ideal outline—and we'll still procrastinate. Why? Because fear hurts. It feels uncomfortable, and we'll do whatever we can to avoid feeling it.

When we went to Disney World, my family challenged me to go on a roller coaster. They chose a small one at Animal Kingdom, one that was suitable for ages 3 and up. I climbed into the ride, making sure my safety belt was tightly fastened. And then I reassured myself: you can do anything for a few minutes. The ride started out fast and never let up. I screamed and swore because, dang, the twists and drops had left my stomach and my courage back at the starting gate. But it was over fast.

It's the same with any emotion: they pass through us quite quickly—in about 90 seconds. I first heard about the 90-second rule in a class with Martha Beck. She said that most feelings take just 90 seconds to run through our bodies.

Jill Bolte Taylor talks about this in her book, *My Stroke of Insight*:

Once triggered, the chemical released by my brain surges through my body and I have a physiological experience. Within 90 seconds from the initial trigger, the chemical component of my anger has completely dissipated from my blood and my automatic response is over. If, however, I remain angry after those 90 seconds have passed, then it is because I have chosen to let that circuit continue to run.

This quest gives you a single tool for overcoming fear. But first a warning: you'll have to face your fear before you let it go. And some reassurance: it'll be over soon, and then you'll feel better.

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THE QUEST

Next time you show up to write and feel fear—don't avoid it. Feel it. Ride it out for 90 seconds and then get back to writing. If you experience one of the roadblocks above—perfectionism, procrastination, or excuses—and suspect it's fear, try writing. If it's fear, it'll roar louder. Let it. Feel what's happening.

Feeling fear is tough. Trust me, I know. I've dealt with it my whole life. I'll do whatever I can to avoid it. It's uncomfortable, distressing, and just plain yucky.

Still, if you can take a deep breath and feel the fear, it will go away more quickly. Know this: you don't have to white knuckle it. Feel the fear with some kindness toward yourself. Talk to your anxious inner child the way you'd talk to any child who was afraid.

- *You are safe.*
- *You are okay.*
- *This feeling will pass.*
- *It will be fine.*

Once the fear has passed, get back to work.

Repeat this quest as often as necessary.

GAME PLAY TIPS

- Use any power-ups that will help you ride out the fear. I've given you one—speaking to yourself with comforting words. Others might include walking in nature, using affirmations, talking to a friend, and deep breathing. Try these out! They'll help.

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- Fear often feels like someone has literally removed the ground beneath our feet. We feel like we're falling, arms flailing, with no safe place to go. Getting grounded can help counter this feeling. Take off your shoes and let your feet feel the ground. Imagine yourself growing roots into the earth. Other grounding exercises include hugging a tree (I'm not kidding!), wrapping four fingers around our thumbs on both hands and holding this hand position while breathing deeply, holding a comforting object like a stone or stuffed animal, or noticing concrete sensory details about your surroundings.
- Fear tends to show up when we're doing something new, working on a project that means a lot to us, or writing about something that's very personal. That's normal. So if the fear appears, acknowledge it, feel it, and keep writing.

FOR THE WIN

Most of the people who've accomplished great things or written amazing books have experienced and overcome fear. You are not alone. And you are not stuck. You can overcome the fear and write.

POWER-UP LIST

In a running marathon, you hit the wall when you deplete all of the glycogen stored in the liver and muscles. When you play video games, you lose a life when you run out of health points. Similarly, if you write and vision regularly, you'll deplete your creative energy.

Criticism, rejection, and inner doubt can also damage our resolve to write. It depletes our inner reserves. In *Daybook*, Anne Truitt wrote about harsh critiques of her *Arundel* exhibit at the Baltimore Museum of Art. She said, "I am not concerned with reviewers' judgments, yea or nay; they cannot deflect my course. What they can do, and this seems beyond my resistance, is hurt my general self, the supporting troops, so to speak, of my striking force."

In video game terminology, power-ups provide boosts of energy, strength, or special powers for the player. In life, power-ups are any activity that makes "you feel happier, stronger, healthier or better connected." This is a list of power-ups that can help you strengthen your soul in the midst of criticism and doubt. Star the ones that work for you. Then make a list of ten soul-strengthening actions and do them regularly. When you're feeling especially low, give yourself a day of nurture!

ARTIST'S DATE

In *The Artist's Way*, Julia Cameron encourages readers to take a weekly artist's date to nourish their creativity. As Cameron says in her follow-up book, *Walking in This World*,

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“Always, when I return to the practice of Artist’s Dates, my sense of wellbeing increases and my work deepens and enlarges.” Take yourself on an artist’s date. You might visit a fabric store, sketch in the park, or wander through an art gallery.

ART MAKING

Making art can be extremely healing. Studies show that it improves wellbeing by decreasing negative emotions and increasing positive ones, improves flow and spontaneity, and improves medical outcomes. Get art supplies and play! Use watercolor paints to capture the blooms on your winter cactus or try creating a collage.

You can supercharge this power-up by making art with others. Socializing carries additional benefits: it strengthens the immune system, increases one’s sense of well-being, and supports brain health. There are several ways to make art with friends. Gather a group of friends and invite one of them to bring a craft to teach the group. Or hire a local artist to lead you and your friends in an art experience. If you live in an area with an art bar or public classes, you can take a class together.

BABY ANIMALS!

Researchers have discovered that looking at photos of cute baby animals can increase our focus and help us to get more writing done. If you don’t have a kitten or duckling handy, find one of the many sites filled with baby animal pictures and videos and check it out next time you need a lift.

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CHOP WOOD, CARRY WATER

When Michael Gelb, author of *How to Think Like Leonardo DaVinci*, asked creatives where they got their best ideas, their most popular answers were: in the shower, while walking in nature, listening to music, or napping. Greek polymath Archimedes got the very first Eureka moment while in the public bath. Herbert Benson, in his book *The Breakout Principle*, suggests that we can overcome our mental blocks by walking away from our work and doing something that is both mindless and repetitive, such as knitting, folding towels, or chopping wood. While you're working on the mindless task—or napping or bathing—your subconscious is hard at work solving your problem. At some point, you land on the exact solution you need—the aha moment you've been searching for.

COLORFUL MOOD BOOSTERS

Do you look at a photo of a deep blue lake and instantly feel calmer? Or see an expansive field of green and experience a wave of peace? Or maybe you've noticed that just looking at a red can of soda energizes you. Research has shown that colors affect our memory, arouse our emotions, and can boost our energy. Green improves concentration, orange lifts moods and increases critical thinking skills, blue stimulates creativity and boosts productivity, and pink can calm us. Play with using color to support your writing productivity. Wear it, decorate with it, or simply create a Pinterest board for your favorite brain boosting colors!

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COLORING CALM

Carl Jung encouraged his patients to create and color mandalas, using the objects as tools for helping him diagnose his patients. Today, art therapists and ordinary people use coloring to calm anxiety, boost mindfulness, and increase focus. A 2005 research study showed that coloring mandalas reduced anxiety.

For years, I've practiced making and coloring mandalas with my family. I use *Everyone's Mandala Coloring Book* by Monique Mandali as my grown up coloring book. In my house, this is usually a family activity. We take out the colored pencils, put on music, and color. Not only is the practice relaxing, I usually come up with a few writing ideas when I color. If you're an adventurous sort, try making your own mandala and then coloring it! If you really love coloring, purchase one of the many new adult coloring books available or try a coloring app for your tablet.

CONNECT

As mentioned in *Art Making* above, connecting with others brings many physical and mental benefits. Socializing speeds healing, lowers levels of anxiety and depression, increases self-esteem, improves our ability to empathize, and may even lead to a longer life. Isolating ourselves carries great risks, and in one study researchers found loneliness to be as detrimental to our health as obesity, smoking, and high blood pressure. Of course, who we connect with matters. Great writers surround themselves with people who are smart, imaginative, and visionary. Austin Kleon, author of *Steal Like an Artist*, encourages

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creatives to build idea incomes by connecting with brilliant people. That means, say no to any committee meeting or connecting with duds and complainers.

DIM THE LIGHTS

Do you feel more creative during the shortest days of the year? There may be a reason for that. In one study, participants who worked in dim lighting were better able to generate innovative ideas. German researchers Anna Steidle and Lioba Werth explained that dim light, “elicits a feeling of freedom, self-determination, and reduced inhibition.”

DOODLE

One of my wonderful clients introduced me to Zentangle, the art of meditative doodling. I bought a book, *Totally Tangled* by Sandra Bartholomew, a pen, and started doodling. It’s one of my favorite ways to take a break and get inspired. The cartoonist Charles Barsotti takes a big stack of paper and doodles until the “aha moment” occurs.

DRINK WATER

We know that we need to drink water to stay healthy. But did you know that drinking water can improve your mood? When we drink water, even if we’re not super thirsty, we feel refreshed. One study showed that students who brought water to an exam got better grades. While many writers use alcohol to fuel their creativity—think of William Faulkner’s

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ready bottle of whiskey or Patricia Highsmith's gin—water might work better, and keep you clear enough to keep writing!

FLOWER POWER

Can flowers boost your energy? According to a Harvard study, people who saw fresh blooms in the morning reported an increase in energy levels for the entire day. I wonder if that's why my great aunt Alma, who lived in Northern Minnesota, kept a table in her living room filled with blooming African violets. Grow flowers in a pot on your front porch or in your office. In the winter, try growing a Christmas Cactus or an indoor bulb. Or simply pick up flowers from the grocery store or farmer's market.

GRATITUDE JOURNAL

Professor Robert Emmons and his colleague Professor Mike McCullough have conducted many gratitude studies. Gratitude has a powerful effect. It boosts the dopamine in our brain, just like the antidepressant Wellbutrin. It also boosts serotonin production in the brain, just like Prozac. Part of the research suggests that even just looking for things to be grateful for is helpful.

Each evening, record three blessings from the day. Or, give yourself a scavenger hunt in the morning—challenge yourself to look for three acts of kindness, three signs of love, or three unusual pieces of art. You'll be surprised at how that small act of intention will help you see more throughout your day. In the evening, record your discoveries.

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LEARN!

When we learn something new, it boosts our energy. When we learn a skill that requires us to continually access our long-term memory and challenges us to keep solving problems, then we are also building brain function. Talk about a power-up! This kind of activity is called productive engagement, and just doing a crossword puzzle won't engage us enough. Take a break to learn a photo-editing tool, a new language, or a musical instrument—you'll feel energized and your brain will, too!

MEDITATE

Meditation benefits us in many ways. It reduces stress, controls anxiety, improves our ability to focus, improves sleep, and promotes emotional health. Start with five minutes of attending to your breathing. From there, let your practice grow in time and quality. If silence isn't your thing, try a guided meditation. If you have difficulty sitting for a long period of time, try a walking meditation.

MESSY CREATIVITY

The stacks of paper in your office or piles of dishes in your kitchen might help you be more inventive. In a study led by Kathleen D. Vohs of the University of Minnesota, Carlson School of Management, researchers put participants in either a messy or a neat office space and asked them to imagine novel uses for Ping-Pong balls. Both groups of subjects came up with about the same number of answers, but the participants who worked in the messy

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room developed “almost five times the number of highly-creative responses” as the others. Try working in a messy space—or create a mess as you work. See if the messy environment makes you more or less inventive.

MUSIC BOOST

We all know that a road trip is more fun with a great soundtrack, but do you know why? Listening to music makes people happier! Research by the University of Missouri shows that listening to upbeat music can immediately lift our mood and, over a two-week period of regular listening, increase our general feelings of well being. Some writers create a playlist for each project, while others save music for the breaks between writing sessions. I’ve found that attending concerts provides an additional boost in mood and energy because I get to appreciate music with other people.

NAP

Take a nap. Short naps can help you restore your ability to pay attention and get work done. In a Harvard study, subjects whose performance on tasks had dropped by as much as 50 percent throughout the day took a one-hour nap and completely restored their highest levels of performance. New research also promotes the effectiveness of a coffee nap. Participants who drank 2 cups of coffee then took a 20-minute nap increased their energy levels and felt more alert. Researchers say this works because the nap helps the body

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absorb the caffeine. Of course, if you don't want to disrupt your sleep, it's good to practice the coffee nap at least six hours before bedtime.

REWARD YOURSELF

One way to keep your butt in the chair is to promise yourself a reward. Famous writers have rewarded themselves in unique ways: Anthony Burgess used the Martini Method, relaxing with a dry martini at the end of each day. I suggest more healthy rewards. A walk in the park. An hour reading a good book. A trip to the library. Healthy rewards at the end of a day of writing will remind you that writing has its rewards—and you'll be much more likely to get your butt in the chair next time!

SAVOR JOY

When we remember our happiest moments, we feel happier now. Researcher Fred Bryant found that people who looked at pictures of happy times in their lives felt happier in the present moment. Take a look through your phone's photos and find an experience that brought you joy. It can be something small, like noticing the perfect blue sky or spending an hour having coffee with a friend. Take a moment to remember the details and bask in the moment. If you don't have enough photos on your phone, make a list of happy past events. They can be big events, like a family holiday party, or smaller ones like watching a neighborhood child eat an ice cream cone on a hot day. Recall the experience in vivid detail, like playing a movie in your mind, or write about it in your journal.

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SING

If you watched *Sesame Street* as a child, you may have heard Joe Raposo's famous song, “Sing,” encouraging listeners to sing along, whether they were good singers or not! And for good reason—singing alone and with others has all sorts of benefits. Singing is a workout, strengthening our diaphragm, improving our breathing and circulation. One study even found that singing improved the immune system of the singers. And if that’s not enough to get you to sing along, listen to this: Scientists believe that when we sing with a group, it lowers our stress levels, decreases anxiety, and increases endorphins. And according to a 2005 study, you don’t have to be good at singing to get these benefits. So sing: in the shower, on the street, or in a choir!

STAIR CLIMBING

When you’re stuck, tired, and tempted to grab a soda, try taking the stairs. In a 2017 study published in the journal *Physiology and Behavior*, researchers from the UGA College of Education discovered that just 10 minutes of walking up and down the stairs was more likely to energize participants than taking in 50 milligrams of caffeine, about what one finds in a can of soda. Wowza—stairs here we come!

VACATION!

Professor Fred Bryant, author of *Thanks! How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier*, encourages people to try the 20-minute vacation exercise. Carve out 20 minutes a day to do

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something you love, perhaps gardening, beading, building, painting—anything that brings you joy. Dedicate that 20 minutes to your activity—don't try to work or check on social media or anything else during that time. Notice how you feel and what you enjoy. At the end of your vacation, intentionally plan the next day's vacation and anticipate it. At the end of the day look back on your vacation and savor it.

If planning a daily vacation is too challenging, create a writing rest stop in your house. Stock it with fun magazines and tasty snacks. Whenever you feel overwhelmed, take a 20-minute break and visit the rest stop. Sip a cool drink and read about how to organize your spice drawer or what to do in Cancun, Mexico. When you feel less frantic and more focused, return to writing.

WALK!

Moderate physical activity can increase cognitive capacity—by driving more blood and oxygen to the brain. In *Write-A-Thon*, I wrote about a study that showed that women who walked had better brain connectivity.

But that's not all! While at Stanford University's Graduate School of Education, Marily Oppezzo, PhD, and colleague Daniel L. Schwartz, PhD, did a number of studies that found students who walked performed better on tests that measure creativity, especially free-flowing thoughts. They did less well on tests that required a single answer.

And another study by Marc G. Berman, John Jonides, and Stephen Kaplan at the University of Michigan found that walking in nature can restore our ability to pay attention, something

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that usually diminishes throughout the day. But if you don't live near the wilderness, don't worry. Just go outside. Take a walk in the park. Dig in your garden. Watch the birds or the bugs.

THE "YOU ROCK" JOURNAL

Several years ago, I purchased a journal and filled it with love letters and sweet quotes for my husband. It made a great Christmas gift that he held onto over the years. Find a journal you like (or make your own out of an old book) and fill it with:

- Inspiring writing and reading quotes
- Quotes from your favorite books
- Encouraging notes from readers, editors, and friends
- Lists of your achievements
- Lists of your strengths

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This book is an excerpt from *Level Up: Quests to Master Mindset, Overcome Procrastination, and Increase Productivity* by Rochelle Melander

To purchase the entire book, visit Amazon: <https://amzn.to/4bQqzj7>.

Rochelle Melander is a writing and ADHD coach and the award winning author of twelve books, including, *Mightier Than the Sword: Rebels, Reformers, and Revolutionaries Who Changed the World through Writing*. Through her individual and group coaching, Rochelle Melander helps writers, creatives, and entrepreneurs with ADHD overcome distractions and procrastination, design a writing life, turn their ideas into books, navigate the publishing world, and connect with readers through social media. Visit her online at writenowcoach.com and book a consultation online at <https://writenowcoach.com/consultation/>