

How I Write

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Not Writing — the condition of using any pretext as a justification for the avoidance of putting words on the blank page — is the unrelenting scourge of my life as a novelist. Its allies are legion. The wife. The kids. My day job as a law professor. The grass that needs cutting. Sudoku. Social media. Playing guitar. Naps. Basically anything.

Even my dogs, Sweetheart and Bristol, get into the act. They perceive a computer on my lap as usurping their proper place in nature's hierarchy and seek to dislodge it with dogged intensity. Try writing a dramatic courtroom scene with two rescue mutts trying to lick you to death. Impossible.

These examples are only the visible phenomena of Not Writing's pernicious power. The unseen forces are more subtle and deadlier. Take, for instance, soul-crushing doubt and paralyzing feelings of inadequacy. Despite having five novels under my belt — novels that lots of people seem to like, based on Amazon and Audible reviews — I still battle the fear that I've spent all my creative bullets and that the next book will fail to rise out of the primordial ooze of my imagination.

But I shouldn't be too hard on myself. Not Writing is a universal malady that affects authors everywhere. Steven Pressfield, the Joan of Arc of helping authors wage war against Not Writing, lays bare a cold, hard truth: "There's a secret that real writers know that wannabe writers don't, and the secret is this: It's not the writing part that's hard. What's hard is sitting down to write."¹

¹ Steven Pressfield, *The War of Art: Break Through the Blocks and Win Your Inner Creative Battles, at What I Know* (2012).

Pretty much. For good reason Ernest Hemingway called the writing gene “a hell of a disease to be born with.”²

Back when I was a civil litigator, court deadlines — and the threat of malpractice liability for failing to meet them — acted as a persuasive cattle prod to keep Not Writing at bay. But the danger back then was minimal. The opportunity to compose a brief felt decadent when juxtaposed with chores such as drafting discovery and wading through document review. Along with taking depositions, writing in those days was the best part of the job. Not Writing didn’t stand a chance.

And then I left practice to become a law professor. Academia carried its own big stick to ward off the threat of Not Writing: getting tenure. Faced with an ambiguous standard of how many publications were necessary to secure my lifetime sinecure, I produced more than double the number of law-review articles commonly thought to be the going rate. One of the lessons I internalized as a baby lawyer was never to leave a question for the jury when you can settle the issue as a matter of law. Once again, Not Writing couldn’t quite get its hooks into me.

With tenure in hand, I decided to write a novel. Unlike the external inducements of law practice and academia that kept me on task, mustering the effort to tackle fiction required me to motivate myself. The journey was intensely personal. If I never wrote a book, no one would ever be the wiser about the stories percolating in my heart. No risk existed of anyone’s mocking my literary pretensions. I could coast on the social capital of being a tenured law professor — in my mind, the best job in all the legal world.

Sure, I would’ve had to live with the whispers in my head about letting one of my dreams go by the wayside. So what? That’s part of being an adult. I’m never going to win the Masters in golf, either. And the path of least resistance cautioned against

² *Ernest Hemingway on Writing* 16 (Larry W. Phillips ed., 2004).

taking the leap into fiction. Merely telling someone that I was writing a novel served to cut open a vein of emotional vulnerability. What if I never finished the thing? How foolish would I look then? Even worse, what if I overcame the odds and actually got a completed book into the hands of readers, only for people to hate it? That fear felt debilitating. And with good reason. Publishing a novel is akin to walking right into the middle of the town square and asking folks to sit in judgment of you. Kinda like the public hangings of old. Or a Maoist struggle session. Take your pick.

Not Writing saw its opening. The twists and turns of my descent into self-hatred while mud-wrestling my first novel into existence would take too long to recount.³ Let's just say that *The Murder of Sara Barton* took me eons to write. Maybe five years, maybe six, maybe more. I'm not really certain. But I defeated Not Writing in the end. That time. Four more books — *Death to the Chief*, *To Kill a Lawyer*, *A Hard Way to Die*, *The Just and the Unjust* — followed in relatively quick succession, the speed of their publication belying the vicious hand-to-hand combat with my enemy necessary to achieve those victories.

From these experiences, I've developed some practical tips for aspiring authors: write every day with a measurable goal (1,000 words, 2,000 words, whatever, but forward momentum is critical); hold yourself accountable to that goal (easier said than done but nonnegotiable if you have any hope of defeating Not Writing); finish the first draft as soon as possible (don't correct things as you go); edit your drafts like a sweaty-toothed madman (I eventually chopped off 60,000 words from the first cut of *The Murder of Sara Barton*); and read as many books on writing as you can get your hands on. On this last point, the five works that have been most helpful to me are Stephen King's *On Writing*,

³ See Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 517 (Karen V. Kukil ed., 2007) (providing a flavor of the experience: "Very depressed today. Unable to write a thing. Menacing gods. I feel outcast on a cold star, unable to feel anything but an awful helpless numbness.").

Steven Pressfield's *The War of Art*, Sol Stein's *Stein on Writing*, and two books from Roy Peter Clark, *The Art of X-Ray Reading* and *Murder Your Darlings*. But be forewarned if you travel down this literary road. Sylvia Plath stuck her head in an oven. Ernest Hemingway put a shotgun in his mouth. And Stephen King consumed so much alcohol and cocaine that he barely remembers writing *Cujo*.

Of course, past performance is no guarantee of future results. I dream of writing a hundred more novels but may never make it to number six. Not Writing will never give up. Even working on this short essay provides a colorable excuse for putting off the grueling work of diving into the next story. The war for an author never ends.

The hardest book to write is always the next one.