

Embrace Your Writer's Block

10 steps to breathe new life into your writing project

by Frank Ewert



franklin, tennessee

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK	4
DAY 1: IT'S OKAY TO BE STUCK	9
DAY 2: RECOVER YOUR SILLY SIDE.	17
DAY 3: YOU'RE STUCK BECAUSE YOUR PROJECT MATTERS	25
DAY 4: BEFRIEND YOUR INNER CRITIC	33
DAY 5: BE DERIVATIVE.	41
DAY 6: CRAFT A SIMPLE PLAN THAT'S FULL OF HOLES	49
DAY 7: BE UNREMARKABLE	57
DAY 8: STOP EDITING	65
DAY 9: FIND TEAMMATES	73
DAY 10: TRUST YOURSELF	81
WHAT'S NEXT?	89
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & RESOURCES.	93
ABOUT THE AUTHOR.	97

*This workbook is dedicated to every person who has ever wondered
if they're a "real" writer.*

(My answer is always a resounding "Yes!")

INTRODUCTION

When your writing project stalls or goes off the rails, it's tempting to just step away.

Sometimes, that's exactly what you need. Time to reflect and recharge. Space to see the forest and the trees.

However, this pause can easily turn into an indefinite hiatus. The longer you're away from your desk, the harder it is to return. Your project begins to taunt you. Every time you're brave enough to open your word processor, you're immediately frozen by overwhelm and slam your laptop shut. Your project stays stuck.

In case you can't tell, I'm writing from experience. I published my first book—a collection of short stories—when I was twenty-four. It wasn't a bestseller, but I was so proud. After years of daydreams, I'd finally written a real book.

But then life happened, and I stopped writing. Some of my reasons for stopping were reasonable: a move, a job change, a baby. Others were less obvious and more insidious. Latent anxieties slowly ate away at my confidence. Before I knew it, I went from being “on a break” to being unable to write.

The result? A decade of believing that I wasn't actually a writer after all. That writing was something I did once, just like that guy we all know who played football in high school.

However, that wasn't the end of my story. Not hardly.

Thanks to a series of encouraging voices, I rediscovered my passion for writing. I not only write for myself but also help others bring their books to life through coaching, ghostwriting, and editing. All because I learned how to embrace and write through my writer's block.

Like me, you've probably tried to “think your way through” this obstacle. Many good books have been written about creativity and finding your voice. Surely you just need to find the right one to set you free, right?

Sadly, no.

If you want to break through your writer's block, you need to wrestle with words on the page. By "words" I mean your words, and by "page" I mean something that you're actively writing. There's simply no other way to get back on track.

Getting unstuck takes time. If you're anything like me, you want to be in the clear already. You'll do anything you can to speed up this process and get back to your normal flow. I encourage you not to do that.

Instead, take your time. If you show up here day after day, you'll experience real growth and progress. By the end of the ten days, you'll have written over 7,500 words. Do that three times, and you'll be over 20,000. That's one-third of most books.

I believe you can do that. Are you ready to give yourself a chance?

HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK

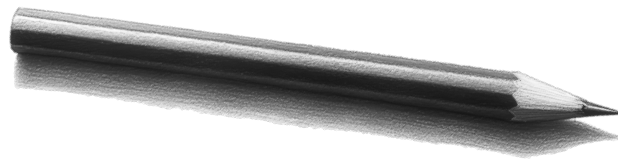
Like I said in the Introduction: if you want to break through your writer's block, you need to wrestle with your words. That's why I designed this workbook to be an interactive experience.

THE WORKBOOK'S DAILY RHYTHMS

Each day provides you with three things:

1. An encouraging reflection
2. A writing prompt
3. A set of blank lined pages

Throughout the workbook, each day builds upon the last. Some of the exercises are fun and will help you rediscover the joy of writing. Others will be a painful challenge. Don't skip either. Trust the process and give yourself to your words.



WRITE BY HAND

“Can’t I type out my writing responses?” you might ask. “That’ll be faster and more comfortable.”



Here’s the thing: you’ll get a lot more out of this process if you complete the exercises by hand.

For starters, this workbook isn’t a race. Going faster is not necessarily better. In fact, it might be counterproductive. There’s much to be gained by moving slowly.

Second, this workbook will not remove every ounce of discomfort from your writing life. It’s not supposed to. Instead, it’ll teach you how to sit and write in the presence of discomfort, when appropriate.

Writing by hand helps on both fronts.

Our brains typically move faster than our pens. The sentence we thought we were writing meanders away from our expectations. Sometimes it feels like the words literally change as we’re writing them. Why? Because we learn as we write. The sentence you end up writing is almost always more valuable than what you set out to say.

Also, it’s tiring to write by hand, but you can do it! When you get to the end of your daily pages, you’ll feel a physical sensation of accomplishment. A sensation that’s very hard to come by when you’re clickety-clacking your way through a Word document.

SET YOUR SCENE

That said, this experience shouldn't feel like a punishment. Indeed, I encourage you to mindfully create your experience so you can truly delight in this work.

Find your favorite writing tools and devote them to this task. For example, whenever I write by hand, I use Pentel EnerGel Liquid Gel Ink pens. No one's paying me to say that: I simply like the way their ink flows, allowing me to move my hand effortlessly across the page.

Also, choose where you're going to complete this writing. It doesn't matter if you do it at a quiet desk or in a noisy coffee shop. What matters is that the place you pick is a place where you feel free to be creative. I do a lot of my creative work at Starbucks. For whatever reason, my mind is wide open there, and my fingers fly in a way that doesn't come as naturally in my home office.

Of course, sometimes there are constraints. You might have to do these exercises during your subway commute or at the kitchen table in the evenings after your children have finally gone to bed. Even there, however, there is room for your creativity. Find something small that you can do to make those times and spaces your own.





CHOOSE YOUR RHYTHMS

As you've probably noticed, this workbook offers you 10 days of writing. That means you can complete this workbook in two weeks.

I do not recommend going any faster. Completing the workbook in one setting just won't give you the same value. It's beneficial to have time to breathe in between the exercises.

That said, you are free to take more time. Perhaps you want three days to complete an exercise. Perhaps longer. There's no right or wrong timeline. You get to decide what's right for you.

My only advice is that you set a timeline before you get started. Chart your journey on your calendar. Give yourself deadlines. If you don't meet them, that's okay. No one's going to fail you. However, you're far more likely to finish this workbook—and actually move your project forward—if you do a little planning upfront.

HAVE FUN AND PLAY AROUND

It's easy for us to take our writing too seriously. It's also paralyzing. How can we put words down on a first draft when we're demanding eloquent perfection of every sentence?

Here, I invite you—indeed, I implore you!—to give yourself permission to play. To be messy, even. Treat this workbook like a playground. It's a place for delight and imperfection. A safe place where you can wonder aloud.

Because there's no better way to rediscover the joy of writing and move your project forward.

Day 1

It's okay to be stuck



Embrace Your Writer's Block

"One's true strength rarely lies in the capacities and faculties of which one is proud, but frequently in those one regards as unimportant or even as weaknesses."

– W. H. Auden, "Introduction to Tales of Grimm and Andersen"

DAY 1: IT'S OKAY TO BE STUCK

As a writer, the realization that you're stuck can feel like a terminal diagnosis.

No one else can see that anything is amiss. At first, that's a relief. But then, as days drag on and writing continues to be a struggle, powerful fears set in. You start to worry that you'll never finish your project. You wonder if your writing talent has vanished.

Maybe it was never even real in the first place.

I know firsthand just how heavy these feelings are. I've felt them multiple times in my own writing career. I can only imagine how I would have responded if someone told me, "Hey, it's okay that you're stuck."

And yet, here I am, telling *you* that it's okay that you're stuck.

In fact, I'm going to go one step further and say that it is *good* that you're stuck.

Are you still with me?

Over the next ten days, you'll reflect on what makes you want to write, consider what it means to be stuck, and learn what you can do to keep going.

Am I promising that you'll break through to the other side with ease? No. I don't believe in magic formulas or cheat codes that allow you to bypass adversity. If that's what you're looking for, I'm sorry. You'll need to look elsewhere.

What I'm offering you is an opportunity to breathe and gain some perspective. I probably don't know you, so I can't speak directly into your situation. However, I've been a stuck writer, and I've also helped other stuck writers. These experiences have given me some pretty useful tools. I'm confident they'll benefit you and your writing.

What do you have to do? Simply write. This workbook comes with plenty of blank space, and I urge you to take advantage of it. The only way to get past your "stuckness" is to write your way through it.

If you're ready, let's get started.

DAY 1: IT'S OKAY TO BE STUCK

PROMPT:

Reflect on your life right now. What things bring a smile to your face? Describe one (or more!) of these things. Write as if you were describing them to your childhood best friend.

The image shows a blank ledger page with a vertical margin line on the left side and 25 horizontal rows. The rows are evenly spaced and extend across the width of the page. The page is otherwise empty.

Day 2

Recover your silly side



Embrace Your Writer's Block

"It was charming to see how these girls danced. They had no spectators but the apple-pickers on the ladders. They were very glad to please them, but they danced to please themselves . . . and you could no more help admiring, than they could help dancing. How they did dance!"

— Charles Dickens, The Battle of Life

DAY 2: RECOVER YOUR SILLY SIDE

I tend to take myself and my work seriously. This impulse comes from a well-meaning place. I love words and want to use them well. Also, I want to write about things that matter. I want to move my readers to think and do new things.

This workbook is no different. I'd love for this workbook to change your life. At the very least, I hope it encourages you to keep writing.

So, why on earth would I tell you to “recover your silly side”?

Simply because your ability to write hinges upon your ability to play. I'm not saying that you must be silly if you want to write. I just think that you'll never enjoy this work if you don't remember and rediscover the joy of pure play.

Kids often discover their passions by accident. We see a young girl playacting and are struck by her mimicry. “She's going to be on stage one day,” we say. “Just you wait and see!”

Elsewhere, a boy is overheard singing as he pushes toy cars around the coffee table. “He can really carry a tune!” we gush. Soon he's in voice lessons, destined for a childhood of choir solos and music recitals.

Neither child set out to “be creative.” They simply did things they enjoyed to make the hours pass by. Others who took note and encouraged them to hone their natural gifts.

Sometimes, well-meaning adults spoil the fun. Actually, well-meaning adults spoil the fun *most of the time*. We want talented kids to take their gifts seriously. That's why we thrust them into lessons and command them to conquer their stage fright.

Is there anything wrong with taking lessons or facing one's fears? Of course not. These steps may even be crucial elements of an artist's journey. However, we must recognize that these efforts can be real joy-killers. Your son or daughter can grow up to play the piano beautifully without having truly played for years.

And that's why, today, you're going to sit down and recover some of *your* childhood play.

DAY 2: RECOVER YOUR SILLY SIDE

PROMPT:

What did you like to do when you were six years old? Specifically, what did you do just because you loved doing it, whether or not it caught someones attention or earned you praise? Describe what that was, why you liked doing it, and how it made you feel.

*Thanks to Fraser Martens for coming up with this prompt and allowing me to use it here.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Frank Ewert is a writer who loves to edit. Or perhaps an editor who loves to write? (He's never sure which comes first.)

He's the author of *Embrace Your Writer's Block*, a workbook for writers who want to get their projects unstuck. He's also the author of *Blue Ice and Other Stories from the Rink*, a collection of short stories about ice hockey.

In 2021 he founded Work with Words. Under this umbrella, he publishes resources for writers and provides editing services. Learn more by visiting him online at workwithwords.co

Born and raised in the Fraser Valley of beautiful British Columbia, he now lives in Franklin, Tennessee, with his wife and kids.