

FIND YOUR VOICE

The Proven Science Behind How Writing Can Change Your Life

DEAR WRITER—

If you want to write but feel stuck, you've come to the right place. We put together this resource just for you.

My name is Allison Fallon and I've not only written more than a dozen books (and counting), but I've coached thousands of writers to get their writing done too.

You might be thinking to yourself, "Well, I'm not really a writer..." But before you count yourself out, there's one thing I've learned in the decade I've spent coaching others to get their words on the page. No matter what draws you into this practice—the desire to process your life, the need to share an important message with the world, a force of nature you cannot explain—the challenges you face when you get here are the same.

Some call it writer's block, some call it feeling stuck, some call it not knowing where to start, and some claim that what they put on the page isn't any good at all.

Whatever you call it, I want to give you some insight on what is happening in your brain when you write, why it can be so frustrating, what you can do to overcome it, and why it all matters so much.

My hope is, after you read this, you'll have the tools you need to start writing and keep writing for many years to come.

The world needs the words you have to share.

Even more than that, you need them. Perhaps that is motivation enough.

I put this resource together with the help of my team at Find Your Voice, and it's everything we've learned from over a decade of research about what helps writers (and those who swear they're not "real" writers) get more work done. It's designed to be read in a single sitting. We hope you find it interesting, yes, but we also hope you find it practically helpful when it comes time to sit down and do your own writing.

We believe that words have the power to transform personal lives, communities, and the wider world we live in. We believe your words matter. Especially right now. Maybe more than you know.

Here's to the words you haven't yet written down.

Happy writing,

Allison Fallon

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YOU PROBABLY FALL INTO ONE OF TWO CATEGORIES:

You might be someone who wants to create a regular practice of writing, but has struggled in the past with consistency. You write when you feel inspired, but inspiration seems to come and go — and you have no idea what brings it. People tell you to just be “more disciplined!” but that advice only makes you feel worse.

Or, you’re curious about writing, but you’re not even sure where to start. People have suggested different self-help strategies, consistent journaling among them, but you wonder: is this like all those other “self-help” strategies you’ve tried, which don’t actually work? Is it worth the effort?

The truth is, writing can have an enormous impact on anyone. But if you don’t understand how writing can tangibly change your life, you’re unlikely to create any kind of practice.

Writing can build a bridge (aka a neural pathway) between the now you’re experiencing and the future you’d like to create. It can provide clarity in your decision-making process, build your confidence, increase your cognitive power and working memory, combat anxiety, give language to the future you want to achieve, and help you heal from past experiences.

The reason for those shifts in your life — and the tricks you can use to get there — all goes back to the science.

There are entire books that dive into the benefits the human brain can reap from writing (*Opening Up By Writing it Down* by James Pennebaker; *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk; *Writing as a Way of Healing* by Louise DeSalvo; and more).

But there are a few key concepts to understand, if you’re hoping to change your life through a regular writing practice:

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WHAT HAPPENS IN YOUR BRAIN WHEN YOU WRITE

So what actually is going on in your brain when you pick up a pen (or sit down at a keyboard) to write? To understand those mechanisms at work, we have to understand one of the most foundational concepts of psychology: the Cognitive Behavioral Therapy model. The CBT model assumes a cause-and-effect relationship among our thoughts, feelings, and the life story we tell ourselves: Things happen to us. We have thoughts about those events. Those thoughts lead to feelings. Those feelings cause us to act in a certain way. Those behaviors lead to outcomes, which make up the “raw material” of our life. The thought behind the CBT model is that if we can move past the events of our lives and better understand our thoughts and feelings about those events, we can discover why things are happening the way they are. When we make those discoveries, we can create change.

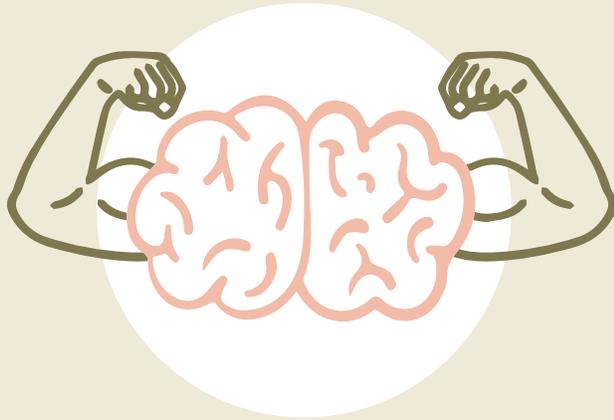
We can come to a better understanding of the events in our lives, and the thoughts and feelings we have about them, through writing. By writing, we can reverse-engineer something that has happened to us, deconstructing why we acted that way, what feeling or thought we had about it, and what “story” we were telling about ourselves that led to that behavior.

When we put words onto the page, we begin to see our thoughts as the pieces of the story we tell ourselves. We can recognize the pattern in our feelings. And we start to untangle all of this, to set a new, clear path forward to more helpful feelings, thoughts, and eventually, story of your life.

Pay attention to how this model plays out in your daily life. Can you find a buried thought that you didn’t realize you had? Do you recognize a pattern of a particular feeling? Is there a consistent story you tell yourself about why you act the way you do, or why things happen the way they do in your life?

And what if writing could help you discover all of that? What if all of your potential – the truth of who you are – is buried under the surface of a “learned” way of being in the world? And what if the call to writing is an invitation to uncover it?

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HOW TO PRIME YOUR BRAIN FOR BETTER WRITING

Once we better understand how writing can help us make tangible change in our lives, we have to find a way to integrate a regular practice of writing into our day-to-day. Research shows that a habit of writing at least four times per week is what will create tangible results.

The problem is, there are all kinds of good things that get in the way of writing. Your job, your kids, the laundry you forgot to do this week, cooking dinner, exercising. There's always something else that could take priority. When it feels so hard to squeeze regular writing into your life, you might start to wonder if it's really worth the time and effort.

But if writing (as well as the resistance to writing that you feel) all happens in the brain, that means there is hard science behind how you can get more quality writing done.

1. Write before picking up your smartphone:

Our best writing comes when we're able to drop into the "limbic" portion of our brains (more on that later). But it's hard for to get to the place in our brains reserved for creativity,

deep thought, and following one thought to its conclusion) when we jump on our phones, bombarding ourselves with thousands of messages, images, and words that don't have anything to do with our writing. Studies show that 80 percent of smartphone users check their phone within 15 minutes of waking up. When we're able to carve out time before launching ourselves into our tiny smartphone screens, we give ourselves the creative space for our best writing.

2. Write in the mornings: Writing before you check your phone is critical. But even in general, smartphones aside, your brain is primed for its best writing early in the day. Research shows that we have a finite amount of willpower in our days and once it's gone, it's gone. Willpower is crucial to the writing process, especially in the beginning when you're trying to establish discipline and consistency. Studies using MRI scans from the morning and evening have also shown that in the mornings, there are more active connections in the brain — another important piece to the writing and creative process.

3. Set a timer for your writing time:

The average brain wanders 15-20% of the time, studies show. So needless to say it can be difficult (especially at first) to stay focused for a long period of time. Not many people can just sit down and write for 6 hours straight. So, break it up. The pomodoro technique is one that studies show can make you more productive in your work (in this case, writing): set your timer for 25 minutes, then take a break. Set your timer for another 25 minutes, take another break. When you're first beginning a writing habit, even just one 25-minute block that you put on your calendar, and then time, can work wonders in creating a daily habit.

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YOUR BRAIN WHEN YOU GET STUCK

So you've committed to a regular writing practice. A few times a week, you find the time to write. But now you feel stuck. You stare at a blinking cursor. Or, you keep finding new distractions to keep you from actually sitting down at your desk and getting the words down (low-priority things like cleaning out the refrigerator or organizing your closet). Worse yet, on the days when you do sit down to write, you're not getting much accomplished. You write, then delete, write, and delete again. You feel stuck in the cycle. You're frustrated. How do you find a way forward?

The first step is to stop thinking of being "stuck" as "writer's block" – a common refrain from writers, old and new. The truth behind "writer's block" is that it's actually just a life block. We get stuck in our writing when there's something we want to do or say that we feel we can't.

But instead of treating this block like an enemy, what if you treated it like an ally?

What if you started to pay attention to what it might be trying to tell you? There are some tangible ways to do that...

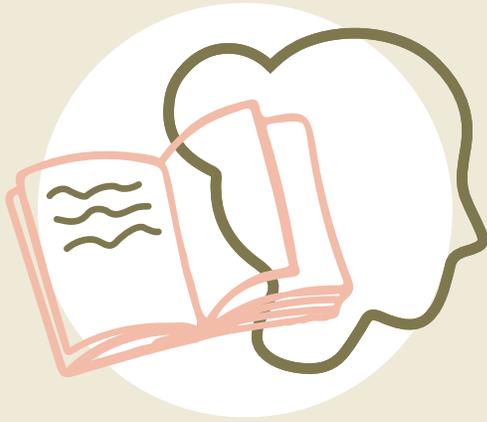
Make space: Find ways to clear creative space for yourself. Block out writing time in your calendar, create a "writing corner" in your office, or do your writing early in your day before emails start filtering in. Our writing fills the creative space we make for it.

Write with pen and paper: Changing up the way you typically write can help your brain see from a different perspective. It kicks your brain out of the pattern (or rut) that you've been in and allows you to see and think more clearly.

Take the pressure off your writing: Have you ever heard the phrase "Done is better than perfect?" That applies here. Just get the words onto the page – don't focus on how they sound, whether your grammar is correct, or how organized everything is. Editing comes later in the writing process for a reason. Putting needless pressure on ourselves can drop us into the analytical pieces of our brains, rather than the creative part.

Get "limbic": Your prefrontal cortex is the piece of your brain you're used to using in your daily life – it's reserved for evaluation, planning, organizing details, and time management. But the "limbic" brain is what you want to tap into for writing: it's the part of your brain in charge of creativity, innovation, and imagination. A great way to "drop into" that limbic part of our brains is to physically move – take a walk, do some yoga, do jumping jacks. When we "drop out" of our prefrontal cortexes (planning the day, organizing our calendar, prioritizing emails), and into our bodies, we find a way into our limbic brains – which is where our best writing gets done.

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USE YOUR LIFE AS MATERIAL AND NEVER FEEL STUCK AGAIN

Most people think they “run out” of things to write about. But it’s actually impossible to run out of writing topics.

Let’s go back to the CBT method of therapy. It’s a framework by which we can think about the thoughts, feelings, and events in our lives, and it can be applied to literally anything. Our lives are an endless collection of events and thoughts to evaluate through this framework.

The same can be true for our writing. Once we understand our foundation – how writing can help us drop into our brains and understand our own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors – we can use this tool for absolutely anything.

Something we call the “Infinity Prompt” is that tool you need. It’s just like it sounds: you can use this prompt whenever you want, and your writing will always be different.

The Infinity Prompt has a few simple steps:

- 1.** Choose a circumstance from your life that feels charged.
- 2.** Think about the facts of the situation. Write them down.

- 3.** Write about the feelings you have on your circumstance: make sure to separate these from the facts of the situation.

- 4.** What are your thoughts on the situation? Make sure to separate these from the facts and your feelings.

This prompt can be helpful for anything — a potential career change, a relationship holding tension for you, a decision you have to make, or any number of other life situations, big and small. What makes it so effective is it takes the principles of CBT therapy and creates a framework for any writing you want to do. There’s not a single circumstance in your life that you can’t use as a tool to identify the stories you tell yourself, and as a tool to heal and change the narrative. For example, maybe you recently were passed over for a promotion at your company: that’s the fact of the situation. This may make you feel insecure or upset, which might lead to the thought “Why am I not good enough?” You might notice that this thought fits in the pattern you’ve noticed in other aspects of your life: the story you tell yourself in a variety of situations is that you’re “not good enough.” Writing through this cause-and-effect can help you pinpoint where the story you tell yourself begins. Writing a new story, “re-writing” your brain, might mean telling yourself, “These things happen. I can find another opportunity elsewhere.”

Another example is maybe a family member was short with you unexpectedly. Maybe this makes you feel slighted or hurt, and you think, “They’re mad at me,” or “They don’t like me.” Writing through your emotions — and separating them from the facts of the situation — can help you figure out if there’s an overarching story you tell yourself about your relationships (“They just don’t love me”) and figure out how to reframe the events in your life (“They just had a bad day”).

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MINING YOUR LIFE FOR HIDDEN MEANING (HOW TO BECOME YOUR BEST EDITOR)

Part of what writing through facts, feelings, and thoughts does is allow you to spot patterns over time. Here's how:

1. Look for the repeated connections

- i.e. When I make mistakes I feel insecure and think that I'm a bad person.
- i.e. When this person hurts me, I feel angry and stuck and think that I'll never be good enough for them.
- i.e. When I succeed at work, I feel proud and I see my success as something I worked for and deserve.

2. Ask yourself which stories you feel help you and which hold you back

- Which "thoughts/stories" help you move toward your values and goals?
- Which "thoughts/stories" keep you in unhelpful patterns?

3. Rewrite the unhelpful stories

- Imagine new reasons for the circumstances and the feelings
- i.e. When I make mistakes, I may feel insecure, but I am allowed to make mistakes. I care about how my actions impact others, which means I might feel deeply about my mistakes, but I'm not bad. I'm human. It's part of the process.

4. Ask yourself: what am I really looking for or working towards?

- As you see your own values emerge (i.e. relationships, performing well, excellent work, etc.), you'll become even better able to "edit out" stories that do not help you, and "write in" stories that give you the meaning and purpose you're looking for.