

Top 10 “Secret Writing Tips” To Boost Your Productivity: Part 2

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This is the sequel and companion piece to the first five tips published in this journal seven years ago. Kidding. I can't trick you, can I? Of course, it was the last winter 2010 issue.

Top 10 Secret Tips

Do you remember any of the tips from the previous article? Me neither. Let's recap them for the benefit of both of us. Remember: This is still a top secret, high security, Code Fuzzy Wuzzy classified half of a document. Here are the 10:

1. Write Everyday
2. Write Everywhere
3. Conquer Distractions and Interruptions
4. Write for a Niche
5. Write with a Purpose
6. Write with Passion
7. Write Drafts
8. Adopt a Writing Mentor
9. Proofread Thoroughly
10. Pick an Accountability Partner

Are you ready for tips 6-10? Hold onto your motherboard. Heere we go.

6. Write with Passion

Your excitement about the content you've chosen should burst through your writing. If you're bored about your topic, you will cognitively kill your readers and prompt them to click “delete.” They don't deserve linguistic purgatory – writing with the excitement of a wad of used paper towels. That can induce a coma. Light a fire under your writing to create at least a spark of interest by your readers, and torch the paper towels while you're at it.

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Remember the suspense and anticipation of the opening scene in *Jaws* with the swimmer and thumping, ominous theme music warning us that something terrifying is about to happen? “No.” You need to see it. Of course, this only works if the shark enters on cue. If he's late because he was busy munching on the passengers from a cruise ship, then the scene tanks.

I bet you're thinking: “What does *Jaws* have to do with my writing?” Great question. The point is that your words should generate interest, titillation, or, even controversy to stimulate your readers' minds. The words in Peter Benchley's novel created that opening scene in *Jaws*.

Writing gifts. Leverage your knowledge and expertise with your writing gifts to put your unique spin on every topic. Unleash *your* creativity and imagination. Express your passion for your serious subject in your writing. What writers have inspired you? What words stop you in your tracks? Here are two examples you'll know.

Two writers. Award-winning TV screenwriter David E. Kelley (*L.A. Law*, *Picket Fences*, *Chicago Hope*, *Ally McBeal*, *Boston Legal*, *The Practice*) revealed his signature style in his characters' words and behaviors, such as the “dancing baby” and John Cage's obsession with Barry White on *Ally McBeal*. Kelley fused his quirky, off-beat humor with the surreal and the serious. He's also known for seeding his plots with political and social “hot-button” issues, especially on *Boston Legal*. Kelley said,

Often we try to seduce the audience at the beginning that this is going to be fun, a romp or a ride, and then once the ride has begun, to reveal some serious subject matter for them to think about.

Aaron Sorkin (*The Social Network*, *A Few Good Men*, *The American President*, *The West Wing*, *Sports Night*) exhibited a different style. His screenplays, such as for the most recent *The Social Network*, and teleplays for the Emmy-Award winning *The West Wing* had his trademark rapid-fire dialogue and scathing wit. In the latter TV series, that dialogue and extended monologues were complemented

by director Thomas Schlamme's visual "walk and talk." His style-mark was also the repartee between his characters as they small talk and banter about various whimsical events. What fun to hear and watch! Sorkin said,

I enter the world through what I write. I grew up believing...that I am a screw-up...and had nothing to offer in any conversation. But when I started writing, suddenly there was something that I brought to the party that was at a high-enough level.

Now you know a couple of my favorite writers and why I do what I do in my writing. Both Kelley and Sorkin infuse their serious material with humor. I bet you have your own faves. If not, find an author in print or visual media who can inspire you the way these writers have inspired me.

Back in your heartland. Where's your heart? Passion in your writing is not about your content knowledge. We're back to the heart again. Your whole heart should be engaged in your writing. Half-, third-, or quarter-hearted writing is not enough. It's either all or nothing. Pour yourself into your writing. It should be a fully immersive experience. Make your readers feel your spirit of passion about your contribution, whether it's a tweet, comment on a discussion, response on Facebook, or a scientific breakthrough for a cure for stupid reality TV programs about spoiled, immature celebrities. You may start with the content, but as you revise and edit each draft, make it sneakily engrossing and captivating for your readers.

Professional writing secret. Every e-mail, LinkedIn message, PowerPoint presentation, blog, article, and book I write begins with the substance—the serious content. That's the most important element to be communicated—the "WHAT." Then I shift gears into the "HOW." Once I'm tentatively satisfied with the content draft, I scan line by line and read the words as a reader would read them, to search for places to add humor or spin some of the material with rewording to make it fun or more interesting. I assume every paragraph to be boring to my readers.

The challenge is to create appropriate humor, image-producing metaphors, and popular cultural references to grab and maintain the readers' attention. It's an unending process of revision in my book writing. The more deadly serious and boring the content, the more turbo-charged I am to humorize that material. That's how I brand my writing. It's the art of writing for me and what I love the most. I'm never satisfied that I've done enough to make it interesting and funny.

7. Write Drafts

Unlike Tip 6 which gave you a belly full of pointers related to your heart and spleen, this one does not deal with any internal organs. This rather noninvasive tip fo-

cuses on external organs. Hold onto to your spleen though. It's draft time.

Consider everything you write as just a draft of your thoughts and words. Type these drafts as quickly as your ideas spill out of you noggin. I even draft e-mail responses when time permits. When I save my e-mails in Inbox Drafts and then return later, I always catch errors and reword something to polish them. If I rush and send e-mails quickly, the mistakes go with them.

How many drafts? Every draft can usually be improved with careful rewrites that might also incorporate the comments of colleagues, a mentor, and/or professional reviewers. Multiple drafts can be expected. However, eventually, *you will reach a point of diminishing returns where there are only minor changes remaining.* That's when it's ready to present, send, or submit for publication. Don't hold onto your manuscript forever. Have someone pry your hands open with a crowbar and let your manuscript go. No one will appreciate your work if they don't see it. Sooner rather than later, you will have to let go. Sever that umbilical cable and submit your work for review.

In the journal and book review process, it's not unusual to submit one or even up to three revisions before a manuscript is finally accepted for publication. Then the editing process by the publisher begins. The process can be brutal, but the final product is usually far better than the initial submission.

Drafter's block. Have you ever written a section of your draft that just doesn't work; it feels out of sync? You stare at it, but it doesn't get any better and your PC/Mac doesn't care. Writer and editor Susan Greene (personal communication, e-mail, August 21, 2010) recommends printing it and then jumping up and down all over it. WROOONG! She says, "Put it aside for a while." Don't look at it, but you can think about it. Take a five-mile jog, Zumba® class, cup of Joe at Starbucks®, or go to a flick. When you return hours or days later, the rewrite of your pesky paragraph will be a piece of crumb cake to go with your cup of Joe. The revision will usually flow and sync with the rest of the manuscript. Don't beat yourself up when your writing hits a wall. Abort, take a break, and then return later with a vengeance. (*Note to Boomers:* After you've completed your revision, treat yourself to a nap.)

Theta brain waves. Always stay focused on your writing product. Think about how it can be more concise, worded more clearly, and/or funnier. Sit back, close your eyes, relax, and try to visualize the writing on the wall...Oops! I mean your writing on your screen. When you're relaxed in almost shallow sleep mode, your theta brain waves activate free-flowing creativity and different words. Hurry and write down those words while they're flowing.

Bedtime thoughts. Have you ever gone to bed and, as your mind relaxes, all of a sudden a burglar you saw on a

Law & Order rerun breaks in and steals your PC? “No?” Oh, sorry. What about: ideas that start popping into your mind about your writing that you must right down before you forget them, but you can’t find your glasses to find the Post-its and a pen and your alarm is still blaring from the break-in. (*Grammatical Note*: English professors call the structure of the previous elongated sentence a *subcutaneous conjunctive carbuncle*.) Jot down your carbuncles quickly while they’re still popping. If you don’t, you probably won’t remember them in the morning and you’ll have to go back to sleep to recall them after you go down to the police station to identify the burglar in a line-up. Hummm. The back-to-sleep part is not a bad idea.

8. Adopt a Writing Mentor

There are formal and informal mentorship programs at institutions everywhere for teaching, research, and clinical skills to guide junior faculty and students. Why not writing? Professors publish scholarship in all three of those areas. Who do you know that’s “been there, done that, as a writer”? A mentor in your writing life can provide wise counsel and, when necessary, poke you in the eyeballs (like the 3 Stooges) or kick you in the keester along your writing journey to keep you producing.

Where do you find a mentor? Solicit feedback on your writing from anyone who can commit to provide you with constructive criticism. Your mentor must be patient and willing to take the time to read, critique, encourage, poke, and kick, when appropriate. You don’t need put-downs and sarcasm.

Your writing mentor can be anywhere in the world — in your department, at another institution, working at a publishing company, living in your house, or grazing in the field. He or she can be an incredible support and sounding board to improve your writing conceptually and mechanically. A copy editor would be terrific if you can find one who can review your work regularly. These reviewers can provide valuable input on any writing piece before you submit it for publication or presentation.

Evaluate the mentor’s review. When you receive comments from your sensitive and fun-loving mentor, carefully consider their impact on your writing. (*Note*: Susan Greene brought this important issue to my attention.) How divergent are the criticisms from your thinking? Are they valid? Are the suggestions consistent with your writing intent and vision? Would the changes in any way compromise the integrity of your work? Should your mentor be smacked or fired? Only you can answer these questions.

Keep an open mind as you evaluate which changes you should make in your next draft. You can learn so much from a mentor, if you could humbly weigh his or her constructive comments in the context of your writing. (*Personal Note*: My first copy editor Wendy Harris at The Johns

Hopkins University Press became my first writing mentor. I learned more about writing from her than from anyone else. She was willing to take the time and explain the nuances of the language to me. I am forever grateful. Most recently, editorial production manager Judy Coughlin at Stylus Publishing has taken on that role. She’s incredible and a blessing in my last three books.)

9. Proofread Thoroughly

Whatever you write, make sure to proof it thoroughly before hitting “send,” “post,” “save,” or “delete” by mistake. Do it a lot; the proofing that is, not the hitting. Your professional reputation for quality work is on the line with every piece you produce. Nothing screams sloppy work, carelessness, and knucklehead more than writing errors in your communications and manuscripts.

Marinate the manuscript. The best advice I’ve received from editors is to put each draft aside for a while — a few minutes, hours, days, and, sometimes, years. Similar to the “draft blockage” strategy mentioned in Tip 7, try to systematically allow your manuscript time to breathe in whatever manuscripts breathe in your PC/Mac. You are so familiar with every word that you will not see every error, and neither will your PC or spelchek. Even with several reviews and a Sherlock Holmes-type magnifying glass, which I am using right now, I will still miss mistakes on grammar, spellinmg, or word selection.

Wait for the mold. Returning totally cold to the scene of your writing crime (with a magnifying glass) will usually allow those errors to jump off the screen; well, maybe not jump, but certainly hop a little. You will also reword and add material that did not occur to you previously. It seems that both the manuscript and you can benefit from marinating for a few days.

This sequel article was marinating for several months before it was finally submitted to editor Ed Neal. There is still some green mold along the edges of your PDF version from the earlier marinating. Don’t get carried away. You may get moldy too, maybe brown mold that can be treated with penicillin. However, the next moldy draft is always better.

Proof a print version. Experiences of other writers indicate you can identify errors more easily from a printed manuscript than online version. Your eyeballs just focus differently. Also, hunt down the words with apostrophes, such as you’re, they’re, we’re, it’s, and the like, inasmuch as those seem to be common trouble spots.

Hire a professional. Remember the ole’ TV series: “*Have Proofreader, Will Travel*”? Me neither. Read your masterpiece aloud AND ask a colleague, friend, or someone else with a pulse to read it. Your best proofer is one is who unfamiliar with the content and writing. You’re REEEAALLY familiar with both. That’s why you’re so bad. Bad, bad proofer!

For book manuscripts, you can even hire a professional proofer. My publishers have done that on several of my books. *The more eyeballs that see your writing, the greater the chance that errors will be found before they're published.* That gives new meaning to the "interocular perusal technique."

Read backwards. I've tried proofing my manuscripts while facing backwards, but it hasn't seemed to work. How silly! A little proofing humor. Of course, you have to turn the manuscript backwards too. The technique actually involves reading the manuscript from the back to the front, which is very uncomfortable and weird. That's why it can help pinpoint errors. No one writes and reads that way except Hebrew scholars. Proofing the way you normally write and read is the least effective strategy. Proof from the end to the beginning and face different directions as well to determine your best approach. Let me know if spinning around like a whirling dervish works.

10. Pick an Accountability Partner

If there was a single *best strategy* to increase writing productivity, this isn't it. Yes, of course it is. If accountability works for weight loss and drug rehab, it must be effective in other applications. RIGHT?

Where's the research? Research by Boice (1989) found that writers who wrote daily (Tip 1), kept records of their writing time (Tip 1), and had an accountability partner produced nine times more than those who were left to their own devices. There is also plenty of anecdotal evidence. Of course, some of us gain the weight back or backslide into our old habits or other meds, but that's another story. The consequences of not writing can just get you fired.

Side effects. Accountability can really boost your productivity, unless you're a chronic liar, but then you will have more serious issues than writing. It's an extrinsic motivator and, as such, can also elevate your guilt levels through the roof if you don't meet your goals. Remember the weigh-in at Weight Watchers®? "No." That's good.

Meeting times. If you have difficulty hunkering down to write daily or anytime, one of the best "carrots" or "Snickers®" candy bars to drive you to write is an accountability partner. You should report to your partner at the end of each week or another mutually-agreed upon regular time. *Regular meetings are an essential ingredient* of this arrangement. If meetings start dwindling, so will your writing. Don't dwindle.

Pick your partner carefully. The partner can be a colleague, significant other, mentor, student, friend, mime, a literate pet, or all of the preceding. It's even better if both of you are struggling writers. Hunt down a partner like Dog the Bounty Hunter. However, before you finalize your pick, you also might want to run a thorough background check on your candidates to make sure they don't have rap sheets

as long as your dream book, running an accountability Ponzi scheme, or are currently listed on the international terrorist watch-list. Be careful. No TSA body scans or pat-downs please.

You need someone who is dependable and committed to helping you dig out of your writing hole and sustain a regiment of regular writing. It approximates a "writing boot camp" to train you to write on your own. Once you're ready to graduate camp with the usual mortar board and robe, you will be more prepared to fight your writing battles.

Commitment. The writer-partner showdown is what Simon & Garfunkel sang about: "Hello, darkness, my old friend." As noted in Tip 1 in the previous journal issue, you must commit to write in writing (What else?) with specific, realistic goals in daily and weekly "to-do" lists to make this work. Record how much time and what you write.

Your partner can reward your successes with celebratory activities or evil gifts, such as a hot fudge sundae (unless you're still on Weight Watchers® or Jenny Craig®). He or she may also extinguish failure with severe beatings or grace. Be very selective in who you pick as your partner.

Writing clubs. You can also seek out writing clubs or groups at your institution or through your professional association. There are also many online writing groups through LinkedIn and other networks, such as <http://www.academicwritingclub.com>. These groups may serve in lieu of or in addition to your accountability partner.

Whatever form of accountability you choose will be only as effective as your commitment to write. How serious are you about writing more and better? Only you can answer that. We both know you can do it.

What's Next?

Now that you have the complete collector's edition of all 10 tips,

HAVE A SPECTACULAR WRITING CAREER!

Let me know if you have discovered another technique that's really effective to improve your writing.

Reference

Boice, R (1989). Procrastination, busyness and bingeing. *Behaviour Research Therapy*, 27(6), 605-611.

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