

# Nurse Author & Editor

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## Banish Your Inner Awful Writer

### **Banishing Your Inner Awful Writer**

Leslie H. Nicoll

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*"I'm an awful writer."*

*"My advisor tells me I need to find an editor for my terrible writing."*

*"I don't know how to write."*

I regularly receive emails from potential clients that include sentences such as the three above. Their desperation in ever completing their writing task—whether it be a dissertation or journal article—is palpable. I am happy to help—that's my business, after all—but I also

try to provide practical skills and resources that they can use going forward so that their writing lives are not an endless source of anguish.

Writing is a skill that can be learned and improves with practice, just like playing the piano or learning to cook. Scientific or technical writing, in particular, doesn't require a great deal of creativity, compared to fiction writing. Fiction authors need to have a story to tell and the skills to tell it well. Creativity for scientists, on the other hand, is necessary at the time a research study is first imagined and then developed. By the time you get to writing the final report, it really should be a matter of just putting the words on the page. Unfortunately, for too many authors, this final writing process is a huge stumbling block. But it doesn't need to be that way. Here are a few tips to help you banish your inner "awful writer."

The first step is to embrace the belief that learning to write well is an ongoing, lifelong process. Too many people believe that learning about writing ended when they finished English Composition 101 or a similar course in college or high school. Having such a perspective creates a personal barrier as your mind is not open to new opportunities. To change this mindset, school yourself to learn or do one new writing "thing" every day. These "things" can be diverse: learning a new vocabulary word or an obscure grammar rule, or how to use a feature of your word processor. Read books about writing—okay, maybe that sounds like torture but there are some fun ones out there, such as *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* (Truss, 2006) or *One Day in the Life of the English Language* (Cioffi, 2015).

Good writers are avid readers, so it is important to read widely, deeply, and frequently, that is, all the time. As a researcher or scholar, you should be reading intensely in your area of study, but that's not enough. You should also be reading newspapers, magazines, online essays, and fiction—to name just a few. Pay attention to what you read, too. Look for how sentences are phrased and words are used. Fiction writing is very different from scientific writing so read both and use the opportunity to compare and contrast the writing styles as

well as content. If you are a student, don't say to yourself, "Oh, that bestseller sounds interesting. I'll read it when I graduate." Read it *now*. Reading is never "a waste of time" although it can be a wonderful escape from stress and frustration. Embrace reading—all reading—as part of your writing education.

Use every opportunity to write as an opportunity to practice. As I said above, writing is a skill that improves with repetition, so take advantage of daily writing tasks that present themselves to you. Email is a perfect example. I receive lots of email and most of the messages require a response. While some can be answered with a quick, "Yes," or "Thanks," many require a sentence or two and some an even lengthier answer. I prioritize my replies, taking care of the quickest ones first, then spending more time on the longer responses. I review and proofread my email replies, correcting spelling mistakes and making sure that grammar is correct. When I receive emails that are full of mistakes and run-on sentences, and capitalization is totally absent, I just cringe. Don't be that person.

Read what you write. I'll be honest, I have received documents to edit where I find myself shaking my head and wondering if anyone has ever laid eyes on it before me. As an author, you need to develop the ability to read and critique your own work and find and fix mistakes, before passing it along to another person for his/her critique or edit. Granted, you may not pick up on everything—that's why editors exist, after all—but basics such as tense, subject/verb agreement, and rudiments of punctuation should be a given for all authors.

Along this same line, there is some debate about the actual approach to writing. Some advocate just letting the words pour out and say you should not worry about correcting mistakes—that comes in the editing phase. I don't totally agree with this view. I write and edit concurrently. That said, once something is finished, I let it sit for 24 hours and go back and edit again—and I always find things to change. If you prefer to "just write," that's fine, but realize that you will have more editing and correcting to do in the next phase of the

process.

Figure out *how* you write. Using myself as an example again, I need to let ideas “percolate” in my mind before I put my hands on the keyboard. As an article forms, I may take notes or jot down ideas, but I don’t begin the actual writing until it is clear in my head. I find that trying to force myself to write before an idea is (almost) fully formed can be an exercise in frustration. However, I also find that deadlines are helpful and keep me from procrastinating and waiting too long for the idea to be ready to go on to paper.

Similarly, some people find they need blocks of time to write, while others are entirely successful in working on a writing project for an hour at a time. The latter approach can be useful in that it is often easier to find one hour to write versus five. But, don’t let the requirement of needing “a block of time” become an excuse to not get your writing done. Play mind games with yourself to squeeze more work into a shorter period of time: “Yeah, two hours is enough for me to finish a page or two.” Then do it!

Find pleasure in the writing experience. Don’t say to yourself, “I hate writing.” If you have opted for a career in academia, you will be expected to write and publish as part of your job. So why talk yourself into hating part of what you are required to do? Figure out ways to make your writing tasks enjoyable and fun. This could be as simple as rewarding yourself with a nice cup of tea or a piece of chocolate after an hour of studious writing. Or, maybe having a writing partner will make the job easier for you. Personally, I take “Words with Friends” breaks, which has the added advantage of often teaching me a new word or two with every game! Whatever you choose, focus on a positive affirmation which helps your mind be in tune with the task at hand.

Last, words—whether written, spoken, or read—help bring order to the chaos of our minds, and that in turn can lead to “flow,” defined as the creative moment when a person is

completely involved in an activity for its own sake (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Having this happen when you are engaged in a writing task can be exhilarating and make you want to return to the keyboard to experience it again. That's the way it works for me, at least! If you have experienced flow in writing, you know what I am talking about. If you haven't, maybe flow has occurred for you in another activity: playing an instrument or sport, or pursuing a favorite hobby. If you aren't familiar with flow at all, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi presented a TED talk in 2004 which is a very good, 18 minute overview of his research on this topic. My point is that flow can happen with writing. The ecstasy that occurs (Csikszentmihalyi's term) can be a potent driver to engage you and propel your writing career. It is a goal to strive for.

As with so many things in life, writing is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration, to borrow a quote from Thomas Edison. And, a lot of the perspiration occurs in your head. Knowing that, you can use your brain to your advantage to make your writing tasks be pleasant and successful, with outcomes that will make you proud when you see your name in print.

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✎ WRITING BASICS



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