

THE 25 HABITS OF HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL

WRITERS

INSIDER SECRETS
FROM TOP SCREENWRITERS
AND NOVELISTS

KARL IGLESIAS
AND ANDREW MCALEER

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INTRODUCTION

You may wonder how reading about other writers' routines will benefit your own creative process. After all, isn't everyone's way of working unique? To that we say: There's no better way to learn to be a saleable writer than from those who've successfully blazed the trail before you. And while all the writers contained in this eBook have a distinctive voice and method that is theirs alone, you'll also find that there's a commonality to the traits that helped these people become established in their field.

The purpose of *The 25 Habits of Highly Successful Writers* is to present a linear progression of the writing life, filled with advice and anecdotes from today's top talent in the novel and screenwriting worlds, so you can understand exactly what you need to do to achieve your own writing goals. We collected what we think are the most essential qualities as presented in [*The 101 Habits of Highly Successful Screenwriters, 2nd Edition*](#) and [*The 101 Habits of Highly Successful Novelists*](#), the source material for this eBook.

Rather than a traditional interview, these two tomes (and this eBook) are organized by habit, trait, or other skill with highly successful writers sharing their thoughts on the topic. You may not always agree with the advice every writer offers, but you're sure to be intrigued and inspired to try to make them work for you. These two books are also based on the common sense approach and simple philosophy of modeling excellence through the apprentice-master relationship. As [*The 101 Habits of Highly Successful Screenwriters, 2nd Edition*](#) author Karl Iglesias notes, "Someone is doing it right—many are, in fact. Why not ask them how they do it? 'Hey, successful

screenwriter dude, what are your habits? What works for you? Enlighten me.”

It’s exactly this philosophy that drives all our offerings at [***The Writers Store***](#). We’re proud of our reputation in the industry as Story Specialists who provide one-on-one guidance based on your own writing goals, and can take you from first glimmer of an idea to final draft, whether you’re just starting out or you’re a more established writer. We’re also a reliable source for the latest courses, software, books, and supplies for achieving creative success.

Ready to get started on this journey together? Read on, and then . . . write!

Sincerely,
Jesse Douma
Publisher, The Writer’s Store

1.

BELIEVE YOU'RE TALENTED ENOUGH

Having talent is like having blue eyes.

You don't admire a man for the color of his eyes.

I admire a man for what he does with his talent.

—ANTHONY QUINN

To do anything successfully, after the initial desire, you must believe it can be done. Strong belief is the driving force behind all art that was once visualized before becoming a reality. In Hollywood, it's not enough to have an "I think I can do it" attitude. It has to be "I *know* I can do it!" We are all blessed with talent. It's just a matter of noticing it and, more importantly, developing it. Anything is possible if you believe it. As Henry Ford once said, "Whether you think you can or whether you think you can't, you're right."

Michael Brandt: If you practice enough, you start developing a trust in your own abilities as you see the response you get. When we wrote that first script, it seems like everyone who read it wanted to help us. It kept getting passed up and up and up. That's when I first started thinking maybe we're good at this. Turns out that generally the stuff we liked was also good. Or at least we sold it that way.

Laeta Kalogridis: Even the best writers think they're terrible on bad days (or, you know, every day). Every aspiring writer has to walk the tightrope between having enough confidence to believe they have talent and something worthwhile to say, and being able to recognize when their writing is not working. The market may respond to you,

it may not; that's not really the measure of a writer. Writers write. Nothing stops them. However, that doesn't mean you'll get paid.

Jim Kouf: You never know if you have talent. You're testing yourself with every script, so I never assume I've solved any riddles. I just keep trying to write something well. I never called myself a writer until somebody else called me a writer, and paid me for it. I wrote a script that got some attention and people started hiring me to rewrite other scripts. But it wasn't until I kept getting hired and I started making a living at it that I believed I was doing something right.

Eric Roth: Winning a contest helped validate me. It got me an agent but I've always had a real sense that I had a good visual imagination. I've always had the arrogance or confidence that I could write good characters. That's about it. I went through a learning process just like anyone else.

Michael Schiffer: The first thing any writer has to ask himself is, "How do I know I have talent?" The answer is, you don't know. When I first started out, I'd cook dinner for my friends, and then make them listen to what I had written that day. If I wasn't a good cook, there's no way anyone would have stayed. I could see them sitting there with such pity in their eyes, probably thinking this was just terrible and that I was just nuts.

Ed Solomon: Once in a while, you have an inkling that you may have a bit of talent when you make a little private connection by yourself in a room, a little scene that works or a great idea that surprises you. But the majority of the time, you're just slugging it out, confused, unable to see the forest from the trees, and doubting yourself, wondering if what you're saying has any value, or if you have the ability to make it work. Then when you finish something, and you think it's the greatest thing that's ever been written—three days later you feel it's an utter waste of ink and paper, and you wonder how you'll ever write anything again. I don't know how you overcome that. I just keep doing it because no one has offered me a better job yet.

2.

BE A NATURAL OBSERVER

The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way.

—JOHN RUSKIN

Pulitzer Prize–winning poet and Columbia and Harvard professor Mark Van Doren observed, “If you want to do something for a child, get him in the habit of noticing and remembering things. . . . Our very word ‘see’ has two meanings—to see with the eye and with the mind.” The important thing to glean from Van Doren’s words here is that with training, the power of keen observation and remembering what we see with our eyes and mind can be taught and mastered.

I had an interesting conversation with a dog trainer of Irish border collies. She told me that some of these amazing animals are born with something called “keen eye.” Their eyes are so intense and focused on what they are doing that when they herd cattle, the cattle respond more to the collies’ eyes than any other body function. Not border collies have keen eyes, however. They must be born with this gift.

The lesson here is that we do not have to be natural *born* observers to be natural observers. Unlike the Irish border collie, we can develop keen eyes.

As writers, we have to train ourselves to notice what is around us, breathe in what is around us, and understand how it relates to the world. Start becoming aware of the obvious and the trivial. Become conscious of the things that mean so much in our daily lives that, by most, don’t ordinarily get the attention deserved.

T.M. Murphy: The small things are the ingredients that transform a good story into a great story. Jerry Seinfeld and Larry Davis were masters of observing the little things and making them universal so we all say, “I know exactly what their talking about.”

I always keep a notebook with me, and I hit my local coffee shop, Coffee Obsession, every morning to observe the characters and listen to the dialogue around me. Be open to what’s around you and write it down. Who knows when you’ll use it!

Mary Balogh: The ability to create realistic characters obviously depends very largely upon one’s ability to *observe* other people. Being an introvert is probably an advantage here. But it is not enough merely to look and listen and get to know people from external signs, however detailed and accurate one’s observation is. It is more being able to put oneself right inside the body, mind, and soul of another person, to be able to imagine what it is like to be that person. True understanding and empathy can come only from that type of observation.

Characters in a book can seem as real as living persons to the reader if the writer has the gift of portraying them from deep within, from the level of their very being, with all the myriad factors that have made them the unique individuals they are.

Stephanie Kay Bendel: Three people look at a river. One is a marine biologist, one an artist, and one a civil engineer who specializes in designing bridges and dams. They’re looking at the same thing, but they’re certainly not *seeing* the same thing.

You can use this principle to good advantage in your writing because readers enjoy seeing the world through different eyes. Give your characters interesting careers, hobbies, or experiences that enable them to see the world from particular points of view. A helpful reference is *Careers for your Character: A Writer’s Guide to 101 Professions from Architect to Zookeeper*, which includes professional jargon, daily schedules, what people of certain professions wear to work, and more.

3.

BE A VORACIOUS READER

The way to get started is to quit talking and begin doing.

—WALT DISNEY

“Voracious” means to be very greedy or eager in some desire or pursuit. When it comes to reading, greedily devour anything you can get your hands on, not just novels. Read newspapers, magazines, biographies, the directions to your iPod. You can cultivate ideas and voice from any writing medium.

UCLA screen writing instructor Lew Hunter says that he will read anything that comes down the pipeline. If he’s eating breakfast and there’s nothing else nearby to read, he’ll read the ingredients of a cereal box.

Bill Pronzini: Read as much as you can in the field of your choice. Study how different authors create conflict and suspense and how they achieve their effects.

William Link: I always read, mostly to fill in the time when I’m not on the script, and funnily enough there are many times when I read something that helps me in the writing. Serendipitous? I really don’t know. But you might try it.

John McAleer: While working toward my doctorate at Harvard, I was taught that you will learn more about writing from one hour of reading than you will in six hours of writing. Having taught English

literature at Boston College for more than half a century, I can always tell if a student is a reader by the way he or she writes.

Cinda Williams Chima: I sometimes meet fiction writers who tell me they don't have time to read fiction. That's appalling! Reading great fiction is like taking a writing workshop from a master for free.

Joan Johnston: What is the one mistake most beginning writers make that's the easiest to correct? New writers don't read enough before and while they're writing. No class can teach you to write a book. Novel writing is about telling a story. We learn to tell stories—plot, character, conflict—by “listening” to stories. The more you read, the better writer you're liable to be. You always get told, “Write what you know.” I'd add to that, “Read what you want to write.”

S.J. Rozan: READ READ READ READ READ READ READ READ READ READ READ READ. If it means less TV, less family time, fewer movies, whatever it means. READ READ READ READ READ READ READ READ READ READ READ READ.

Kit Ehrman: I read with an eye toward improving my writing. I like to “read up” by reading authors whom I admire, whose work I aspire to emulate. You never stop learning.

Tom Sawyer: I cannot imagine being a writer without *loving* to read.

One of the very best pieces of advice I've heard given to would-be writers came from an agent, speaking at the Palm Springs Writers Conference some years back. The agent opened his talk by asking how many people in the room wanted to become successful writers. All seventy-five or so raised their hands. After a dramatic pause, the agent said, “Then, from this moment forward, you *will, every day* of your life, read the *New York Times*.”

He was dead-on correct. Flat-out—if you are serious about being a writer—*any* kind of writer—the *Times* is about as important as your pen, your thesaurus, or your word processor. Now, obviously, very few of us are going to read every word. But you will *invariably* find items of interest and value.

Okay—but—for writing better *dialogue*? Yes. Sprinkled through the *Times* are contemporary quotes, columns about language and usage, and information about everything else that's *happening*, from music to the arts to science and technology, to publishing and on and on. You will *absorb* what's going on in the larger world.

The *New York Times* is, both in breadth of coverage and the quality of its writing, simply the best in the world. By miles and miles. No other newspaper comes close, and I guarantee that once you become hooked on it, you will become a better writer, not just of dialogue, but of *stories*. I cannot begin to estimate how many of the ideas for the 100 produced television scripts and scores of series and movie pitches I've written were inspired by items I've read in the *Times*—from book reviews to news stories to obituaries. *Everything* in it is better written than *anything* else you will find—anywhere.

Further, because the people who produce the *New York Times* take their work *very* seriously—they regard the *Times* as *The Newspaper of Record*—the publication will inform you on subjects and on levels that will amaze you. Not incidentally, it will likely tell you more about what is going on in *your* part of the world than will your local papers.

And the blessing is that in all but America's most remote spots, you can receive home delivery of the national edition seven days per week, or you can access it online. I urge you to do so. It will change you, your perspective, *and* your writing. Profoundly.

4.

BE OPEN TO EXPERIENCES

A writer is working from the instant the alarm clock goes off to the moment when he goes to bed. For that matter, the [creative] process does not stop when I'm asleep. The old subconscious mind takes over then and sifts things around and sets the stage for the next day's work.

—LAWRENCE BLOCK

One day, I went to make a deposit at my local bank. Little did I realize that I would experience something new. I learned what it was like to carry \$1,000 in quarters. Doesn't sound like much? Well, it was worth its weight in gold to me.

I saw the assistant manager with two huge clear plastic sacks of quarters on his desk while he was filing out forms. I jokingly asked him if he had change for a dollar, and he retorted that he didn't have any change on him. I asked him where all the quarters came from. He said that because the bank is next to a Laundromat, they end up with sacks and sacks of quarters. I asked him what happens to all the quarters, and he told me that they go to the Federal Reserve. He added that the old man from the Federal Reserve always became grouchy at the bank because he hated toting the heavy bags out to the truck. I asked the assistant manager if I could pick up one of the bags to experience what it felt like to tote one around. I figured this was the opportunity to experience something I never done before, and it wasn't going to cost me dime. By lifting the bag, I could experience what the curmudgeon guard from the Federal Reserve experiences each time he has to carry one of them.

From this experience, several character ideas were borne: the hard-working Laundromat owner keeping track of each quarter, the cranky Federal Reserve guard who has it with the bankers and Laundromat man, and maybe the terrible bank robber who tries to escape with the heavy booty. I don't know what I will do with all this new and exciting information, maybe nothing, but it is stored in my writer's bank, ready to withdraw should I ever need it for a short story or scene.

Try to experience as much as possible. That doesn't mean that you have to travel the globe to obtain material to write about. Experience the world as much as you can, but not at the expense of the area around you. Take in the small details of your community, the day-to-day grind of people you do business with every day, but have never really taken the time to notice. Take notice of life! Then go write about it.

Peter Lovesey: Give your writing the authentic feel by using your own experience. Of course you don't have to commit a murder to write about one, but you can give it a strong sense of place by choosing a setting you know. Dorothy L. Sayers worked in advertising and wrote *Murder Must Advertise*. Agatha Christie trained as a pharmacist and used her knowledge of poisons in her books. P.D. James worked in the police department at the Home Office. Colin Dexter, the creator of Inspector Morse, is a champion crossword solver and a lover of real ale and Wagner.

Robin Moore: Be a proactive writer—an adventurer. As Ernest Hemingway said, "Live it up so you can write it down." I have to agree with Hemingway on this. My best work came after I wrote *The Green Berets*, where I actually trained with the special forces and served with them in Vietnam. I was nearly forty at the time; it is never too late to live it up and write it down.

Bruce Balfour: Whether you're writing about the mean streets of Austin, Texas, or the pedestrian slipways of Beta Centauri IV, you should spend some time explaining the common environmental details of your fictional world to create a definite sense of place for your reader. If your urban protagonist wakes up in a gutter in San Francisco with his face on gritty concrete and his body stretched out

on a warm asphalt road near a fish market, it's a different experience than waking up in a gutter in Buenos Aires, where the streets are paved with cool granite cobblestones and a dog is barking in his ear. The reader needs to experience the world through all five senses of the character. Getting these details right will enhance the reader's immersion in the story and make your fictional details more believable. Getting these details wrong will elicit letters from outraged readers who live in those places and know you've never been there. This is particularly disturbing when they live on Beta Centauri IV.

Kit Ehrman: Writing is an interesting form of self-entertainment, but I need to come up for air and join the real world or I'll run out of raw data, be that character inspiration or story ideas. Because I write about the horse world but no longer run a barn, it's important for me to occasionally immerse myself in that world, to slip back into its intricate, beautiful rhythms. So, I visit that world whenever I can to recharge my batteries. On a deeper, more psychological level, if I'm not living real life and experiencing real emotions, I probably don't have much to say that's truly genuine.

JoAnn Ross: Writers all need to do extensive research on locations and other details intended for our books, but I also believe it's important to get away from the computer from time to time because you never know when everyday interaction with "real" people will make its way into your stories.

For example, the writers for *Cheers* supposedly hung out in bars and wrote down conversations they'd overhear. This is partly why, I suspect, the dialogue in that show always sounded so spot-on. I don't know any writers who can go out to dinner without eavesdropping on conversations at surrounding tables. Those conversations often spark new ideas.

I once worked in an ER on the Fourth of July. Thirty years later, I tapped into memories of the turmoil and organized chaos of that day—when it seemed ambulances were never going to stop arriving at the hospital—for my novel *No Regrets*.

Another time, I saw a woman hanging clothes on a line on a quiet residential street near San Quentin prison. The domestic scene, in such a startling beautiful location where you could see the death row gas towers, had me wondering if the tidy homes—many with

Private Property, No Parking signs stuck in their lawns--belonged to people who worked at the prison. If so, weren't they, in some way, perhaps nearly as much prisoners to the place as the inmates? That mental image stuck with me for nearly twenty years and triggered the San Quentin prison scenes that eventually ended up in my romantic thriller *Blaze*.

Live your life with your eyes wide open and soak up the amazing world around you. You never know when something seemingly insignificant at the time will provide the all-important final piece that completes your novel.

5.

BE AWARE OF YOUR MUSE'S FAVORITE ACTIVITIES

Make friends with your shower. If inspired to sing, maybe the song has an idea in it for you.

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

Although they don't seem to do it consciously, writers put themselves into situations that foster creative thoughts and allow their subconscious to help out. Asked when they usually come up with bursts of original ideas, our mentors answered: While driving; showering; taking a relaxing bath; or performing any manual activity, such as shaving, putting on makeup, cooking, gardening, or exercising. They might be walking in nature, swimming, or jogging. It happens when they're reading, listening to music, sitting on the toilet, doodling at a boring meeting, and falling asleep or waking up—especially in the middle of the night. You'll notice most of these activities tend to free the mind to think, while their rhythms and routines put the body on automatic pilot. Put simply, these activities are just “disciplined inspiration.” By making it a daily habit of just being aware of and prepared for these activities, you allow these heightened moments of inspiration to enter your consciousness on a regular basis.

Ron Bass: I get up very early. It used to be around three in the morning, now more like around four. But the “writing” starts before I get up. Right around the 3:15, 3:30, 3:45 of it all, I lie there thinking about the scene, I go there, and eventually there's so much there I have to get up to write it down.

Derek Haas: I have a time of day in which I know I'm at my best . . . the morning. Then I turn off the Internet and get to work.

Michael Brandt: I find the right music and turn it up loud. Writing for me comes in bursts, and a great burst of forty-five minutes is usually better than five hours of forced typing.

Jim Kouf: I do a lot of thinking about one hour before I get out of bed or before I go to sleep, but it can happen anywhere. I never leave home without a notepad.

Aline Brosh McKenna: I wish I had rituals like other writers. But I have found over the years that there's no summoning the muse, there's sitting in chairs.

Terry Rossio: The only odd thing I do is take long drives. I'll intentionally schedule a two-, three-, or four-hour drive when I need to make a lot of progress on a project. Sometimes I'll pick up a Stephen King book. For some reason, the rhythm of his writing, the casual ease of it, helps me believe that I can do it, too. Best not to combine these two techniques.

6.

WRITE ABOUT WHAT YOU LOVE

Imagination is more important than knowledge.

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

Many an aspiring writer has stared at a blank screen, wondering what on earth she should write about. Spending time worrying that you must complete your novel now or you will miss the latest trend is a surefire way to sabotage your belief. Instead, write the novel you wish to write—the novel you would love to write—and create the characters you feel comfortable with. Trends come and go and if you try to latch onto a trend it will likely be passé by the time you have completed your manuscript.

T.J. Perkins: I know you've heard it a million times, but it's so true. Write about whatever it is you like: mystery, fiction, true-to-life, fantasy, etc.

Lawrence Block: Write only what you want to write, the way you want to write it.

Sabrina Jeffries: Too many beginning writers think shorter automatically equates with easier. The truth is, it's just shorter. Short fiction takes a whole different set of writing skills and can actually be harder to write if your bent is toward novels.

Write what you really want to write. If you love long, complicated tales, don't waste time trying to master a short form.

Kit Ehrman: My number one rule is, “Write what you love.” If I can do that, I’ve moved a ways toward mastering what readers enjoy because, after all, I’m a reader, too.

I love suspenseful mysteries with heroes I can fall in love with or, at the very least, find sympathetic. And if that story is set in an interesting world with an insider’s look into a fascinating job, so much the better. I’m happiest when I feel the need to check that the doors are locked and the curtains are drawn because the book I’m reading late into the night has me spooked.

7.

WRITE REGULARLY

I write only when I'm inspired. Fortunately I'm inspired at nine o'clock every morning.

—WILLIAM FAULKNER

The difference between successful screenwriters and dreamers is that at the end of the day, successful screenwriters have more pages written than they did the day before. This requires daily writing. Even if you hate to write, even if it takes you a whole day to warm up only to write one page, it's better than no writing at all because if you do it every day, it'll become a habit.

As author Tom Robbins once answered a student's question about inspiration: "I'm always at my desk by ten o'clock, so the Muse knows where to find me. Sometimes she comes and sometimes she doesn't, but if she does, I want to be there." So think of writing as something you're required to do every day, like eating, sleeping, and brushing your teeth. You don't have to be inspired to do those things, you just accept them as part of your day. Feel the same about your writing.

Ron Bass: The process of writing is so joyful, so satisfying, so *necessary* for me that I'd do it even if no one else in the world but me was ever going to read it, let alone pay me a dime to do it. Aside from the pleasure I get from interacting with the people I love and care about, writing is the most intense pleasure I could ever have alone.

Leslie Dixon: The physical act of writing is sometimes a pleasure for me, "satisfying" would be a better word. It tends to flow in pockets

and usually doesn't last more than a couple of hours at a time. I fall in the crowd who hates to write but loves to have written, like Dorothy Parker.

Akiva Goldsman: Writing is both a pleasure and a struggle. There are times when it's really aversive and unpleasant, and there are times when it's wonderful and fun and magical, but that's not the point. Writing is my job. I'm not a believer of waiting for the muse. You don't put yourself in a mood to go to your nine-to-five job, you just go.

I start in the morning and write all day. Successful writers don't wait for the muse to fill themselves unless they're geniuses. I'm not a genius. I'm smart, I have some talent, and I have a lot of stubbornness. I persevere. I was by no means the best writer in my class in college. I'm just the one who is still writing.

Nicholas Kazan: I write every day, but not on weekends, now that I have children. However, if it's a first draft and I need the continuity, it's much easier to write every day, even if I work only a couple of hours and don't get a lot done. It's a way of visiting the world of this screenplay, so when I come back to it on Monday morning, there's no adjustment to make. If I start writing after two days away without contact, it's more difficult to re-enter the script.

Scott Rosenberg: It's just automatic pilot, a habit. You just wake up, get your coffee, glance at the paper, sit down, and just go. Sure, you have bad days. I've had days where I sat there for an hour and a half and nothing came. Then, I just say, "I know better than to force it. Tomorrow's another day."

8.

SET WRITING GOALS

Great things are not done by impulse, but by a series of small things brought together.

—VINCENT VAN GOGH

Most professional writers set writing quotas. Whether it's the number of hours of actual writing, number of pages per day, or number of scenes, they produce a given page count on a steady basis. If you make a pact with yourself—reward yourself if you have to—that you won't leave your desk until you've completed a certain number of pages, you'll be surprised at how soon you'll have a completed screenplay.

Leslie Dixon: I try to assign myself a certain amount of pages, and if I do achieve that quota and it's really quite solid, I'll knock off a little early.

Akiva Goldsman: When I'm laying down the first draft, I try to write ten pages a day. Then it's a matter of hours like a regular job. I generally don't write at night and on weekends, because the danger of writing is that you could be doing it anytime. So unless you build rules, you're never free of it.

Andrew W. Marlowe: My daily goal is usually to get to a specific place in the story. But if I don't reach that goal, there can only be two reasons: either I'm mentally fatigued or there's a story problem. Either way, it's good to just walk away, to rest or to let your mind work on that problem. Sometimes it's more effective to just walk away and go

work out, play basketball, or have a cup of coffee. Just do something completely different. There's a reason why many people have ideas in the shower—they're relaxed enough to have them.

Bill Marsilii: Once I'm deep into it, five pages a day is a general quota, but that's deceptive because at the beginning of the process, it's like a locomotive trying to leave the station. At first, it's a very slow start, but once it reaches a momentum, it chugs along effortlessly. So at first, it's tough to write even one page, but after a while I get into a white heat and I write morning, day, and night, as well as revising the pages I wrote the day before.

Aline Brosh McKenna: I try to break it down into tasks as much as I can and set goals for the day, like five pages for the day, or edit ten or twenty pages, or do notes. Specific tasks keep me sane.

Terry Rossio: A thousand words a day. Sounds easy, turns out to be impossible.

Tom Schulman: I'm usually very precise at budgeting pages. If I have X number of weeks to finish a project, I'll be very specific as to when I want to be done and how long I'll give myself on each draft. I try to average twelve pages a day, but it depends on the day, because sometimes I can do twelve pages in two hours. So for me, the goals are more like I want to be done with the first third of it by a certain date, the next third by another date, and so on.

9.

PROCRASTINATE

Small deeds done are better than great deeds planned.

—PETER MARSHALL

Because writing is such an agonizing activity, writers procrastinate in one way or another to alleviate the pressure. They become experts at keeping themselves busy, making excuses—“I’m not in the mood to write,” or “There’s plenty of time to do it later.” While procrastination is often seen as a form of fear, writers are also told it’s an essential step in the creative process: the incubation period. We’re supposed to stop writing and do something completely different so that our ideas simmer in our subconscious, ready to flash great ideas at any moment. So procrastination is acceptable if it only takes a small chunk out of your available writing time. But if it prevents you from finishing a script, it may be a negative habit. The difference between pros and amateurs is that the pros control how long they procrastinate.

Steven de Souza: I know I’m about to write when I become a neat-freak and start rearranging the pens and pencils around, noodling things in my brain, and basically wasting time until I get that caffeine rush.

Leslie Dixon: I call them “stalling mechanisms.” We all have them. Writers who are close friends will be honest with each other; they’ll say, “Okay, I’m avoiding work,” and next thing you know, you have a forty-five-minute conversation. You waste time by checking your e-mail when you get up, drinking your coffee, or reading the paper. I

guess you overcome that by feeling guilty and yelling at yourself to get on with it. In some cases, it's "Don't you want to get rid of this project? Aren't these people horrible? Don't you want to turn this in as soon as possible so you can go on to something else? Write!!" Procrastination can actually be a very interesting tool for success, because if you can control it, you have a leg up on the competition. If you're known as a person who can produce quality work in a reasonable period of time, they'll be much quicker to hire you over the writer who takes a year to write a script.

Tony Gilroy: I hate the idea of just sitting around and nothing happening, spinning my wheels and going nowhere. I want to make myself want to be there at the desk. The whole goal is to try to create a situation where it's either too painful not to be there, where I'm so afraid that everything will just disappear if I'm not there. So it's all a mental game to make myself want to be there—where I really want to wake up and get to the keyboard, where I'm hurrying up to get back from lunch because I love a particular sequence and I can't think of anything else.

There's all kinds of games where you try to get yourself to continue, like "I need money to pay the rent," or "These people are really assholes, I'm gonna show them," or "If I don't make my deadline, I won't be able to go away and be with my family." You write from anger, you write from fear, but mostly you write from excitement—"This is so cool, I can't wait to show this to somebody."

Terry Rossio: My best motivator is the paycheck. Not really the desire for it, but the enormous guilt that arrives with it. A check, or a contract for a check, is a huge act of faith on the part of someone. Procrastination hurts only myself, and that's fine, I'll do that all year long. But when it's going to hurt someone else, that's where it gets unacceptable.

10.

FACE THE BLANK PAGE

Even the highest towers begin from the ground.

—CHINESE SAYING

One of my colleagues on the Boston Authors Club told me of a writer he had met who confided in him that he was so petrified of the blank page that he would have to take a drink or two before he wrote. When I asked my friend if he recalled the writer's name, he thought for a moment and shook his head. Not surprising. Whoever this writer was, it is likely that he let his fears destroy his talents and perhaps even worse—him.

Don't let the blank page destroy you; let it redeploy you. If you can't think of anything to write today, shift gears and try to work on something else. My college creative writing professor would have us spend the first fifteen minutes of class "freewriting," writing the first things that came to our heads. Freewriting is a great way to stimulate the brain. If you practice freewriting, it eliminates the possibility of you ever facing a blank page again.

Think of the blank page as a new canvas upon which you are about to create something. The words you choose to put on this page can create a whole new world, story, chapter, setting, or character. You are in complete control. Look at this blank page as a fresh opportunity to create all of the new and wonderful ideas that no one else in the world can create except for you.

Lori Avocato: You can fix, polish, and sell anything except a blank page. Ergo, sit down and write.

Cinda Williams Chima: Don't end your writing session at the end of a chapter, or it will be more difficult to get started the next day. Stop in the midst of action.

Liz Carlyle: Never look at a blank page for more than two minutes. Write something. Anything. Even garbage will get your neurons firing. Eventually it's apt to morph into something useful. If not, you can at least take pride in having resisted the urge to dawdle.

Michael Wiecek: Everyone's habits are different, but hardly any writer I know actually *likes* to sit down and open up a blank screen. In my case, it always takes about half an hour to start writing. Good days, bad days, inspired, uninspired—thirty minutes of undirected activity always seems to be necessary. Knowing that, I can force myself through it and then, most of the time, I'll come up to speed.

11.

WRITE THROUGH YOUR FEARS

Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the judgment that something else is more important than fear.

—AMBROSE REDMOON

This whole industry runs on fear. Fear of saying yes to a potential box-office flop, fear of missing out on a hot script, fear of being found out and never working again.

As writers, we all have to face our fears—“What if I write something awful? What if I’m criticized? What if I don’t have enough talent?”—and write anyway. Delaying writing because you think you’re just not good enough won’t get you closer to a finished draft. What helps is not worrying about making your first draft a masterpiece. Just think of it as a draft that no one will see until you want them to. You can make it perfect later. Put it on the page. As Sol Saks once said, “The worst thing you write is better than the best thing you didn’t write.”

Ron Bass: Even today when I have a meeting at a studio and somebody says, “Ron, we don’t think the quality of this piece is up to your standard, it’s just not what we expected,” it still devastates me. I just go home and feel really, really bad. Even when my team says, “Oh, you’re a great writer, you’re brilliant, etcetera,” you still question your talent. Dustin Hoffman once said to me, “Every role is going to be my last; this is the one when they’ll realize I can’t act, I never could act; I will be found out, and this time I will fall off the tightrope, and they’ll tear me to pieces and I’ll never be allowed to act again.”

You always have these fears because there's no objective standard. Even when your movie comes out, you realize it wasn't all you, it was Julia Roberts or a hundred other factors. Or your movie doesn't get made and the next one is a failure. It's hard to be in an industry where people alternately tell you you're brilliant and they didn't like something. Who's right and who's wrong? But you don't really want to give up your insecurity, because it's tied to the requisite humility. If you're not humble about the quality of your work and embrace the fear that it's not good enough, that everything that comes out of your mouth isn't just golden because you said it and you're famous, then you're dead.

Jim Kouf: My only writing fear is trying not to repeat what I've already done. I'm always thinking, "How can I do this better?" The toughest thing is to keep coming up with original ideas. You have to go through a hundred ideas to find the one that's right. That takes a lot of thought and a lot of trying. You just keep writing. The other fear is, "When will they stop paying me?"

Bill Marsilli: I've been comforted somewhat by seeing how many writers I admire use the phrase, "working up the courage to write." I've come to accept that part of my process is to face these first weeks of dread where I'm staying up all night getting virtually nothing done and fearing that this will be the project where I never get past this point, that this will be the one where the muse never comes, even though I know in my rational brain that I always get past it. It's part of the process. You have to keep showing up at the keyboard.

Tom Schulman: I wish I could find a way to enjoy the process more, because the fears are part of what makes it so excruciating. The only way you overcome them is by just writing and trying to make it better every day. I may not be able to make it great on a given day, but I can make it a little better every day.

Robin Swicord: My only big fear about writing is that I'm so odd that what fascinates me, the things I'm giving myself to completely, will turn out to be of no interest to anyone else. It will be so personal and idiosyncratic that no one will think it's funny and no one will feel sad when they get to that part and I'll be the only one to care. But then I say, "What the heck, I'll just amuse myself."

12.

RECORD YOUR IDEAS AS SOON AS THEY APPEAR

Dig the well before you are thirsty.

—CHINESE PROVERB

Good ideas come and go quickly, so most of our accomplished writers don't let them escape. They record everything—random thoughts, observations, character sketches, overheard bits of conversation. Some use tape recorders, others notebooks or whatever piece of paper is lying around. Others feel self-conscious talking into a tape recorder; they'd rather write ideas directly on paper. Since the advent of cell phones, many find it convenient to call their answering machine, especially when an idea happens to strike while they're driving.

Steven de Souza: I believe in free association. I always carry a bunch of three-by-five cards where I write ideas that come to me—bits of dialogue or odd observations. Eventually, a couple of them will collide to form a whole new idea, or they'll achieve a critical mass, and a light bulb will flash in my head and I'll say, that's a story.

Akiva Goldman: I don't do anything. I just try to remember it. I believe good ideas stay so if I forget one, it probably wasn't a good idea. The danger is that everything seems good in the moment. The question is, does it last? Does it live with you?

Amy Holden Jones: I have several notebooks all over the place, and a scrapbook in my computer where I jot down ideas as they occur to me when I'm writing. I pop into it periodically and find that I forgot

about a particular detail or line of dialogue. If I'm in the car, I try to remember it, but I often forget it. Small and forgettable ideas are meaningless. What matters are the big ideas of theme and plot and characters. If you suddenly get a solution that comes out of the blue, you'll remember it if it's important.

Terry Rossio: I write my ideas down on “stickies” on my MacBook Pro. I like stickies. Something about them fools me into thinking that I'm not really writing, so there's no stress. I often forgo the screenwriting programs and write first drafts on stickies.

13.

CHOOSE YOUR POINT OF VIEW

Measure twice, cut once.

—SCOTTISH SAYING

Two young fish were swimming along one morning when an adult fish swam by and said, “Good morning, boys, how’s the water?” and then swam away. Later, one of the young fish said to his friend, “What’s water?”

Like in life, in writing perspective is everything. Deciding what point of view to use to tell your story is a critical decision to make. It’s best made early on, to avoid a whole lot of rewriting should you later change your mind!

Elmore Leonard: From James M. Cain, I gained an appreciation of the antagonist’s point of view: The bad guys are more fun to write about than good guys, their attitude and the way they talk more entertaining.

Because I’ve always spent at least equal time writing from the antagonist’s point of view, a friend of mine in publishing would write to ask, “How’s the book coming? Has your good guy done anything yet?”

Kris Neri: I look at my story elements from three different angles.

First, back story—I separate out the elements that lead up to the crime, just to be sure I don’t give too much history, which can slow down the narrative flow, and so I use it to hook the reader.

Second, the villain's story—I work out the villain's behind-the-scenes actions—how he carries out the crime, how he establishes his alibi, how he casts doubt on someone else, etc—by working through it before I write the book. I'm sure there won't be any holes

Third, the story I'll write for the reader—Only after I separate out the back story and work through the crime as it's carried out from the villain's perspective, do I tackle the book's story line, which is from the protagonist's perspective.

14.

WRITE TERRIBLE FIRST DRAFTS

My best writing is done by writing rapidly and with few filters. I then delete my way to excellence.

—RICHARD BACH

Most professional screenwriters have become comfortable with writing a lot of bad stuff in order to come up with a little good stuff. They often produce thousands of words before one line is fresh enough to jump off the page. To do this, they give themselves permission to write anything, no matter how terrible, because they know it can all be fixed later, thus giving them the power to free themselves sufficiently in the creative stage to write from the heart while silencing their inner critic.

Steven de Souza: I like writing the first draft, which I blaze through as fast as I can, without even stopping for spell- or fact-checking that might interrupt the flow. And I like the editing part of the printed first draft with my trusty red pen, though I hate all the retyping from the edited page into the computer. On the other hand, I never get depressed about what I write, because I know I'm going to rewrite it. I remember seeing an interview with George Lucas where he talks about a trick he learned from Francis Coppola, which is not to read what he's writing until he's done with it. He writes nonstop, puts the pages in a file, and it's not until he thinks he's done with it that he'll find the nerve to look at his pages.

Jim Kouf: You just write, blindly putting things down on paper. Just put something down, and then put something else down, because it's

a process of thinking through all the choices. You have to be willing to throw it away. If you write something awful, you just say, “Okay, I tried,” and sometimes you make it all the way through to discover it’s not worth it. You’ve got to write. Don’t be afraid to make mistakes.

Tom Schulman: Silencing that inner critic is important, at least through the first draft, because when will you have another chance to let it all out, if not in the first draft? I try to finish the first draft before rewriting it, and ultimately, I’ll go over it about ten to twelve times. But I usually go over the first third of the script and rewrite it until it’s good enough because I feel that if it’s launched properly, the rest will follow through.

15.

FIND TIME TO RECHARGE

Find a job you love and you will never work a day in your life.

—CONFUCIUS

Everyone needs time to recharge their batteries. When I used to sand floors for a living, we would frequently run into an old house painter named Harold who insisted on taking a power nap each day after work in his office chair back at his shop. At the time, Harold was in his late sixties, and now, more than a decade later, I still see his van driving around town.

I'm not saying that you need to stop the presses every day at 4 P.M. to take a nap after cookies and milk, but try to find some time to relax each day, even if it is for only ten or fifteen minutes. Play your favorite CD, take a walk, go for a drive, fold laundry, get some sun, tend to your houseplants, or meditate. Refilling the tank will make you far more productive and creative.

Because writing is so solitary, it might be a good idea to make your relaxing activity something you do with your spouse, significant other, or pet. Take advantage of whatever it is that will help you recharge your batteries.

Hank Phillipi Ryan: Making time for rest is an investment in your future, in your brain, in your creativity, in your stamina, and in your success.

Some days, unless my impending deadline is unavoidably crushing, I say, I'm not writing today. I'm resting my brain. (Your brain is

still working, of course, whether you know it or not. And sometimes it's coming up with wonderful stuff.) And I say, Today, I'm working out. Riding my bike. Walking through the garden.

Ed Gaffney: When I need to recharge, I turn to one of three things: books that I love, movies or television shows that feature great writing, or the thesaurus.

Obviously, this kind of advice is entirely dependent on individual taste. For my money, there's nothing like J.D. Salinger's *Raise High the Roof Beam Carpenters*. But some of the descriptive passages from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* also do the trick for me, and I also love Kaye Gibbons's *Ellen Foster*. All I have to do is read these things, and I want to write.

Other times, especially when it seems like I'm just not doing my best work, I take a stroll through my thesaurus to remind myself of the richness of our language. I make a list of words that catch my eye that I rarely use in my prose: fearsome and feckless, gumption and guise, prattle and precipitous. Even if the words never appear in anything I write, the process of writing them down seems to energize me.

Beverly Barton: Take time off between books, the more time you can afford to take off the better. During this off time, I read for pleasure. And because I'm an old-movie aficionado, I'll often spend an entire day watching one movie after another. Just as we must eat to nourish our bodies, we must feed our minds. After writing a book, I feel mentally and emotionally depleted, as well as physically exhausted.

16.

REALIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF CHARACTERS

The whole thing is, you've got to make them care about somebody.

—FRANK CAPRA

Storytelling is all about characters. People don't go to the movies to see scary, romantic, or exciting situations; they go to see memorable human beings reacting to scary, romantic, or exciting situations. Which means your goal as a screenwriter is to create characters that the audience will identify with. It goes beyond simply revealing their traits and emotions on the page and making your protagonist "likable." This is about *caring*, even if the character is immoral: caring about the character's personality, attitude, goals, flaws, and rooting for him or her to succeed against all odds.

Ron Bass: To me, there's no distinction between story and character because most stories are about what happens between people. If the story is about someone climbing a mountain or facing some physical hazard alone, then that's different, but in most of the stories that I see, that I write, that I care about, story is what happens as characters interact, so character is story.

Gerald DiPego: Let's say you have an idea that starts out like, "I just thought of a great new way to rob a bank. I'm going to build a movie around that." If you don't throw your focus on who these people are, what their dreams and demons are, you'll be on the road to a neat idea that ends up empty, because that's who's sitting in the

audience—people. If you can connect them to your characters in a meaningful way, then the audience will have a complete experience with your film, and they'll still appreciate all the stunts, clever twists, and dialogue while operating on a deeper level because they care about your characters.

Jim Kouf: Your characters have to be so interesting and compelling you can't wait to get an actor attached. After all, why do people sit through certain movies? Because the dialogue is great, and something about the characters makes you love them or hate them. It's just like life. Why do you sit with a few people and have a conversation, and other people, you decline when they invite you to dinner?

Andrew W. Marlowe: What makes us flawed is what makes us human, and it's what makes characters attractive to the audience. The fact that Rick Blaine in *Casablanca* is disengaged and so emotionally wounded that he doesn't want to care is what makes that movie worth watching. Here's a guy who has to be dragged kicking and screaming to invest in anything, who doesn't want to stick his neck out for anybody until the love of his life walks through the door.

Characters are like icebergs: 90 percent of the work you'll do on a character will never be seen, but it supports the 10 percent that we'll see on the page. I'm not talking about character biographies, but of knowing who your character really is and why he has to take this journey through the story, what his hopes and dreams and fears are, what his emotional investments are, who broke his heart, how he deals with life, and so on . . . that's what your first ten minutes should be about in a story—getting to know your main character.

Tom Schulman: Aristotle was right. Plot determines who your characters are. But once you've figured out who your characters are, they become more important than the plot. Without characters, nobody cares about the story. I always try to drive my characters toward a story.

17.

EVOKE AN EMOTIONAL RESPONSE

I want readers of my scripts to feel my scenes.

—SHANE BLACK

Despite the wealth of information devoted to the principles of screenwriting, from books, magazines, and blogs, to seminars and websites, to film schools, story consultants, and screenwriting gurus, a surprising lack of awareness still exists among aspiring writers about what great screenwriting is really about—creating a satisfying emotional experience in the reader.

Hollywood is in the emotion-delivery business. It trades in human emotions, delivering emotional experiences carefully packaged in movies and television to the tune of \$10 billion per year. If you doubt this, take a look at how it advertises its films in newspapers. When was the last time you saw a movie ad that said, “*Well structured, great plot points, fresh dialogue?*” No, what you always see are promises of the emotions you’ll feel by watching the movie. Make sure your script matches these promises to a reader.

Gerald DiPego: Most movies fail because they don’t reach inside the audience. They feel empty because they’re written from the outside, and they don’t ask you to invest anything or care about the characters, so it’s not a complete experience.

Terry Rossio: There are many people who are creative but can’t write, and a truckload of projects out there which are highly original and thoroughly unappealing. What Hollywood needs from a

screenwriter is someone who can invent stories that are moving, compelling, and engender interest.

Eric Roth: The drama of the story certainly dictates what's emotional, and you try to make your characters act in such a human way that's recognizable by an audience, and therefore universally understood. Even in the most outlandish situations, sometimes it's the little human touches that bring everyone together. If it makes me feel something when I write it, I'm hoping that I'm translating that to the audience. For me, it's about setup and payoff. I try to set things up so that they pay off in a way I hope evokes a strong emotional reaction.

Michael Schiffer: Whether it's comedy or drama, our entire goal as writers is to make our audience respond to the emotions of the characters by pulling them through terrible situations that reflect their own conflicts. When an audience connects, they have a cathartic reaction. Their emotions are purged, because they all have stress and pain in their lives. When they can identify with actors who go through these things and triumph, they feel renewed and full of hope. It then becomes a communal experience that makes an audience know we all share a common bond.

Tom Schulman: All you try to do is involve an audience in the drama of other people's lives—their relationships, their obsessions, who they are, where they are—and if they're identifiable and they start out in conflict, theoretically, the audience should be hooked on that roller coaster. So emotion should be the result of what you've set up, not the other way around.

18.

OVERCOME WRITER'S BLOCK

I can't understand the American literary block—as in Ralph Ellison or J.D. Salinger—unless it means that the blocked man isn't forced economically to write (as the English writer, lacking campuses and grants, usually is) and hence can afford the luxury of fearing the critics' pounce on a new work not as good as the last (or the first).

—ANTHONY BURGESS

Some authors contend that writer's block exists, and other flat out deny its force. Other authors don't know what to make of writer's block.

Mark Twain for example, contended that after he wrote each book he would just simply have to wait until his tank filled back up again, yet he put *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* aside for years because he didn't know how it would end. Regardless of what Twain really thought about writer's block, the fact is, he did complete *Huck Finn*, and it remains a major American novel.

If you are stumped, maybe you ought to put your project aside for a while and work on another. Keep your mind active and your creative juices flowing. By doing so, you give yourself a different perspective, just like the painter who examines her subject from all angles and depths. Try to think of writer's block as an opportunity to tackle another project or to gain the proper perspective on your present one.

Liz Carlyle: Writer's block exists only if you believe in it and grant it power over you. Adhere faithfully to your writing schedule. When it is time to sit down at the keyboard, sit.

Rhys Bowen: Remember once you have created a character, it becomes that character's story, not yours. If you get writer's block, it could be because you're trying to force your character to do something he simply would not do, and he is digging his heels in.

Gregory McDonald: To avoid writer's block, at the end of a writing day, regardless of how wiped-out you are, start the next day's work. Type a few sentences, even a few words. Even if what you noted is dead wrong, you've given yourself a place to start.

William G. Tappley: Hemingway claimed he quit each day in the middle of a sentence. Another good way to prevent writing inertia is to leave off in the middle of a scene at the end of each session. The next time you sit down, a quick read of what you wrote the previous day will draw you back into the scene you were writing.

Lori Avocato: There is no such thing as writer's block. When I was a nurse, I could not go up to my boss and say, "You know, I just don't feel like doing any nursing today."

So, sit yourself in the chair and write. You'll be amazed at what good work comes out of your subconscious. (It's all in there to begin with!) Never accept the excuse that you "just don't feel like writing today."

Ed Gaffney: Whenever I am stuck on a facet of a book I'm writing, I watch movies that I enjoy, that are somehow related to what I'm writing.

For me, the relationship between the movie and my writing doesn't have to be that strong. For example, I recently wrote a legal thriller called *Enemy Combatant* about a lawyer who finds himself defending a man accused of the worse domestic terrorism attack since the Oklahoma City bombing. I saw it as a Hitchcock-like tale, so while I was writing it, I watched a couple of my favorite Alfred Hitchcock movies with a similar feel—*Rear Window* and *The Man Who Knew*

Too Much. Neither was a legal thriller, but each featured a sympathetic character struggling against overwhelming odds.

Similarly, when I was writing my first three books, which featured a pair of lawyers who were best friends, I found myself watching the Paul Newman and Robert Redford classics *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *The Sting*. Neither movie's plot was related to any of my books, but the expert depiction of the main characters' camaraderie put my brain into the right place.

Carrie Vaughn: Have writer's block strategies in place. Most professional writers will tell you that they don't get writer's block. They can't afford it when they have deadlines to meet and writing is their job.

But I do get stumped at some point on most things I write. The following strategies work me through it.

- **Change location.** If you've been writing on the computer at a desk, take a pen and notebook and go outside to write by hand for a while. If you write by hand, try moving to the computer for awhile. Or sit on the sofa with a laptop.
- **Skip ahead.** If a current scene is giving you trouble, skip to the next part where you know what happens. This will either give you a clearer idea of what needs to happen before that point, or it will illustrate that maybe you didn't need that scene in the first place.
- **Outline.** I do this a lot. I sit down with pen and paper and brainstorm all the possible things that could happen at that point in the novel. That helps me figure out where I need to go and gets me writing again.

Stephen Harrigan: For me, writer's block is nothing more than an information deficit. Through the years, I've noticed that whenever I hit a wall while I'm writing a book, the problem very rarely has anything to do with the writing itself. Sure, I deliberate over word choice, sentence structure, and metaphors, but that sort of tinkering is part of the joy of creative work and is not in itself anxiety-provoking. What leads to despair is a creeping realization that I don't really know what I'm writing about. If I don't know sufficiently well the world I'm trying to portray or the characters that inhabit it, the only cure is to actively

search out knowledge through reading, traveling, and consulting with experts in whatever period and place I'm dealing with. This sort of intensive research, in addition to being a pleasure, almost always restores my confidence and points the way ahead.

19.

EDIT AND REWRITE

The only true creative aspect of (novel) writing is the first draft. That's when it's coming straight from your head and your heart, a direct tapping of the unconscious. The rest is donkey work. It is, however, donkey work that must be done . . . you must rewrite.

—EVAN HUNTER (ED MCBAIN)

Authors' opinions vary when it comes to when you should revise your draft. Some insist that you write the whole draft through without looking back, and others advise that you revise as you go. What to do?

First, consider which approach is more likely to get you to finish your first draft. As I've stated again and again, the most important objective is to get your novel written. If you don't, you have nothing to work with.

Let's consider what the "don't look back philosophy" has to offer on this point. By not back tracking each day, you are always moving forward, getting closer and closer to the last page where you finally type "end." The beauty here is that because you have a full manuscript, you can print it and begin to edit, research, and build continuity and structure in your novel as a whole rather than piecemeal. If you had edited as you went along, you might still be stuck on page fifty!

Sounds like the perfect way to write, but wait a minute, we need to hear from the "edit as you go" camp." It's a wonderful, triumphant feeling when you get that page or chapter for the day completed, print it, and then reread your creations later that afternoon or evening before you go to bed. Here you can jot down some edits, form new

ideas, or discover opportunities for character development. Another advantage to editing as you write is that daily you reinforce exactly what is happening in your story. When you begin writing the next day, you'll know exactly where you left off yesterday and perhaps have a better idea of where the story is going. And maybe you'll head off a few plot glitches.

In the end, whether you edit or not on a daily basis will be up to you. Try both ways and see which you feel comfortable with.

Lori Avocato: Write that first draft all the way through without looking back! Get that internal editor off your shoulder if you are the type of writer who keeps polishing the first three chapters—and doesn't finish the work. The first draft is all creative stuff that comes to us, often as a surprise. There's nothing like reading what you wrote and mumbling, "Wow. I wrote that!" Let your stream of consciousness flow, and the words will appear on your monitor. You will often be amazed at how damn good they are! And then someone will buy your words, and that is a good thing.

Vicki Stiefel: First-draft rule: Don't go back. I love to edit. Love it! So when I'm writing a first draft of a new novel, I never do it. What! Yup, I never go back and edit. Why? If I did, I'd end up with about twenty pages of really, really, really well-edited material. And that would be it. On a first draft, I push forward. Period. *Gee, but I'd love to go back and just tweak that one small section.* Nope, not allowed. I push forward. *Golly, if only I could smooth out those pages. I know they'd be better.* Probably right, but no way, not now. *Gosh, it would be great if I could have these words in the "real" Portuguese right now. I'll begin that research and . . .* Forbidden. Don't do it. Just jot some quick notes and move on. Move forward. Always forward. Relentlessly forward. And that's how I write some 400-plus manuscript pages for a novel.

Side roads are great, if you're driving a car or taking a hike. For me, they're crummy when writing a novel. So I write on, and write on, and write on. And, suddenly, I'm there. Whew. And when I've finally made it to the finish line, I smile. Because that's when I pull out my pen, and I edit, edit, edit the bahoosie out of the manuscript. That's when I do thorough and important research. That's when I check spelling, continuity, and a million other things. But not before then. Because if I did, I'd never have finished book one.

Cynthia Riggs: Don't edit as you write. According to right brain/left brain students, your right brain allows you to dash off stuff uncritically. Let the right brain help you get a chapter or so written, then at a different time, let your left brain loose to edit. One cause of writers' block may be the warring of the two sides of your brain, where you write three or four words, then examine those three or four words critically.

Johnny D. Boggs: If something stops me during the writing or proof-reading process, it's likely going to stop the reader. So that means revision, editing, tightening, deleting. I keep focused on the story. What I'm writing, even if it's dialogue, has to move the story forward. If it doesn't do that, I have more work to do.

Cinda Williams Chima: Don't be afraid to rewrite if you have to. It's very freeing to find out you can do major surgery on a novel and not ruin it. You may even improve it. I found out through the editing process that I could rewrite the beginning and the ending, change the gender of the villain, get rid of the dad who had nothing to do, move the action to the city, and cut fifty pages without ending up with blood on my hands.

James M. Cain: I rewrite so much I lose track of how many drafts it takes to finish a book—at least four or five, sometimes more.

Kit Ehrman: When I sat down to write *At Risk*, I was essentially teaching myself to write. I jokingly referred to the undertaking as “the first thing I've written since ninth grade Creative Writing that's more complicated than a grocery list.” Not surprisingly, that first draft was a huge, unwieldy thing.

But I was not discouraged. I kept editing. I wasn't in a rush. I didn't have a deadline, I enjoyed the process, and I'm a stubborn person. When many writers might have shoved that manuscript under the bed or buried it deep within a desk drawer after the fifth or sixth edit (and started book number two) I combed through it with renewed enthusiasm, even after a writer whom I admire told me the story had no plot! My protagonist became more proactive, the plot more tightly woven. I embedded subtle clues and red-herrings throughout the narrative as I became more adept at plotting a mystery.

I must have edited *At Risk* more than twenty times. I could flip open the manuscript, glance at a line or two, and know exactly which scene I was looking at. But what those early edits consisted of was *cutting*. I learned to embrace that often repeated mantra that every scene must move the story forward or, at the very least, define character. If I could not justify a scene, it was gone. I got over the trauma of cutting—words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, scenes, and (gulp!) chapters, and I eventually ended with a lean but complicated mystery.

Needless to say, this was no easy task. But I discovered a way that made it less painful. I created a “Cuts” document. Everything I cut went into that separate file. Nothing was ever *gone*. If I changed my mind, I could reinsert it with the click of a mouse.

As I matured as a writer, the “Cuts” documents for each book shrunk because I was evaluating scenes *before* I wrote them. The “Cuts” document for *At Risk* is 190 double-spaced pages. For *Triple Cross*, it’s seven.

Around edit number ten of *At Risk*, I realized I needed to do a major story revamp, so I copied the entire manuscript into another document for safekeeping. This freed me to be as bold and daring as I liked. If I messed up in the revision, I still had the earlier version to fall back on. This is a nice strategy for short stories, too.

20.

DON'T BE PARANOID ABOUT YOUR IDEAS BEING STOLEN

It used to be that executives could spot an amateur by the look of his or her script—the page count, the number and quality of brads used, or whether a WGA registration number, draft number, or date were printed on the cover page. Now, it's the instant a writer says, “How do I know you won't steal my idea?”

Why? Because it's a useless worry for something that rarely happens in legitimate circles. There are two important reasons why executives almost never steal ideas (it's still possible, but very rare). One is financial. It costs a lot less to buy an idea from a beginning writer than to fight a lawsuit in court. The other is interpersonal. Because relationships and appearances are crucial to executives, they won't risk embarrassment and losing their jobs should they be faced with a lawsuit. It's just not worth it. This is why executives are so careful to avoid even the slightest potential for a lawsuit by avoiding reading unsolicited material, and making sure that release forms of all kinds are signed, or that submissions come through legitimate channels, like agents, attorneys, or people they absolutely trust.

A common scenario is of the paranoid writer who never lets go of his “original” idea, only to read in the trades that another writer has just sold the very same idea. “How could it be? I've never told anyone about it,” claims the shocked amateur. It's the universal consciousness. As soon as you think up an idea, at least four other people around the world come up with the exact one. What's important in Hollywood isn't just the idea, but the unique execution of the idea that the writer brings to the table. So if you think you have such a unique idea (doubtful, but possible), develop it into an outline or script. Otherwise, relax and free your energies for other worthwhile habits. Professional

screenwriters, who also have attorneys and agents, protect their developed work by registering it with the WGA [Writers Guild of America] or U.S. Copyright Office, and they keep detailed records and logs of phone calls, meetings, business lunches, and memos.

Ron Bass: [Stealing my ideas is] something I've never worried about, maybe because I used to be an entertainment lawyer, and you know that in legitimate circles, it just doesn't happen, in general. It's relatively rare when someone feels that the best thing for them to do is steal your idea. I'm sure it can happen, and has happened, but you can't really function in the business worrying about it.

Derek Haas: I don't think you should be paranoid about ideas being stolen. I mean, we literally had our first idea taken by a producer, but we found there's little you can do about it. Ideas aren't copyrightable. So quit worrying; they won't hire you for your idea but for how you execute that idea.

Michael Brandt: To me that's the biggest rookie move there is, and the surest way to never make it in this town. You gotta put yourself and your ideas out there. Or you can just take your ideas back to Kansas with you, and rest assured that no one would ever take them from you. That's one less writer we have to worry about.

Laeta Kalogridis: Ideas are seldom as valuable as execution, so one shouldn't worry about them being stolen. You can have the greatest idea in the world, and it isn't worth anything if you can't execute it. Also, there are very few ideas that are really revolutionary in themselves.

Michael Schiffer: Most professionals in the business will bend over backward to avoid even the slightest impression that they've borrowed your idea. The last thing they want to hear is anything remotely close to what they're developing, so they'll stop you. On the other hand, nonlegitimate and desperate people who hear your idea at a coffee shop could run out and sell it, so be cautious in public.

21.

LEARN FROM OTHER WRITERS

No one is wise enough by himself.

—TITUS MACCIUS PLAUTUS

Early on in your writing career, you may have joined a writer's group to share ideas and motivation. Now that you're a farther along in the process, however, you may want to reassess your needs, or if you haven't yet joined a group, reconsider it.

One of the best ways to become a recognized member of the genre you wish to write in is to join a writers' organization that represents your chosen genre. By becoming a member of such an organization, you immediately create an association with some of the most successful writers in your genre. Moreover, you will learn about open anthologies, which invite you to submit your work. In newsletters you will learn about what agents and editors are looking for, what's hot, what's not. You will also have the opportunity to network with fellow authors, established and aspiring. You will be impressed by the camaraderie between authors, and you will learn that your fellow writers are your colleagues, and they really do want you to succeed.

Here's an example. One night at the close of a monthly meeting for the New England Chapter of the Mystery Writers of America, one of my favorite mystery writers, multi-Shamus Award-winning author Jeremiah Healy, distributed a brochure that he had put together, chockfull of excellent, hands-on advice to aid the aspiring author's quest for publication.

Additionally, many of these organizations host functions where you can meet agents and editors who are specifically looking for manuscripts in your field.

Also, your membership is also a way for you to support your genre and to help galvanize its standing in literature.

Research the Internet for the organization that might serve you best. Chances are, no matter what country you live in, there will be a welcoming organization for aspiring writers of romance, Westerns, fantasy, crime, science fiction, and horror.

Finally, never forget how much you can learn from the writers you meet not just by talking with them, but by reading their work. This is their greatest gift to you, and when you have read their work, you will be able to broaden your discussions with them.

Robert J. Randisi: Attend conventions to meet other writers, both new and established. Just listening to other writers converse—not speaking on stage or on a panel—can be helpful.

T.M. Murphy: Some writers are no fun and no help. I have, however, had some of the best times in this business being on panels where I've met and learned from people such as the late-great Philip R. Craig (The J.W. Jackson Mystery Series), Claire Cook (*Must Love Dogs*), Tom Sawyer (writer for *Murder, She Wrote*), Jan Brogan (*Yesterday's Fatal*), and Peter Tolan (cocreator, executive producer, and director of *Rescue Me* and screenwriter for several movies). You can always learn something from hearing other writers talk shop in a real, unpretentious way.

22.

BE OPEN TO OUTSIDE CRITICISM

*Don't mind criticism. If it's untrue, disregard it.
If it's unfair, keep from irritation. If it's ignorant, smile.
If it's justified, learn from it.*

—OLD CHINESE SAYING

When faced with feedback on a script, no writer with an ounce of sensitivity wants to be told what's wrong with it. It's easy to feel hurt and defensive, and hard not to take even constructive criticism personally. This is why it's so difficult getting honest feedback from friends and family. They know how vulnerable we are.

One habit professionals have, though, is being willing to listen to criticism and not react defensively to it. Instead of arguing over every note, take it all in and think about it. As the writer, you're in complete control to accept or reject the notes, but the only surefire way to improve is to understand when what you're doing isn't working.

Michael Brandt: After we get our manager's notes, we sit down and have a "cigar session" where we talk out what the next pass is going to be. We don't get defensive about what we wrote. The best idea wins on the rewrite.

Nicholas Kazan: There's no such thing as constructive criticism. All criticism is destructive because it's felt by the author as destructive. All criticism says is (a) you didn't do this part well, and (b) there's something wrong with you. At least, that's how it's experienced. You want to kill your critics, but you need to listen.

Recently I've been taking my laptop computer to story meetings, and it's been very helpful because whatever pain I feel, it just moves through my fingers and down into the computer. I'm just typing away whatever they're saying. Then, I go home and think about it, and often it's not as bad as my first impression. When you listen and analyze the problem, solutions present themselves.

Andrew W. Marlowe: The way I look at it is that my audience is reading the script and watching the movie in their minds. Are they responding the way I want them to respond? Because all writing is emotional manipulation. So if they aren't responding the way I want them to, I can't argue with that and tell them that they're wrong to feel that way. So I have to ask them, "Okay, this is not how I wanted you to feel. What's missing? Is there something that I have in my head that I didn't put on the page?" When I read it, I know all this stuff because it's in my head, but have I communicated that to the reader? If they say they weren't heartbroken in that scene, I ask them why, what's missing for them? Never ask those questions from the point of view of ego, of being personally attacked, but from the view that it's a story and it can get better. Knowing what works and what doesn't emotionally for the reader will help in making the story better.

Bill Marsilli: Notes tend to fall into three categories: Good, lateral, or damaging. The good notes are the ones that improve the script, and you should be thankful for those. The lateral notes are the ones that don't affect any major points. Someone might prefer a character's hair to be blonde instead of brunette. Sure, no problem. These can be implemented painlessly and aren't worth debating. And then you have the damaging notes. Those you need to be diligent about. The phrase "Pick your battles" comes up a lot for these. The degree to which you've been accommodating on the other notes will earn you some degree of stature where you can discuss these notes, and say, for instance, "I have a problem with that one, and let me tell you what we will gain or lose if we make this change here." It's not about saying no. More like, "Here's my concern if we do this." Ideally you want them to hear you out, and have *them* say, "Never mind, ignore that note." And if you can also offer another solution that addresses their concern, so much the better. At times like that, I try to listen to the first half of the note, where they describe the symptom, what they think is wrong.

Their proposed way to fix that problem is often mistaken, but that doesn't mean one should disregard the entire note. Always remember that all they're trying to do is improve the script, so it should be an amicable process, not open warfare.

Robin Swicord: What's good about giving your script to more than one person is that in the end, the notes are not so personal. If I give it to a few people, someone will like something. The most important thing is that if you hear something once, they could be wrong, but if you hear the same problem more than once, you have to pay attention. Notes are symptomatic, so you have to be good at hearing them in such a way that you can interpret these notes, and don't rush the process when there might be another solution.

23.

SET A HIGH STANDARD OF EXCELLENCE

I've learned early on, that no one discriminates against excellence.

—OPRAH WINFREY

Put simply, highly successful screenwriters are successful because they do the job better than anyone else. When starting out, our mentors took the necessary time to develop their craft. They knew what it took to make it and that they had to write more than one script to achieve the requisite craftsmanship to gain attention. Now, they're ruthless in their desire to do their best. They have to be—their livelihood and reputation depend on it. A few slipups into substandard levels and they know they'll be replaced by the latest hotshot young writer.

As a beginner, you need to know what this standard is and raise your work to meet it. Read great scripts and compare them to yours. You'll see the difference on the page and, hopefully, it will inspire you to raise the quality of your own work.

As Oscar-winner Michael Arndt (*Little Miss Sunshine*, *Toy Story 3*) once said, "After working ten years in the film business as an assistant and a script reader, I had read enough mediocre scripts that I was determined not to inflict another one on the world."

Michael Brandt: A lot of beginners see a crappy movie at the theater and say, "I can do better than that." You have to understand that your competition is not the crappy movie at the theater. Your competition is the thousands of great scripts that are trying to break through the clutter every year.

Leslie Dixon: As a screenwriter, I went through a horrific learning curve. My first script was basically sold on the idea. I continue constantly to feel my work is not good enough and try to improve it every day. To this day, I've never felt that my work pops out of the gate fully formed. So much of it is diligent and grinding application. It doesn't come easily to me.

Akiva Goldsman: Joel Schumacher taught me that if you just do your job well, you're doing better than 90 percent of the people doing it because so few people actually really do their job. He also taught me that there's room for error but no room for sloppiness, and this is really important to know because in the movie business, there are a lot of people relying on everything you do. If you take your work seriously from the get-go, you have a better chance of fitting into the business once you're in it.

Bill Marsilli: The concept is the most critical aspect of a screenplay, especially for someone trying to break in. You can be the most talented jockey in the world but if you sit on top of a mule, you'll never be able to race with professionals. I see too many beginners ignoring this point. They see a movie and then try to write one just like it. I don't need a new writer to come up with another buddy cop script. There are already plenty of pros who can do it and do it very well. But if you have an idea that nobody else is writing out there or has done before, even if it's not executed that well, Hollywood will buy it from you and throw twelve writers at it. And once you're in the door, you'll have a chance to write something else.

24.

REMAIN PASSIONATE DESPITE THE DISAPPOINTMENTS

A successful man is one who can lay a firm foundation with the bricks that others throw at him.

—DAVID BRINKLEY

After reading about the downside of being a screenwriter in Hollywood—how even highly successful screenwriters are disrespected and mistreated, how difficult writing a good screenplay actually is, the horrors of dealing with the Hollywood system, and the sacrifices needed to eventually make it—you have to wonder what could possibly motivate our mentors to keep going despite these frustrations. Here’s a hint: It starts with a P and rhymes with “fashion.”

Akiva Goldsman: This is what I do for a living. I like it and hate it the same way someone at IBM hates it. If I were at IBM, I’d be having my own set of challenges and rewards and I’d be engaged in them because that’s my job. It doesn’t mean I don’t hate it sometimes, and that I don’t fantasize about leaving it all behind one day. What it means is that I actually get to do what I want for a living, and there’s a difference between that and loving every second of it.

Amy Holden Jones: It’s the one thing I do well, and at regular intervals movies have been made from my works. If they weren’t, I probably would have given up. I know writers who have written a number of interesting scripts that never got made and I understand when they feel like quitting after a while.

Aline Brosh McKenna: We work for other entities, so we don't have the luxury to dictate how things should go. The only thing you control 100 percent is what you get to do alone in your writing cave. So it's best to focus all your energies on the stuff you can control and don't be affected by the stuff you can't. I read about another writer who had a piece of paper above her desk that said, "Write with no attachment to the outcome." If you obsess about what's selling right now, or what so-and-so will think of this, or who got that assignment, you'll be crippled.

Terry Rossio: About one out of every seven movies I've worked on ends with a group of people in power (director, star, producer, studio) who get the story and respect the screenplay. Everyone is on the same page, so to speak, and the film comes out better than I could ever imagine, due to the combined talents of the group. You live for that scenario. That makes it all worthwhile.

Eric Roth: You have daily frustrations with any kind of work you do. You may write a scene that just doesn't work, but the upside is that you have stories where it does work, and some wonderful discoveries where you sort of thrill yourself because it's just you and the work at that point. Then, once you turn it in, there's a whole different world that enters into it. What's exciting is working with directors who have the same vision, and that can be fun and stimulating. I also enjoy when we do a table reading of it because there's a sense that something is really there and that it's playing the way you envisioned it. It's very pure, there's no ego involved; we can strike and change lines that don't work. And then, there's the thrill when the movie works and when you're on the set during production. But at some point, you have to let it go because it's not yours anymore.

Michael Schiffer: When I'm working, I try to do the best I can so that there are never any regrets. If I work as hard as I can and give my best, I never feel that if I worked a little harder, this wouldn't have happened. By the time I turn it in, I have taken it as far as I can take it, and then I just move on. You've got to have a life of your own. The longer I'm at this, the more I feel like the business can't be the only definition of your soul.

Tom Schulman: What keeps me going is the passion for whatever I'm writing. Despite the terrible things that happen to my various projects in development, the one I'm working on is the baby in the womb with the hope it'll someday be a genius. It's what keeps me excited and makes it worth getting up in the morning.

Robin Swicord: There is a sense of mission. In a sense, I feel very lucky that I knew early on I was a storyteller, and it's the one thing I've come here to do. I know that at the most basic level, these frustrations can't really reach me, because where I really live is not available to them.

25.

WRITE FOR YOURSELF

When you get used to being disappointed, the recovery time gets shorter, the time you need before you get back to work gets shorter and shorter.

—COLSON WHITEHEAD

When I was in my twenties, I used to work on a farm and I was issued a knife to trim the vegetables. One day I had to tell my boss that I had lost my knife. He looked at me and said, “You know why you lost it?” He answered for me. “Because you didn’t pay for it.” He was right. If I had paid for that knife, it would have been mine and I would have had a greater appreciation for it. I think this same philosophy holds true when it comes to writing. When you write for yourself, what you have written is truly yours. Bought and paid for by your life’s unique joys and troubles. Your words not manufactured for the buck. And when you have a greater appreciation for your creations, your readers will know it.

Patricia Briggs: We all really write the story for ourselves first. If I can’t entertain myself, then I’m certainly not going to entertain anyone else!

Beverly Barton: Most really good writers don’t write for their readers; they write for themselves. This isn’t to say they don’t want to please their readers, but they know that in order to write a good book, it has to be one that they love. Write the book you love and it will find an audience. If you’re lucky enough to enjoy writing what’s currently

popular, then that's all the better for you. If you try to write whatever happens to be the latest "hot trend" and actually hate that type of book, your writing will suffer, the book will not be your best work, and your reader will sense that your heart was not in your writing.

Joan Johnston: My biggest struggle as a novelist is to put my own story on paper—not to be influenced by what I think my editor, my publisher, my friends or the reader wants to see on the page. I need to get those other people out of my writing space and focus on writing *my* story. If it resonates for me, it will resonate for my readers.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

After reading about all these habits of highly successful writers, you're no doubt inspired and ready to apply what you've learned to your own career. So what's your next move? Maybe you need to complete your novel or screenplay, or you're preparing to pitch to a buyer. No matter what's coming up on your radar, [*The Writers Store*](#) has the tools and the resources you need to help you reach all your writing goals.

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