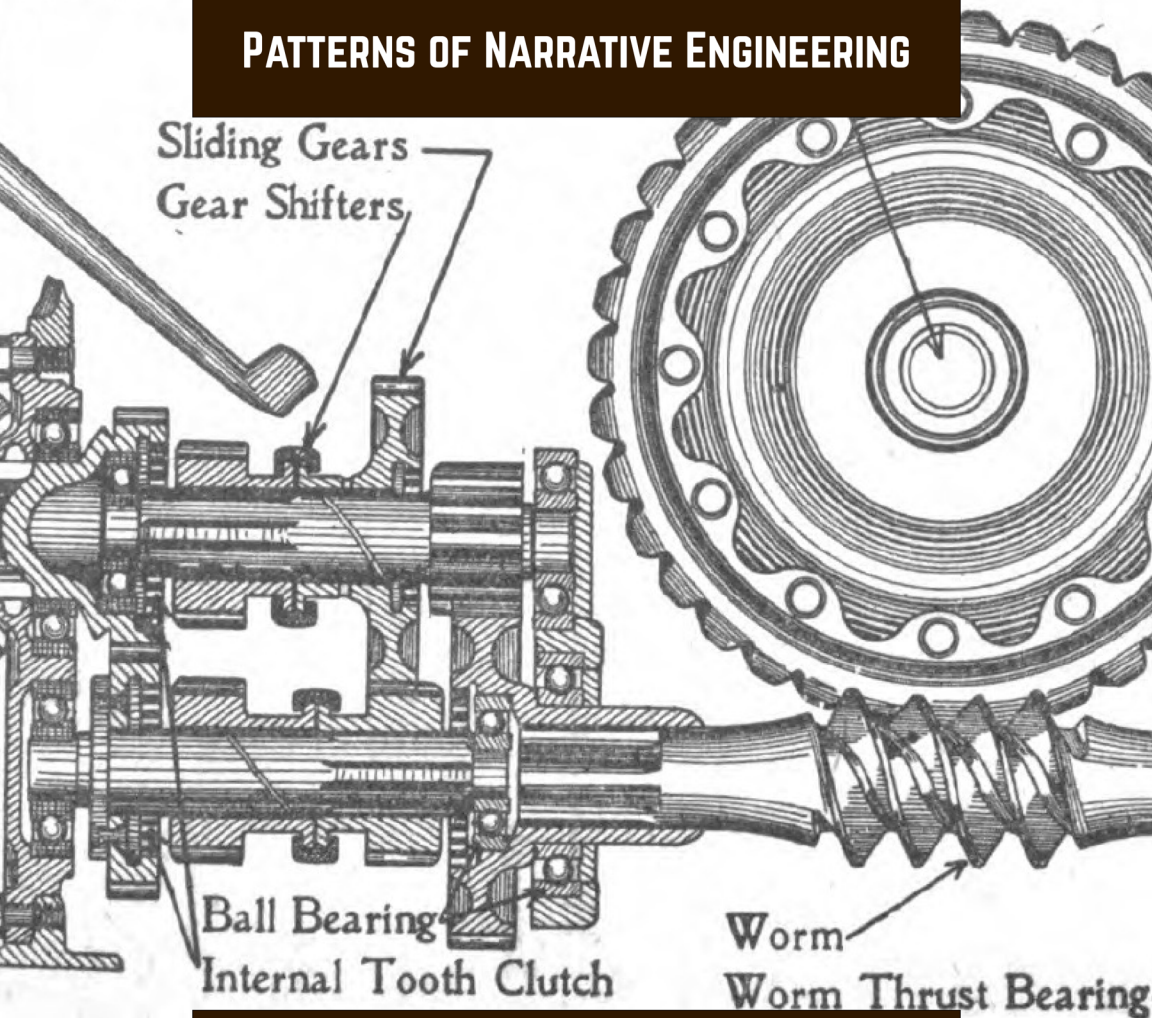


YOUR WRITING HABIT

PATTERNS OF NARRATIVE ENGINEERING

-Clutch R
-Clutch P
-Pulley D



5.—Clutch

DAVID EYK

of

Your Writing Habit

Patterns of Narrative Engineering

David Eyk

This book is for sale at <http://leanpub.com/your-writing-habit>

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Leanpub

This is a [Leanpub](#) book. Leanpub empowers authors and publishers with the Lean Publishing process. [Lean Publishing](#) is the act of publishing an in-progress ebook using lightweight tools and many iterations to get reader feedback, pivot until you have the right book and build traction once you do.

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for Remie, who also wants to write

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Introduction

The Couch

How many times have you heard this?

“I’d like to write a book some day.”

Sitting at coffee with a friend:

“I’d like to write a book some day.”

Mingling at the office Christmas party:

“I want to write a book some day.”

Plenty of people are wannabe writers. They’ll tell you about the plot, all the world building they’ve done, the cool characters they’ve devised.

Very few actually do anything about it.

They sit on their nice, comfy couches and say, “I’d like to write a book some day.”

You’ve said it yourself, haven’t you?

The couch *is* very comfortable.

No one blames you. You work hard at your job. When you get home, you’re tired. The couch calls to you: *Rest! You’ve earned it!*

But do you ever wonder?

Do you ever wonder what it would be like?

To write that book that’s in your head.

To see it outside your head. Words on a screen.

Words on a *page*.

But words on a page don't get there by themselves. Words on a page need a writer to write them.

Do you *want* to be a writer?

If so, there are two things you absolutely have to do.

1. *Decide* you want to be a writer.
2. *Prove* to yourself that you *are* a writer.

Do you want to be a writer?

Say it.

"I want to be a writer."

Prove It

You want to be a writer?

Prove it.

Prove to yourself that you're a writer.

What does a writer do?

A writer *writes*.

You must write.

It took me decades to figure this out. I thought of myself as a writer, but in my heart of hearts, I didn't believe it. I didn't write, or when I did write it was in fits and starts.

But now I'm writing. Regularly.

I'm a writer.

Look around on this page. *These are my words.*

Have I written any best-selling novels? *Not yet.*

I've written, I've published. I've sold a few copies and learned a thing or two.

I'm not *commercially* successful. *Not yet.*

But if I continue diligently to practice my craft, if I continue to write, it's only a matter of time.

Any pro will tell you, the secret is perseverance. *Writers write.*

There's no magic. There *are* some simple tricks.

(Simple tricks I wish I'd learned twenty years ago!)

Once I'd learned these tricks and seen how transformative they could be, I knew I had to share it with others.

I want to share it with you.

I've put together a plan for you. I call it "Couch to 50k (words)".

It's very easy on the knees and the shins. (If you've ever tried to become a runner, you might get the joke.)

The first phase of the plan takes nine to twelve weeks. You get Sundays off.

At the end of phase one, if you follow the plan, you'll have written a novel's worth of words: more than 50,000.

You will be a writer, with a writing habit. A habit that will take you places and build your career as an author.

Most importantly, you'll have proven it to yourself: you can write like a professional.

This isn't <abbr title="National Novel Writing Month">NaNoWriMo</abbr>.

You're not going to lock yourself away for a month, burn out in a blaze of glory, and vow to never do *that* again.

Instead, you'll be a writer with a sustainable writing habit. It will be the simplest thing in the world to just keep going. You could have another 50k words in another *six* weeks.

Don't worry about what to do with those words right now.

Focus on producing the words first.

I'm going to show you how.

Show Up

You've decided. You want to be a writer.

You're *going* to be a writer.

Now it's time to write.

But how do you start?

Writing is hard. Starting to write is even harder.

You have to overcome the inertia of *not* writing.

You have to find something to write *about*.

Once started, you have to *keep writing*, day after day. Or else you'll stop. (Ask me how I know...)

Writers like to complain about "the tyranny of the blank page."

The blank page can have a terrifying power over us writers.

Imagine that the blank page is Hitler.

Imagine that blank page with that toothbrush mustache and those beady little eyes.

Imagine how it gloats as writers around the world cower before it.

That little tyrant. That petty little tyrant.

He thinks he's better than you.

He thinks he can control you.

I'm not from Virginia, but they have a saying there that I'm fond of: *sic semper tyrannis*. "Thus, always, the tyrant."

As a proud 'Murican, I stand with the Virginians: I don't take kindly to tyrannies.

You shouldn't either, whether you hail from Richmond or Mars.

So let me show you how to take that tyrant right down. Put your foot on his neck. Menace him with your sword if you like. (Try it! It's fun!)

You see, it's as simple as this: you don't write a novel all at once.

You don't build a writing habit all at once, either.

It takes about three weeks to establish a habit, and that tyrant will fight you every step of the way.

So what's the trick?

Channel your inner Sun Tzu. *Don't fight*. Not until you're guaranteed to win.

How do you guarantee victory?

You prepare the battlefield ahead of time.

You stack the odds in your favor.

You start by doing the easiest, most absolute smallest amount of work possible.

Start by showing up.

Open your favorite writing tool. Set a timer. Write for two minutes. Then stop.

Do it again the next day. Show up. Write for two minutes. Stop.

These first three weeks of building your writing habit are about becoming *consistent*. Consistency means *showing up*.

Especially at first, showing up is *much* more important than word count.

Every time you show up, you're proving to yourself that you're a writer. James Clear, author of *Atomic Habits*, calls this "casting a vote" for your new identity.

Don't worry about word counts. Don't worry about anything more than showing up and writing for at least two minutes.

"What do I write?" you may ask.

Easy. Write whatever comes to mind. Vomit onto the page. It's called free writing. Don't worry about structure, typos, or pretty words. Just write.

If nothing comes to mind, write "I'm writing because I'm a writer and that's what writers do." Write that over and over for two minutes if you have to.

(Spoiler alert: You won't have to.)

By the end of the first week, you're going to have a hard time *stopping* at two minutes.

If that's the case, go ahead, add *two more minutes* to your timer. Keep adding two more minutes as needed.

But if it starts to get difficult, back off. Frankly, I wouldn't recommend going beyond ten minutes. I find five works really well for me.

Do this for three weeks. Minimum.

Then don't ever stop.

Congratulations. You're writing.

This new habit of yours, free writing every day for at least two minutes, serves two purposes:

1. As you begin to add real word counts, **this becomes your warm-up routine.** A few minutes of free writing to shake the cobwebs out of your head.
2. **It's a placeholder,** cheap maintenance for the habit that you will build your career on.

In the years to come, you're going to have bad days, bad weeks, bad months even. Even if you do nothing else, you can find two minutes each day to fill with words.

"But what about the 50k? You can't write 50k words in two minutes a day!"

Of course not. Two minutes is your beachhead against the blank page.

Next comes the long road to total victory.

The Long Road to Total Victory

Writing anything that pops into your head for two minutes (or more) works great as a warm-up. But a solid writing career it does not make.

(Unless you're James Joyce, I guess... Don't be James Joyce. There's only room for one of him, and the position's *taken*.)

Free-writing *does* make an excellent foundation.

The next phase of the Couch to 50k Plan *builds* on that foundation.

I recommended that you practice your two-minute warm-ups for at least three weeks, working up to five or ten minutes.

You can start phase two whenever you feel ready.

If you lack confidence, start by giving yourself a week of showing up.

Remember, you're proving to yourself that you're a writer. Cast that vote every day.

If you're cocky and impatient, start phase two on Day One. (That's what I'd do, for the record.)

Remember though, this isn't NaNoWriMo. It isn't a race. There's no deadline. The goal is to build yourself a rock-solid writing habit and conquer the Tyranny of the Blank Page once and for all.

Before I explain phase two, let's talk about why it works.

It's called "Habit Shaping" (hat tip once again to James Clear).

You start by showing up.

Then you work your way to your goal *incrementally*.

Incrementally is the key word here. You master the first two minutes. Then you master the next two minutes. In the Plan, you master writing 100 words a day. Then you master the next 100.

Once you're writing 200 words a day, 400 isn't a stretch.

Writing 400 words a day? 800 isn't much more.

Each step requires the smallest effort, but the end result is powerful.

How powerful?

You start by writing 100 words a day, and nine weeks later you're writing *1,500 words per day*, with a cumulative total of more than 50,000 words.

An aside:

Are you a terrible writer?

(It's OK if you are. Most people start out that way.)

When you practice a 1.5k word-per-day habit, your writing will improve so fast it'll take your breath away.

Those first 50,000 words aren't necessarily for publication. They're proof.

Proof that you *can* write.

And you *will* see improvement. Your first 100 words won't compare to your *last* 100.

Now, if you follow my advice, you won't start out writing a novel. Not at first. You'll practice something else and build up to the novel.

But we'll get to that.

Word Counts:

The Mouse and the Motorcycle: 22.4k

Fahrenheit 451: 46.1k

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer: 69k

The Hobbit: 95k

The Lord of the Rings: 455k

Source^a

^a<http://commonplacebook.com/art/books/word-count-for-famous-novels/>

If you *do* want to write novels, don't worry: with a daily output of 1.5k words a day you'll have plenty of words to fill a novel. In fact, it wouldn't be hard at all for you to pump out a finished novel every quarter if you want.

Did you read that? Read it again. After only nine weeks of practice, you'll have a foundational habit. You can use that habit to churn out *four books a year* without breaking a sweat.

Care to check my math?

1,500 words per day × 6 days per week × 52 weeks = 468k words per year.

Even if only *half* of those words end up in a final product, you have more than enough to fill four 50k-word novels.

Don't think it's possible? Consider Frederick Faust, the powerhouse behind the pen name Max Brand.

He churned out at least a million words of finished prose every year for a decade.

More than 500 novels of 30–50k words each, and even more short stories.

On a typewriter.

They were pretty good words, too.

Or how about Lester Dent? He wrote 159 Doc Savage novels over the course of 16 years. (Doc Savage was the proto-superhero who inspired both Batman *and* Superman.)

Even if we estimate low, at 30k words per “novel”, that means Dent wrote nearly *300k words* of finished prose per year.

Again, this was on a typewriter. And Dent wasn't cooped up in his attic. He was sailing around the Caribbean with his wife on their yacht, diving for sunken treasure.

(He wrote out on the deck in the evenings. Novel after novel. *On a typewriter.*)

Should you strive to emulate these titans of word count? That's up to you. My goal here is to expand your worldview and show you what's possible.

One book a year would be respectable. How many people write one book in a lifetime?

Let's come back down to earth. I don't want to scare you.

Remember, you don't start out writing 1,500 words a day.

You start by writing for two minutes, and you build from there.

The Habitual Writer

Let this be your core tenet: a writer writes.

When I was pretending to be a writer, I only wrote when the mood struck me. I waited for inspiration to strike. No inspiration, no writing.

There's a popular saying most commonly attributed to William Faulkner, but I'm most enamored with Peter DeVries' formulation:

"I write when I'm inspired, and I see to it that I'm inspired at nine o'clock every morning."

A serious writer "sees to it". A serious writer writes regularly. Better yet, habitually. Writing becomes the default behavior, not the exceptional behavior.

I'm framing this book around what author James Clear identifies as the Four Laws of Behavior Change. These four laws answer the question: what conditions must adhere for a behavior to become habitual?

1. The behavior must have an obvious cue.
2. The behavior must be attractive.
3. The behavior must be easy.
4. The behavior must be satisfying.

This gives you our order of battle:

1. Make writing obvious.
2. Make writing attractive.
3. Make writing easy.
4. Make writing satisfying.

You've got the landscape and the strategy. Now you need a plan.

The Couch to 50k (words) Plan

You can use this plan as your jumping-off point into the rest of the book. Each pattern is designed to solve a problem you’ll encounter as you work your way through the plan, and beyond.

If you’d like some extra coaching, and you’re not already a part of the Couch to 50k mailing list, please join up.

[You can join the Couch to 50k newsletter here.^a](https://couchto50k.club/join/)

^a<https://couchto50k.club/join/>

- 1. Start each writing session with a warm-up: free-write for at least two minutes but no longer than ten (*Write for Two Minutes*).
- 2. Writing will come easier if you have at least a rough plan. Generate ideas ahead of time (*100:10:1*) and use some sort of structure (*The Dent*) plan your writing sessions.
- 3. Brainstorming and planning both count toward your daily targets!

Day	Wordcount	Cumulative	
Week 1			
Monday	100	100	☐
Tuesday	100	200	☐
Wednesday	100	300	☐
Thursday	100	400	☐
Friday	100	500	☐
Saturday	200	700	☐
Sunday	Rest!		
Week 2		Cumulative	
Monday	100	800	☐

Day	Wordcount	Cumulative	
Tuesday	100	900	□
Wednesday	100	1,000	□
Thursday	100	1,100	□
Friday	100	1,200	□
Saturday	200	1,400	□
Sunday	<i>Rest!</i>		
Week 3		Cumulative	
Monday	200	1,600	□
Tuesday	200	1,800	□
Wednesday	200	2,000	□
Thursday	200	2,200	□
Friday	200	2,400	□
Saturday	400	2,800	□
Sunday	<i>Rest!</i>		
Week 4		Cumulative	
Monday	400	3,200	□
Tuesday	400	3,600	□
Wednesday	400	4,000	□
Thursday	400	4,400	□
Friday	400	4,800	□
Saturday	800	5,600	□
Sunday	<i>Rest!</i>		
Week 5		Cumulative	
Monday	800	6,400	□
Tuesday	800	7,200	□
Wednesday	800	8,000	□
Thursday	800	8,800	□
Friday	800	9,600	□
Saturday	1,500	11,100	□
Sunday	<i>Rest!</i>		
Week 6		Cumulative	
Monday	1,500	12,600	□
Tuesday	1,500	14,100	□
Wednesday	1,500	15,600	□
Thursday	1,500	17,100	□
Friday	1,500	18,600	□
Saturday	3,000	21,600	□

Day	Wordcount	Cumulative
Sunday	<i>Rest!</i>	
Week 7		Cumulative
Monday	1,500	23,100 □
Tuesday	1,500	24,600 □
Wednesday	1,500	26,100 □
Thursday	1,500	27,600 □
Friday	1,500	29,100 □
Saturday	3,000	32,100 □
Sunday	<i>Rest!</i>	
Week 8		Cumulative
Monday	1,500	33,600 □
Tuesday	1,500	35,100 □
Wednesday	1,500	36,600 □
Thursday	1,500	38,100 □
Friday	1,500	39,600 □
Saturday	3,000	42,600 □
Sunday	<i>Rest!</i>	
Week 9		Cumulative
Monday	1,500	44,100 □
Tuesday	1,500	45,600 □
Wednesday	1,500	47,100 □
Thursday	1,500	48,600 □
Friday	1,500	50,100 □
Saturday	3,000	53,100 □
Sunday	<i>Rest!</i>	

Patterns of Narrative Engineering

This is the first book in a series: *Patterns of Narrative Engineering*.

A narrative is a story, a tale with a beginning, middle, and end.

Stories do not happen by accident. Even if a story relates an accidental series of events, the story must be *told*. A storyteller must pick and choose what to tell, what to leave out. Furthermore, the storyteller must choose the *how* of the telling.

In a word, a narrative is *engineered*.

People have been engineering narratives for thousands of years. Over all that time, tried and true *patterns* have emerged for telling successful stories that engage the teller's audience and leave them begging for more.

In this context, a *pattern* is a general solution to a specific problem, written out in a structured form.

This book is a pattern *library*.

In the pages to follow, you will find many patterns. Each one follows the same form.

The most important part of any pattern is the name. For instance, *The Dent*. This gives you a convenient handle to talk about the concept with anyone else familiar with it.

One goal of a pattern *library* is to codify and develop a jargon for a particular field.

If you know a software engineer, chances are he's heard of the *Observer* Pattern, the *Singleton*, or the *Proxy*.

In writing and publishing, we have our own jargon, developed over centuries of bookmaking: outliners and pantsers, novels and novellas, *recto* and *verso*.

In my own small way, I'm hoping to contribute to this tradition.

What's more though, for beginners in any field, the jargon can be pretty overwhelming. Not just figuring out the definitions, but figuring out the usage. When should you outline? When should you pants? Why write a novel instead of a novella? Why can't I just say *right* and *left*?!

A pattern doesn't just *name* a thing. A pattern *describes* it. What problem(s) give rise to the thing? Why? How does *this* thing solve the problem? What *other* things do I need to consider?

Go look at *The Dent*. See what I mean?

I'm using a particular structure of pattern called "Portland Form".

(Yes, there are patterns for Patterns!)

As you'll see in *The Dent*, it has these main sections:

The Problem—A description of the problem, with a little bit of context that leads up to it.

The Forces Involved—Why is this a problem? What are the components of the problem, the factors and forces that create it?

Therefore—A little rhetorical flourish makes *everything* better.

The Solution—Usually the longest section. How to apply the pattern to the problem in general, along with any variations or divergencies.

Next Steps—This is where the pattern connects to other patterns, exercises, or outside sources.

Each pattern takes its place within a larger system.

Writing and publishing (and *marketing and selling*) form a very complex system. That's what makes the field so tough for beginners. There's a ton to figure out, and *everything* is connected to everything else.

Pattern languages are all about analyzing and decomposing systems, figuring out how the components fit together, in order to solve real problems.

The pattern library then presents the system one component at a time in a digestible format.

With some care, you can pick and choose from these patterns to fit them together into your own personal writing system.

For instance, you might use *Write for Two Minutes* and *Shape Your Writing Time* to generate words, *The Dent* to shape those words into stories, and *100:10:1* to generate creative ideas to inspire more words in your writing sessions, while *Visualize Your Author Career* provides the 30,000 foot vision.

Do you see how theses pattern fits into a larger system you might build?

You don't have to use every pattern. *You probably shouldn't.* Writers are individuals. You will find many things easy that I find hard, and vice versa.

You are building your own writing career, and nobody else's. God has made you unique among all his manifold creation. Nobody else in all of time has walked the roads you've walked and seen the things you've seen, and nobody ever will again. Nobody else can write the books that you need to write, only you.

As you consider what to write and how to write it, let this book and the patterns within be one advisor among many. If you still don't know what to do, or you ever feel overwhelmed, pray to God for wisdom.

And then *Just Write*. It doesn't have to be good, it doesn't have to be wise or pretty, it just has to be words on a page. You can always *Revise Later*.

Peace,

David Eyk

April 25, 2020

Part 1: Make Writing Obvious

Life gets busy, and when it does, when you're first getting started building your habit, it wouldn't be hard to go a day, two days, a week without writing.

You must guard against this by making it *obvious*. I mean step-on-a-rake-get-hit-in-the-face obvious. You shouldn't be able to go a day without some reminder popping up and smacking you in the face.

"Oh yeah, I need to write."

Consider Your Day

This content is not available in the sample book. The book can be purchased on Leanpub at <http://leanpub.com/your-writing-habit>.

The Problem

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The Forces Involved

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The Solution

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Next Steps

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Write Early

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Write Late

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The Problem

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The Forces Involved

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Make Your Intention Specific

The Problem

You have good intentions. You *want* to write. But you never quite get around to it.

The Forces Involved

Most people misidentify their own lack of action as a lack of *motivation* when what they truly lack is *clarity*.

It's easy to have good intentions, to *want* to change behavior. But good intentions rarely translate well into action if they remain vague.

Vague intentions are easy to derail. You can rationalize any exception and continue making exceptions all day, all week, all month long, without feeling any real sense of loss.

Action must be taken at a specific time and in a specific place or it won't happen. Actions like writing require the proper tools to be available at the specific time and place where the writing will occur.

Good intentions require clear plans in order to translate into action.

Therefore:

The Solution

Get specific about how you will implement your intention to write. Identify the time, the place, and the tools you will use.

Fill in the blanks:

“At [TIME] I will go to [PLACE] and write in [TOOL] for [X] minutes.”

Write this down on a sticky note and post it on your bathroom mirror. Say it out loud to yourself every time you see it.

By being specific about your intention to write and how you will go about it, you are preparing your mind for action. You will be ready and on your guard to defend this time and space from distractions and derailments. When you miss a day, you will know it and regret it.

Next Steps

- *Leave Useful Landmines*
- *Prepare Your Writing Space*
- *Prepare a Writing Ritual*
- *Visualize Your Author Career*
- *Systems, Not Goals*

Leave Useful Landmines

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Part 2: Make Writing Attractive

There are going to be *those days*. You'll be tired. You will not *feel* like writing.

Guard against this by making it *attractive*.

Not simply attractive in a pie-in-the-sky, *someday I'll publish* fashion. I mean right now, today, if you write you can count on these concrete, immediate benefits to make your life memorably better.

Visualize Your Author Career

The Problem

You've often dreamed of writing a book, but you've never done much about it.

The Forces Involved

Many people want to write, but few do.

Writing is hard work.

You work some sort of job to earn money right now. Perhaps you had to develop skills to qualify you for that job. Perhaps you had to learn on the job, progressing from novice to master under the watchful eyes of your boss and colleagues.

What pulled you through all the hard work of learning those skills?

Maybe it was simply the promise of getting a paycheck so you could buy food and pay rent.

Maybe there was more. Maybe you imagined yourself in your career, doing great things.

Most people don't think about it in these terms, but you need a vision to pull you through all the hard work, especially when you're first starting out.

A vision primes your mind for the work. Your brain has something called the Reticular Activating System (RAS). Its job, among other things, is to filter out unwanted stimuli so your conscious mind can focus on important things, like obtaining food and shelter.

By harnessing your RAS to a vision, your unconscious mind will be on the lookout for opportunities to fulfill the vision. The more vivid and concrete the vision, the stronger the effect.

This isn't magic or bunkum like *The Secret* or *The Law of Attraction*. This is just your brain working in the way it's designed to work.

Therefore:

The Solution

Grab your favorite writing tool. Write out your vision for your successful authorial career. What sort of author are you?

Get specific! What have you published? How many books have you sold? Who reads them? What awards have you won?

How much money do you make from your books? Do you still go in to the day job, or are you writing full time?

Make it vivid. You're a writer. Use your powers.

What do you see?

What do you hear?

What do you smell?

What do you taste?

What do you feel?

Now at the top, summarize your objective, in this form:

"I, <your name>, will be <your authorial career>."

Write this objective summary on a sticky note and put it somewhere you'll see it many times a day. Whenever you see it, repeat it to yourself and re-imagine that vivid scene.

Again, this isn't magic woo-woo nonsense. You're simply priming your brain to look for opportunities to make it happen.

Next Steps

- *Visualize Your Book of Gold*
- *Set Firebreaks*
- *Always Ship*
- *Systems, Not Goals*

Visualize Your Book of Gold

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The Forces Involved

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Join a Writer's Group

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The Local Writer's Group

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The Online Writing Forum

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Find an Accountability Partner

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Prepare a Writing Ritual

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Part 3: Make Writing Easy

Writing is hard. There's no way around it.

Several writers have been attributed with the saying:

Writing is easy. Just put a sheet of paper in the typewriter and start bleeding.

You don't have to write that way, however. Instead of writing *harder*, write *smarter*. Prepare the battlefield ahead of time, and stack the odds all in your favor.

Prepare Your Writing Space

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Write for Two Minutes

The Problem

It's time to write, but writing is difficult. How do you even start? And once started, how do you continue?

The Forces Involved

The blank page strikes fear into every writer's heart at some point, and every writer must fill that page with words. *Resistance* will try to dissuade you with fears of writing words that aren't good enough.

Not writing has a certain inertia to it. You must overcome that resting inertia with new energy to generate new momentum. Once started, you must maintain that momentum or risk stopping again.

A *habit* is a routine behavior that you engage in regularly. Productive professional writers write *consistently* and *habitually*. They do not ask, "Shall I write today?" just as you don't ask, "Shall I brush my teeth today?" Writers simply write.

It takes three weeks to build and solidify a habit. When building a writing habit, *consistency* is much more important than *volume of output*, which is why programs like NaNoWriMo that emphasize volume of output fail to produce habitual writers at the end.

Developing consistency is less about the writing itself and more about your identity as a writer. Every time you show up, you're *proving to yourself* that you're a writer. James Clear, author of *Atomic Habits*, calls this "casting a vote" for your new identity.

Therefore:

The Solution

When first establishing a writing habit, commit to free writing for *at least two minutes* every day for three weeks, allowing one day of rest each week.

“Free writing” means simply writing whatever comes into your head. Some have likened it to *vomiting* words out onto the page. If nothing comes to mind, write, “I’m writing because I’m a writer and that’s what writers do.” Write that sentence over and over for two minutes if you need to (though you probably won’t need to).

There’s no need to polish, wordsmith, or even save this writing. Some people throw the words away immediately. Some keep it as a journal. Either way, the goal is to fill the page with as many words as you can within the time allotted. You’re warming up your writing mind in preparation for the real writing time to come.

As your writing habit develops, you will probably have trouble *stopping* at two minutes. Feel free to add more time to the timer as this happens, to a maximum of ten minutes. I find five minutes to be a good span of time: just challenging enough, but not too challenging.

If you increase the time but circumstances or your energy level conspire to make it too difficult, back off, to a rock-bottom minimum of two minutes.

After three weeks, your writing habit should begin to feel natural and stable. Your opening free write can become an initial warm-up session before you begin your work on the writing project at hand.

Plan to practice this for the long haul. In the years to come in your writing career, you’re going to have bad days, bad weeks, even, God forbid, bad months or bad years. If you do nothing else, commit to writing for at least two minutes every day. On those days when you can’t write anything else, this habit becomes a lifeline to pull you through the danger and a placeholder to rebuild upon when you break out into the clear.

Next Steps

- *Shape Your Writing Time*
- *Set Firebreaks*

Shape Your Writing Time

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The Forces Involved

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Next Steps

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Start Small

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Break It Up

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Commit for an Hour

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Plan Ahead

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Mise-en-place

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100:10:1

The Problem

Especially when practicing, you need to write a lot. Writing short stories provides good practice, but they're over quickly. Knowing what to write next can be a challenge, and some ideas start out promising but fall flat as you develop them.

The Forces Involved

It can be difficult to generate ideas while you're writing. Just as writing and editing both become more productive when separated into two processes, writing and brainstorming can be separated.

Creativity can be divided into two different expressions: invention and problem-solving. Each mode engages your brain in a different fashion. We're always alternating between them.

Writing tends to be a form of creative problem-solving fueled by invention: you have an idea, now you need to solve the problem of expressing it in words. Later you refine that expression through editing and revision.

Inventive creativity is about developing the vision itself. We can do this intentionally through the process of brainstorming.

Within a brainstorming session, there are two separate phases:

1. Ideation
2. Selection

Again, it's more productive to separate these phases, saving our inner Critic for phase two.

During the Ideation phase, you pick a subject and then generate as many ideas as you can. Forcing yourself to generate a bulk mass of ideas without critiquing them challenges your creative muscles and often produces surprising results.

During the Selection phase, you again enter a problem-solving mode and begin to analyze and critique the ideas. It's much easier to evaluate ideas alongside each other.

Therefore:

The Solution

Ideation

Pick a subject. For generating conflicts and themes for stories you might go with any (or all) of the following:

1. things people *like you* need or want
2. things people *unlike you* need or want
3. things frightening, intimidating, or unnerving people need or want
4. kinds of people (<adjective> <adjective> <occupation>)
5. interesting and unusual settings
6. murder weapons
7. striking images
8. items of great worth.

Work on one subject at a time.

For each subject, generate a list of at least 100 ideas. No editing, no crossing out or deleting ideas.

This could be a good exercise for a free-writing warm-up. Brainstorming counts towards your daily word targets!

Selection

Once you have a list of 100 ideas, evaluate them. You can use your own criteria, or use these:

1. What's most *interesting* to me right now?
2. What would be most interesting to my *audience*?
3. What's *possible* for me to do right now?

Choose ten *and only ten* ideas to develop further. If you're working with multiple subject lists, choose ten *combinations* that meet your criteria.

Development

Create ten story concepts based on the items you selected. Work on these concepts *concurrently*. If you get stuck on one, move to the next. Try to develop each to the point of a three to four paragraph summary.

Execution

Pick the most promising of the ten concepts and finish it.

Iteration

Discard any of the ten that aren't working. Replenish their number from your brainstorming list. Repeat.

Next Steps

- *Plan Ahead*
- *Mise-en-place*
- *Just Write*

The Dent

The Problem

You need a simple, straightforward plan for directing your words as you write. A short form would be the best way to practice.

The Forces Involved

Short stories are notoriously hard to write well.

Modern writing education tends to focus on novelty and clever technique. Most short stories offered as examples are one-trick ponies.

Attempting to emulate these academic exemplars tends to result in dull, colorless vignettes that wander without purpose.

Outside of academia and MFA programs, however, most audiences have simpler tastes: they want colorful stories with vivid action, unexpected twists, and a satisfying ending.

Lester Dent, author of the Doc Savage novels, was a superstar of the 1930s pulp magazines and pocket novels market. He offered a simple formula for writing consistently successful short stories.

Therefore:

The Solution

Plan and write in “Dents”.

Dent originally conceived of this structure for a 6,000 word story, broken into four 1,500 word quarters, that allows for exciting and near-continuous action.

Preparation:

Answer these questions:

1. Who is your hero?
2. Who is your villain?
3. What is the villain seeking?
4. How does the villain murder or menace his opponents? (Get creative!)
5. Where will the story take place?

1st Quarter: Setup

Hook the reader in the first line or as soon as possible by introducing the hero and presenting him with immediate trouble.

Introduce *all* your supporting characters as soon as possible.

As the trouble unfolds, hint at a mystery, menace, or larger problem that the hero must solve.

Demonstrate the hero's skills and abilities as he investigates the mystery.

The hero's efforts land him in a physical conflict near the end of this quarter.

End the quarter with a surprise twist.

2nd Quarter: Complications

Reeling from the twist, the hero encounters more grief and trouble.

Being heroic, the hero struggles onward.

The hero's struggles lead him into another physical conflict.

End the second quarter with another surprise twist.

3rd Quarter: Crisis

Reeling from the twist, the hero encounters yet more grief and trouble.

Now the hero begins to make real progress in solving the mystery.

He corners the villain or a lieutenant in another physical conflict.

End the third quarter with a devastating plot twist. This should be an enormous setback to the hero.

4th Quarter: Resolution

Bury the hero in trouble. All should seem lost.

Using his own skill and ability, the hero extricates himself from this predicament and takes control.

During the physical conflict that follows, the remaining mysteries are revealed or cleared up. Save the big central mystery for this moment if possible.

Ensure that the hero is ultimately responsible for the villain's demise, not accident or circumstance.

End with a final surprise or twist, revealing some hitherto unsuspecting thing about the villain or the treasure he sought.

Close the final line with a snappy punchline that will give the reader a warm feeling of satisfaction.

Revision strategy:

When revising a story written with this structure, ensure that each section:

1. has suspense
2. displays clear menace to the hero
3. follows logically from what happened before.

Next Steps

- *Plan Ahead*
- *Mise-en-place*
- *Just Write*
- *Revise Later*

Set a Deadline

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Learn to Touch Type

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Learn to Dictate

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Part 4: Make Writing Satisfying

So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?

Ecclesiastes 3:22 (ESV)

Writing is hard, but writing is ultimately rewarding if you persevere. As you develop your writing habit, use these strategies to make each day's writing satisfying.

Just Write

The Problem

You may find writing to be slow-going, and as you strive for higher daily word counts, it may take longer than you have time available.

The Forces Involved

Everyone has an inner Critic. Imagine a tiny, dumpy little man, balding, in horn-rimmed glasses and dark suspenders, sitting on your shoulder. As you write, he likes to direct the process. He points out every flaw, every typo, and urges you to correct them before you continue.

When revision time comes, you'll need your critic. That's when he's in his element. Your critic is a problem-solver, taking your raw recruited words and making them sing together in perfect creative harmony.

While editing and revision is more of a problem-solving process, writing is an inventive process. When you combine these two divergent processes, you can't give either one the attention it deserves, and you lose even more time by forcing your mind to switch modes back and forth.

If we consider how authors produced their works up until the 1980s and '90s, the tools they used required distinct phases. Whether with quill and ink or typewriter, an author wrote a draft, then edited it, then rewrote a new draft.

With modern technology, we've achieved greater efficiencies. We no longer need to re-type a draft, but in turn the writing and editing phases have lost their distinct character. It's possible to write a

word, then go back and change it five times before continuing on. This might produce a cleaner first draft, but at the expense of slowing the writer down considerably.

Therefore:

The Solution

Editing as you write will produce cleaner copy, but it will slow you down immensely and stifle your creativity. When you're trying to write, just write. Do not edit. Do not revise.

To do this you need to silence your inner critic and make him wait his turn. In a modern word processing environment, this takes discipline. You may need to take time to train yourself.

Timed writes may help. Set a timer for five or ten minutes and challenge yourself to just write. Do not use the arrow keys, do not use Backspace. Turning off any visual spell-checking features will help you: there's nothing like a red squiggle under a word to send your critic into paroxysm.

When you just write, you will be able to write faster. Especially at first you will make more mistakes, which will require more time editing. With practice, however, you *may* be able to write relatively clean copy on the first go.

No matter what, you will be receiving more focused practice in your time available and your writing will improve faster overall.

What's more, your editing time will become more focused and efficient as you won't be distracted by the need to invent further expression as you write.

Next Steps

- Use the [Write-only tool](https://eykd.net/write-only/)¹.

¹<https://eykd.net/write-only/>

- *Revise Later*
- *Learn to Touch Type*
- *Learn to Dictate*

Track Your Progress

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Set Firebreaks

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Weekly

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Monthly or Quarterly

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Make Rapid Repairs

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The Forces Involved

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Next Steps

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Revise Later

The Problem

It is very difficult to edit your own writing. The hardest and most time-consuming way to edit your own work is at the moment of writing it. This stifles your creativity, slows your writing down to a crawl, and will inevitably discourage you from further writing.

The Forces Involved

The process of editing and revising a text primarily engages the *problem-solving* abilities of your creative mind, a very different mode of thought from the alternating mixture of *creative invention* and *problem-solving* that goes into writing.

When reviewing a piece of writing, every writer is his own worst critic and a poor judge of his own work. Many writers oscillate between foolish overconfidence and withering self-deprecation.

You can't evaluate your writing when the invention is fresh and recent, with the ideas still percolating in your mind. You frequently can't even read the text you have just written without substituting the text in your head: garbled phrasing will read as correct and typos will pass unnoticed as your mind fills in the missing context for you.

Later, when the heat and glow of invention have subsided, you may see *only* the problems and the deficiencies in a piece, without being able to recognize the raw value that hides latent within the unrevised text.

Therefore:

The Solution

First, you must wait to edit and revise. *Just Write*, and do not edit your words as you write them. Revision should be a separate process from production.

To avoid writer's blindness, wait **at least a day before revising a text**: long enough for the idea to fade a bit from your mind. Longer may be better, depending on your skill level, experience, and personal tendency to overconfidence. Work on something else while you wait. (*100:10:1*)

Recognize that writing is a *process*. Do not expect perfect prose from yourself in a rough draft, or even your first revised draft. Instead, look at every revision as an opportunity to make the text better.

Separate out the processes of *editing* and *revision*. *Editing* is the process of identifying problems in the text. *Revision* is the process of applying edits through correction and rewriting.

To self-edit, print the text out double-spaced with a generous margin and mark it up with a red pen. (This could also be done to a PDF with a tablet and stylus.)

It may help to read passages aloud to yourself. If you stumble over anything, your reader is likely to as well. If it *sounds* odd or awkward to your ear, it probably is.

Work in passes. Have you ever pawed through a pile of LEGO looking for just that one piece? If you try to look for three shapes of three different colors, you won't find anything. But if you look for one shape or one color, you're sure to find it quickly. The same principle applies to editing. On each pass through the text, be on the lookout for a different kind of problem. At some point you may also wish to engage a professional editor for any or all of these:

1. **Developmental edit**: focused on the big picture items of

theme, character, and consistency. Does everything hold together and contribute to a unifying theme?

2. **Structural edit:** focused on the overall structure of the story. Does it work? Does it engage the reader? Does everything happen in logical progression? Does every scene move the story forward?
3. **Copy edit:** focused on the mechanics of the prose. Look for problems with:
 - * Spelling
 - * Grammar
 - * Capitalization
 - * Word usage
 - * Dialogue tags
 - * Point of view
 - * Verb tense
 - * Inconsistencies in description (character, setting, action blocking)
4. **Line edit:** like a copy edit, but more focused on style, consistency, and flow than on mechanics.
5. **Fact-checking:** focused on the facts. Especially if you've done research on an unfamiliar subject, you would be wise to find a subject-matter expert to review your manuscript for errors.
6. **Proofreading:** comes later in the production process when you have a typeset, ready-for-production file for print or e-book. This is the last chance to catch any typos or formatting mistakes. You should do this yourself, and then if you can, you should pay an eagle-eyed professional proofreader to catch what you missed.

Mark every change twice: once in the text, once in the right margin. This will make it easier to find all your changes when entering them later: just scan down the right margin!

Learn to use standard proofreading marks. (You'll need to learn these anyway when you begin to work with professionals.)

Once you've finished a pass of editing it's time to revise. Return to your word processor and *apply* your edits to the text. You can revise the document in place or keep the unrevised version as a backup.

Once you've done one or two passes of self-editing and revision, *Get an Outside Opinion*.

You should revise as many times as the text requires, but you must recognize when to stop. Do not be like T.H. White's foolish armorer, who sharpened every sword until it was dull. *Set a Deadline*.

Real artists ship. *Always Ship*.

Next Steps

- Learn [the basic set of proofreaders' marks](https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/help-tools/proofreading-marks.html)².
- *Just Write*
- *100:10:1*
- *Get an Outside Opinion*
- *Set a Deadline*
- *Always Ship*

²<https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/help-tools/proofreading-marks.html>

Get an Outside Opinion

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The Problem

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The Forces Involved

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The Solution

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Next Steps

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Always Ship

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Take a Break

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Systems, Not Goals

The Problem

You have big plans. You've visualized a stunning career as an author, but you're still just yourself. How do you begin to fill in the vision?

The Forces Involved

Goals have a limited amount of usefulness.

Small, concrete goals are excellent tools. They give you direction: "I need to finish this story by this date." That's achievable, with clear action steps and clear outcomes.

But once you've checked off the goal, what next?

Larger goals are necessarily more vague. "Become a published author" has a nice ring to it, and with some work you can break it down into smaller, more concrete steps: write a book, edit it, format it, get a cover, publish it. But taken as a whole, it's daunting, and just as likely to put you off from the task. And once you actually finish your first book and publish it, then what?

Therefore:

The Solution

Don't set big, vague goals. Instead, build small, concrete, interlocking systems. In this sense, "systems" are processes that produce predictable results.

Instead of setting a goal of becoming a published author, become a writer who regularly produces publishable stories. Every pattern in this book is a little system that interlocks with other systems to begin that process of transforming yourself into a writer who regularly writes publishable stories.

Your writing habit is a system that produces words.

Story structures like *The Dent* are systems for organizing words into entertaining stories.

A writer's group is a system for encouraging and being encouraged by other writers, building each other up to become better writers.

An important part of building your writing system will be educating yourself about writing. Make space in your schedule to read other books about the craft, especially about those aspect of writing that you know you need to improve.

Next Steps

- Pick a pattern from this book to apply to your writing habit this week.
- Find and read another book about a specific aspect of your writing that you need to improve.