

Writer's Mindset

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EXERCISES

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TRANSFORMING STORY



WRITER'S MINDSET

The Five Senses

Here's an exercise I like to do when my to do list, my writing journey, or the whole world gets to be too much for me to manage. . I do this outside with my feet firmly planted on the Earth, but if weather or other restrictions prevent that, just find a different room than your usual creative space, or even just turn your chair around so you're facing a different direction.

Take three deep breaths and imagine the tension and noise of the day draining out with your breath and leaking into the Earth from the soles of your feet.

Now soften your gaze and look around. What are five things that you see? Take a deep breath. Close your eyes and listen. What are four things that you hear? Scan your body in your mind as you take another deep breath. What are three things that you feel in this moment? Take a final deep breath. What are two things that you smell?

Did something you sensed during this exercise surprise you or make you curious? Spend five minutes journaling and see where it leads.

Brainstorm Your Way Out of The Murky Middle

I was that kid who crept into wardrobes looking for Narnia. I have a weakness for all things magical and that sometimes manifests as a habit of adding unnecessary magical objects to my stories. Specifically, magical books.

Lucky for me, I've got some great writing pals. The kind who, when I come to our weekly Zoom with a fabulous idea to add a magical book, know it means I'm stuck in the murky middle and need a rescue.

See, when you get stuck, your brain turns instantly toward your comfort zone, whether that's a plot you've already written, a familiar character, or a magic book trope. Brainstorming is a great way to get past this, but only if you throw out your first five ideas to get to the fresh stuff.

Tip: Brainstorm a list of five solutions to your story problem. Then throw 'em out. Burn them. Seriously. Now do it again. The next list will be full of fresher, newer ideas. I promise.

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Finding the Exact Right Thing

The inimitable Anne Lamott brought another book into the world recently, *Dusk Night Dawn*. In it, she talks a lot about restoring hope and joy after what has been a rough couple of years. I highly recommend it!

Anyhow, in the prologue, she mentions how she attends church or other spiritual events hoping that "someone will say the exact right thing that will save me from my bad mind and worries that day."

I'm in a real "the princess saved herself" sort of mood these days, so this story left me wondering what the exact right thing was for me in this moment and if I could say it to myself rather than waiting for someone else to say it to me. Often, creatives look externally for inspiration, for something that will wake the muse inside them and let creativity flow. But I think we have more control over that muse than we think.

So I jotted a few things on the sticky notes that are always on my desk. Slow down. Be in community. You are enough. Your words matter.

These were the words that I needed to hear. What are yours? Take out your notebook (or sticky pad) and close your eyes. Quiet your mind and just breathe in and out for one minute. Then open your eyes and write down the exact right thing you need to hear. Say it to yourself every morning as you sit down to create. Let it guide and inspire you.

The Story Only You Can Tell

With the rise of blogging, #NaNoWriMo, and indie publishing, there are more people out there writing their stories than ever before. Sometimes it can be daunting to figure out how to stand out when it seems like everyone is writing a book these days. But I believe that everyone has a story to tell that is the culmination of their thoughts, beliefs, and experiences. And this exercise will help you find the story that only you can tell.

When I was feeling really stuck this past spring, a friend recommended Lewis Jorstad's *The Ten Day Outline* to kickstart my brainstorming process on a new story idea. It was a very different way to approach fleshing out a story idea and it really helped me get over a pretty big block.

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This exercise is adapted from one of the exercises that are part of Day 1 and it's all about brainstorming story ideas. Jorstad has you brainstorm a list of 50 interesting events from your life. They can include anything from strange experiences to important relationships to your fears, your memories, and the goals and adventures you hope to have in the future.

When you make this list, turn off that internal editor who tells you not to talk about your tenth grade boyfriend because you don't want to write romance, or who tells you your fear of spiders is irrelevant. Fifty items is a lot, so capture whatever comes into your head without second-guessing yourself.

Now comes the fun part! Take a look at what you've written and look for patterns. Not only are those fifty things unique to you, but the patterns you find within them are as well. Digging into this process will help you find the story that is uniquely yours, the one that only you can tell!

Putting on Your Bad-Ass Writer Hat

This exercise has been adapted from one I did as part of a body image session with the amazing Katherine Metzelaar of [Bravespace Nutrition](#).

In a world that rewards busy-ness and "productivity" over all else, we end up wearing many different hats. Provider, child, spouse, parent, friend, employee, boss, volunteer...the list goes on. But one thing busy-ness robs us of is presence, and the opportunity to choose which hats we wear with *intention*. How many times have you tried to shift your priorities only to feel like it's impossible, weighed down as you are by your other responsibilities?

This exercise won't solve all your problems, but it's a first step in the right direction. Begin by taking some deep, centering breaths. Now set a timer for three minutes and make a list of all the hats you wear. They can be official roles you play in your life, such as wife or mother hat, or they can be emotional ones like "the happy-go-lucky" hat, "the life of the party" hat, or the "wallflower" hat.

Once your three minutes is up, take a look at your list. Which hats would you like to send to the donation pile? Which ones do you wish you could wear more often? Did anything you write surprise you? Maybe you have a dream or goal hat that you've been afraid to wear. Circle that. Maybe you've got a hat that you'd like to spend more time in. Circle that one too.

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Now imagine putting all the daily-grind hats aside temporarily and wearing one of those circled hats. How does it feel?

When I did this exercise, I circled "Bad Ass True Self Hat." I've got that written on a sticky note now and I imagine myself putting on that hat any time I sit down to write, go into a tough conversation with my teenagers, or navigate a tricky professional situation. Because I know if I have that hat on, I will bring not only my best to the situation, but my truth.

That, my friends, is what living out loud is all about--wearing the hat with your deepest dreams and desires as much as possible to keep your eye on the ultimate prize: an authentic life.

Find the Joy (delegate the rest)!

I recently finished Rachel Rodger's amazing book *We Should All Be Millionaires*. All women, people from marginalized communities, and entrepreneurs should read this book to help get out of the scarcity mindset and to overcome the limiting ideas that many of us were raised with when it comes to making money.

I'd like to focus on one aspect of Rachel's book, which is her recommendation that you delegate a task to someone else every single day. Whether it's asking your teens to pick up an unsavory task (hello, scooping the litter box!) or finally hiring someone to trim your unruly bushes or fix those hard-to-reach smoke detectors that beep all night long, delegating tasks is one of the best ways I know to make time for creativity in a busy life.

So sit down with paper and pencil and make a list of things you could reasonably delegate to someone else either in your household or outsource to a paid assistant of some sort. Getting those items checked off your to-do list will make mental space and not having to do them yourself will create a little time to work on that creative project you've been neglecting.

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Six Ways to Bounce Back

When a disappointment sends you reeling, try one or all of the following to help you regain your creative balance:

6. Remind Yourself of Past Wins - If you don't already have a kudos file, start one today. This can be positive reviews, photos from conferences or other bookish events, notes from friends, acceptance letters, or any feedback that reminds you that you CAN do this work. Spend some time looking at the kudos file whenever you need a boost.

5. Feel the Disappointment - Disappointment is one of those "negative emotions" that we're told to ignore/deny/avoid. But the truth is, the best way out is through. So sit with your disappointment about the rejection. Because rejection stinks. Acknowledge it. Feel it. Only then can you start to let it go.

4. Take a Break - Don't be afraid to rest and recharge after a creative disappointment. This work takes a lot out of us, especially when someone rejects something we've put our heart into. So take a break and do something else for a little while, perhaps something with slightly lower stakes.

3. Talk to a Fellow Creative - No matter how much our partners and best friends love us, unless they're also doing creative work, they might not truly be able to offer words of comfort. But a fellow creative can. They can say "I get it, I've been there, and I know you will survive because I did," and sometimes that's exactly what we need to hear.

2. Send It Out Again - Receive a rejection on a short story? Send it to another literary journal. Get turned down for a grant application? Find another to apply to next month. Get a rejection from an agent or editor on your latest novel? Send out a couple of additional queries. Sometimes called "revenge querying," sending your materials out for another look is the best way to take the sting out of rejection. Remember, this business is subjective. Just because one person didn't like your work doesn't mean another one won't.

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1. Start Small and Ease In - Some disappointments are larger than others. As someone who has split with a literary agent, had multiple books not sell, gotten passed over for numerous awards and grants, and received a flood of rejections on other stories, pitches, articles, and poems, I know some hurt more than others. So for the particularly tough ones, ease in with something small, maybe even a blog post or your monthly newsletter ;) Little by little, your wounds will heal and you can get back to the work that brings you joy despite the pain of the business side of things.

I get it, I've been there, and I know you will survive because I did.

Write Yourself a Letter

One of my favorite activities as I dream about what I want my creative future to be like is writing a letter to myself.

This letter is a time to dream big, to put words to your unspoken goals, and to outline on paper what you're going to focus on both in the near-term and the future.

I recommend hand-writing this letter and posting it somewhere near your writing space so that it can inspire you. Then, this time next year, you can take a look, see which dreams you've achieved and which ones you've put aside, and write yourself a new letter for the coming year.

Here's a sneak peak into my letter to myself at the beginning of 2022:

- Continued growth of my business and community.
- Better balance between my coaching life and my own creative work.
- Launch my first online course for writers.
- Finish my Goonies reboot.

You'll notice that these goals are all things that are within my control. I didn't include "sell my verse novel" or "publish my anthology," even though I'm very much hoping those things will happen. Because I can't control whether other people buy my stories. But I can control whether I create them.

If you need some additional inspiration, check out this [letter from icon Octavia Butler](#). And don't forget to dream big.

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A Box of Disappointment

I've been quite open both here and on social media about both my writing triumphs and disappointments. I received **84 rejections during 2021** from a mix of agents, editors, residencies, and grants. And yet, 2021 was a great year for me, in which I published 2 short stories, 3 poems, and 8 craft and personal essays, in addition to completing an (as yet unpublished) novel.

I'd like to share an exercise that I use to help me keep those disappointments in perspective: the "Box of Disappointment."

Give yourself at least ten uninterrupted minutes for this exercise. You can use visualization, the written word, or even drawing as you create and describe your box.

Start by planting your feet flat on the floor and taking in several deep, cleansing breaths. Imagine a box big enough and strong enough to hold all the disappointments in your creative life. The grant you didn't get. The book that didn't win the major award. The article that wasn't accepted for publication. The poem that didn't turn out as powerful as you'd hoped.

Now, either visualize, write about, or draw this box. And imagine filling it to the brim with your disappointments. Examine each disappointment as it goes into the box. See how much space it's been taking up in your creative life. Feel the disappointment for one sharp moment. Then lay the disappointment into the box.

Once you've filled the box, put the lid on tight. Feel the space you've made within your creative soul. Imagine that space filling up with new ideas, new stories, new poems, new art. And set that box of disappointments aside.

You may eventually want to re-examine the contents of the box when you're feeling more resilient. Or you may be ready to set fire to it and let it go. Either way, it's OK to feel those disappointments and then set them aside. Those disappointments are real. They feel awful. And they do not need to control your life or your work..

Take three more cleansing breaths. Do you feel lighter? Are you ready to set the box of disappointment aside to make room for more creative work? I am. And I hope you are too.

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