

TEN TIPS FOR DISPELLING WRITER'S BLOCK

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TIP ONE: BE OFFENSIVE

There are lots of good reasons to be evenhanded in life, but sometimes the weight of all that levelheadedness mires us down and clogs our creativity.

In the privacy of your own journal or writing practice, being offensive can be freeing and fun.

So hit the keyboard or journal and scribble down uncensored, potentially offensive, never-to-be-mailed letters to the annoying characters in your life.

Tell your name-dropping narcissist of a supervisor, the sniffy maitre d' who tried to stick you at the lousiest table in his overrated restaurant, or your smarmy sycophant co-worker what you really think of them.

If you'd like your slimeball ex-husband to know that he should be drawn and quartered, or at the very least, beheaded, spit that out on paper.

Or if you secretly wish that your barky, bossy, know-it-all sister-in-law would contract a flesh-eating disease, get that down.

Be offensive in private. And have some fun with it!

TIP TWO: LIST FIVE THINGS THAT YOU'RE EMBARRASSED TO ADMIT

We all have a few embarrassing things in our lives that we'd like to squash down, skirt around or hurriedly cover up.

Acknowledging our embarrassments in writing can help us become more comfortable with them, which tends to loosen up tight creative muscles.

So for your eyes only, jot down a list of five things that you're embarrassed to admit. No need to choose your deepest, darkest secrets. Lightweight embarrassments will do the trick.

Here are some personal examples:

- I'm embarrassed that it's 1:15 p.m. and I'm still wearing my ratty black sweatshirt-style bathrobe.
- I'm embarrassed that my kitchen floor is dirty. I hope to get to it tonight.

- I'm embarrassed that I ate most of the ripe strawberries myself and offered my husband some (not all) of the less-than-ripe ones. I rationalized this ungenerous behavior because he likes sugar on his, but nonetheless this is not the kind of thing I'd like to see emblazoned on a billboard.

Once you've finished your list, reread it with an amiable, relaxed, good-humored eye.

TIP THREE: BE PETTY

This is a great exercise for those of us who take ourselves and our writing too seriously.

Make a list of petty, insignificant things that you'd like to whine about.

Ordinarily, you might dismiss this kvetching as not worth your valuable energy. But under the right circumstances, pettiness can be goofy, hilarious and so very human.

Writer Fran Lebowitz says that she doesn't like adults who roller-skate, children who speak French, or anyone who is unduly tan.

Maybe you are bugged by Andrew Weil's fluffy, voluminous beard; Italian restaurants that don't put Parmesan cheese on the table; people who purposefully turn up their shirt collars or Tony Robbins's unnervingly large teeth. Get that down on paper.

Once you've finished, peruse your list. Look for something funny about your pettiness and have a good laugh at yourself. A humorous approach can go a long way in the block-busting process.

TIP FOUR: NURTURE THOSE CREATIVE FIREFLIES

If you're trying to ignite your creative fires, you usually don't need a lightning bolt. The first glimmers of creativity are often more like a lightning bug, wispy flickers of inspiration that can get things glowing.

But these tender new fireflies of creativity can be fragile things. They're easily stomped out by hasty judgments and fears, quickly extinguished when ignored or unthinkingly dismissed.

Sometimes they're washed away by the deluge of our daily demands, and we're left with just a vague memory of something that seemed potentially inspiring.

So protect your first, fragile creative sparks. Don't subject them to judgment right now; analysis will come later. Jot them down in your inspiration file or journal and nurture them.

Pay attention to your own glimmers of creativity and they may grow into ripe, flourishing ideas.

TIP FIVE: SURPRISE AND DELIGHT—YOURSELF

It's a popular marketing recommendation these days: Surprise and delight your customers. Great advice, really. Couldn't we all use more delight?

So what about you? When it comes to creative inspiration, what surprises and delights you? What infuses you with creative energy?

What writers, artists, websites, comics, magazines, movies, cartoons, TV shows, businesses, inventors, public figures, friends or acquaintances, juice up your creativity?

Make a list of 12 things that surprise and delight your creative spirit. Or piece together a collage or notebook filled with snips and snaps of ideas, items or images that enliven you. And the next time you're in need of some writer's block-busting, grab your surprise-and-delight list or collage and let yourself be re-inspired.

TIP SIX: TAKE OUT EVERYTHING THAT SUCKS

I borrowed this exercise from the marvelous writer, Adair Lara. She recommends that after you've conjured up a piece of writing, you go through and highlight all the parts that you like.

Next, yank out everything but the highlighted sections. This will include the bits that suck, as well as chunks that aren't working.

It can be enlightening to see what's left. Sometimes, at least in my case, there might not be much, but the parts that please you will have juice or rhythm or buoyancy or even grace.

Just the process of plucking out the not-so-hot parts can spur you through a sense of stuckness.

And as you play with the remaining chunks, they may spark you or steer you in a new direction, like seeing puzzle pieces with fresh eyes.

TIP SEVEN: BE EASILY AMUSED

I got this tip from my husband. Beneath his contrarian exterior beats the heart of a naturally creative and funny guy.

And here's his secret: he's easily amused.

Unlike me, he's no humor snob. He'll laugh at almost any joke, even the clunkers, and appreciates a whole spectrum of humor. He's generous with his laughter. He's nonjudgmental towards other people's humor and his own. And he easily amuses himself.

This state of relaxed, nonjudgmental receptivity invites in creativity.

So try on the idea of allowing yourself to be more easily amused. Temporarily suspend judgment and watch some wacky comedies. Listen with your writer's ear and you might hear some genuine creativity.

Let your hair down, toss out your sophisticated sensibilities for now and open up to some goofy amusement.

TIP EIGHT: GET THE GUNK OUT

If your writing feels clogged up, it can be useful to clear out any gunk in your head that might be getting in your way.

Carve out a block of time and get writing. Pour out any troubling thoughts and feelings that may be lurking inside. Scribble down anything that concerns, worries or disturbs you in as much detail as feels right to you.

Feelings may include frustration, uneasiness, fear, heartache, outrage, bitterness, disappointment, jealousy, hopelessness or confusion, to name a few. There's a whole smorgasbord of possible feelings, and you'll have your own unique version.

Spew or spit or dribble them out. Unload them all onto paper or your computer and keep writing until you've expressed the whole schmear, or until you feel ready to stop.

If your issues seem especially stuck, as mine sometimes do, you may need to repeat this exercise several times.

In the day or two after this process, pay attention. You may find that you have some unexpected new ideas, a refreshingly different perspective, a greater sense of ease in your writing or a lighter heart in approaching your work.

TIP NINE: SLIP INTO A NEW VOICE

Pick a person, from present day or distant past, who rouses strong feelings in you.

It may be somebody who makes your teeth ache, or a person who sparks you and fills you with inspiration.

Maybe you're nauseated by Charlie Sheen, despise Donald Trump, think Vlad the Impaler was the spawn of Satan and that Sarah Palin is a nincompoop.

Or perhaps you're deeply inspired by Gandhi, are still in awe of Elvis, have an undying appreciation for Atticus Finch and secretly admire Lady Gaga.

Once you've chosen your character, imagine that you are stepping into this person's boots.

Now try on his or her voice. What would it be like to write in this voice? How might this person's approach to writing be different than yours? What tone would he or she strike?

Start writing in this voice, either on a piece that you've partially finished or something completely different.

Once you're in the midst of this new voice, notice any differences in the texture or tenor of your work. Are there any changes in your writing style, perspective or attitude? Play with this. And have some fun stretching your tone and your voice.

TIP TEN: DITCH YOUR CREATIVITY DRAINERS

What drains your creativity? It pays to recognize these beastly little creativity sappers, because they can suck the precious life out of your work.

We each have our own specific culprits, and once we recognize them, we can learn to cut them off at the pass.

Here's a sampling of some classic creativity drainers:

Fear, and its first cousin, worry

Judgment

Victimized feelings

Distractions

Self-criticism

Blame

Limiting beliefs

The first step is to recognize what saps your creativity. Take a moment to identify your own creativity drainers. Jot them down.

Now pick one of them. When this pattern kicks in again, what action could you take to short-circuit it? This doesn't have to be a major move; one small step can be an excellent starting place.

Next time you feel your creativity being sapped, try out your new action step.

Don't let those creativity vampires bleed you dry. Yank them into the light, get a closer look at what needs changing and take the first step, and then another.

ABOUT METECE RICCIO RAYNOR

I'm a writer, licensed Marriage & Family Therapist and the chief chocoholic at SmartRelationshipsForWomen.com.

I grew up on the South Side of Chicago in a large, boisterous Italian-Irish family and come from a long line of scrappers, sausage-makers and dreamers. White Castle Hamburgers (no cheese) are my weakness. And I make a wicked triple chocolate biscotti.

As a writer, I specialize in no-b.s. spirituality, relationship repair and heart-and-soul healing.

