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President's Voice

By Julie Ortolon



Happy October, NINC members. As the weather turns cooler and my term as your president starts to come to an end, I've been reflecting on what a great year we've had and wondering how 2018 flew by so quickly.

One of my roles as your president was to help oversee the NINC conference. For those of you who joined me in St. Pete, welcome home from another great NINC Conference! I imagine everyone's brains are full to bursting with information and ideas on ways to take your career to new heights; I know I'm still processing everything.

Since we had so many great sessions, as of next month, start looking for the conference reports in the next few editions of *Nink*. For those who went to St. Pete, it was impossible to attend every presentation. For members who weren't able to attend, let me reassure you that our conference reporters are already hard at work writing the articles that will appear in the next few editions of *Nink*. While we do not cover the Saturday roundtables or the Night Owls, we consider the conference reports a benefit to NINC members, one of your perks, and so all sessions on Thursday and Friday had reporters assigned to them.

Speaking of the conference one last time, I want to offer a heartfelt thank you to all the people who put in an unbelievable number of hours working behind the scenes on the NINC Conference every year. To be part of what goes on, and how every year the volunteers we have rise to the occasion and deliver, leaves me in awe. NINC members are what make NINC such an amazing organization. You have my deepest gratitude.

NINC truly is an organization that works for the benefit of its members, and to all of you, you've enriched my life. It was wonderful to put names with faces, and to see how we can all come together and share our unique, yet similar, writing journeys. Thank you for being part of my world and part of NINC, and may the beauty that is fall inspire you this month.

Julie

NINC Member Benefits

Don't forget to sign up for the [email loop](#), [critique/brainstorming group](#), and the members-only [Facebook group](#) if you haven't already. The Pro Services Directory, member [discount page](#), and [sample letters](#) are also great resources.

Missing a newsletter? Past issues can be found [here](#). You can also [propose an article](#) or submit a [letter to the editor](#). And you can [buy a paperback copy](#) of the 2016 *Best of Nink!*

Accessing the NINC Website

Not sure how to log in to the NINC website? Visit the login page here: <https://ninc.com/membership-overview/login-to-ninc/>

Julie Ortolon is a USA Today bestselling author of contemporary romance. First published by Dell Publishing in 2000, she has also written for St. Martin's Press, and Signet Eclipse. Since going indie in 2009, she has hit the Amazon Top 100 several times. One of her greatest joys is helping other authors find success. When not writing, she enjoys traveling the world with family and friends.

September 25 - September 29, 2019



Join us for *NINC 2019* to discover the latest strategies and insights, from marketing innovations to high-level craft to running your business as smoothly and effectively as possible.

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Conference FAQs: <https://ninc.com/conferences/about-the-ninc-conference/ninc-conference-faq/>

BeachNINC201: <https://groups.io/g/BeachNINC2019>

Using Beta Readers & Freelance Editors

By Michele Dunaway



Editor's Note: As the critique group articles (featured in July and August) focused on authors critiquing other authors, I wanted to also address the idea of "beta readers" and "freelance editors," especially given my own ignorance even as a multi-published author.

In one of those odd conversations that happen, I was picking up my daughter from a Brownie troop meeting and a woman heard the name "Dunaway." She asked if my first name was Michele and if I wrote romance novels. I said yes, and she brought in four of my books for me to sign at the next troop meeting—books she'd bought before she knew who I was.

As our daughters became friends, we became friends, and she ended up reading everything I wrote before I sent it to my editor.

I'm going to admit that I had no idea she was fulfilling what authors call "beta reading." She was my one and only beta reader for my romance works, reading about 15 of them.

In fact, even after 26 books, the concept of someone reading just to test out a work seems weird. None of my friends want to do it, minus Julie the Brownie troop mom, and she moved to Kansas City, and as time moved on and my Harlequin line closed, so did her reading for me.

For author Janis Susan Patterson, who writes as Janis Susan May and Janis Patterson, her beta readers came about organically. "Two are longtime friends who are also writers," she said, "but neither of them are novelists. Another is a romance novelist whom I got to know online years ago. I trust all of them explicitly."

Barbara Meyers's daughter is her number-one beta reader. "She is creative and could be published," Meyers said. "She's been an avid reader since childhood and she knows what works in fiction. I trust her because if she doesn't like something, she will flat out tell me, but beyond that, she will tell me why."

Notice the key words here are finding someone you trust. None of my family or my St. Louis girlfriends want to beta read for me, and many of them don't read romance either, making them a bad fit. While my best friend and I will have Hallmark Movie nights (we have a complete drinking game), and while she's all about helping me brainstorm plot, her reading my work is a line neither of us want to cross.

Beta readers should love your work and want to make it great. Remember, you are the one

deciding what feedback you need, who you want to allow to read your work, and what you want from the beta reading relationship.

Beta readers can be anyone from family to friends to readers found online. Authors are known for posting chapters and asking for feedback, or posting small outtakes on websites to draw readers and traffic and allowing for comments. A beta reader is anyone who will “test drive” your pages.

Marsha Nuccio, writing as Emelle Gamble, uses beta readers while several others in the Lifesavers Critique Group do not. “I have a handful of readers I have cultivated over the last eight years,” she said. “All fair, smart, don’t love every word I’ve written, give great feedback primarily about characterization. If I had a beta reader who hated my work I would drop them—I’m the arbiter of what I trust about the book.”

If you don’t have beta readers, a critique group, or can’t find one, another option is to pay a freelance editor, who can help with everything from brainstorming to copyediting.

“Use word of mouth to find editors,” freelance editor [Mary-Theresa Hussey](#) said. “Or check out dedications and acknowledgements or Amazon info in books by some of your favorite authors.”

Editors can also be found via social media, conferences and websites. Hussey and Zinberg provided a list to the following resources as places to search: [Editorial Freelancers Association](#); [Publishers Marketplace](#), [Independent Editors Group](#); [Association of Freelance Editors, Proofreaders and Indexers](#); [Bibliocrunch](#); [Society for Editors and Proofreaders](#); [New York Book Editors](#) and [Reedsy](#).

Freelance editors can fulfill the beta reader role, acting as a first reader. They can focus on one aspect or on the overall feel, or reader appeal.

They can also work as a concept/consulting editor, working on the early stages of a proposal or series to work out potential flaws in the editorial or marketing concerns. This type of edit often involves notes in the margins or at the end. This type of editor will also sit on the phone with you and brainstorm ideas.

For those who want more, freelance editors can do deep dives into the manuscript, looking at language, plot, and characterization. This development/content editing goes beyond simple flaws in the editorial. Again, an editor might make notes in the margins or discuss via a phone call.

Finally, freelance editors can focus on the grammar, language, sentence structure, repetition, etc., doing a complete line edit or a complete copy edit, when the editor does a final polish with a grammatical eye. This would be the edit before any actual book formatting, and a proofreading edit will ensure your book doesn’t have style errors or typos, just like an in-house copy editor would do. This edit would be done after book formatting and would be a final check of spelling/grammar/missing words and so on, and is great for those going indie.

Michele Dunaway is the editor of Nink and writes contemporary romance. If you want her Hallmark Movie drinking game, you can find out more [here](#).

Creating Newsletter Content that Captivates

By Lindsay Randall



Are you struggling with what to cover in the next issue of your author newsletter? Or maybe you're wondering if newsletters are a fading fad. Read on for some stats, tips, and fellow NINCer insights.

Still a viable communication vehicle

Fear not: The author newsletter remains a powerful and personal way for authors to reach readers.

"The newsletter is the single most valuable marketing tool an author has," said author [Roxanne St. Claire](#), who has offered a newsletter since her first release 15 years ago. "The list consists of people who want your news, and there is no filter between you and the reader. It is the opportunity to connect, to share, to become 'real' to them, and if used properly, is the No. 1 way to sell books."

Author [Nancy J. Cohen](#) agrees. She has created a newsletter throughout her 20+ years as a novelist and continues to see her subscriber list grow. "An author newsletter is a personal message to fans," Cohen said. "You own your mailing list, and the choice of content is entirely yours to decide. It's a direct way to keep in touch with people who are interested in your books and your career."

Furthermore, the reach of email is only growing. Though an older form of communication in this fast-paced age, it is estimated that by 2022 [there will be 4.3 billion global email users](#).

"Stories + Presentation = Just as important"

Amy King, editor-in-chief of [The Lily](#), a bi-weekly e-newsletter from *The Washington Post*, ensures that every issue has a visual and voice consistency that makes the newsletter stand out in a crowd of others.

In the [Poynter News University](#) webinar "Secrets of a Successful Newsletter: Lessons from *The Lily*," King noted that stories and presentation are equally important. Both should create an expectation in the reader that is satisfied in every issue, she said.

Images for *The Lily* are bold and often superimposed with artwork. Only two different emojis are used in the editorial, and no exclamation points. It is tiny details like these that lend a newsletter its own unique flavor, plus let readers know “real human beings” are creating it.

King advised investing in design work for the initial newsletter template, noting that “design is storytelling” and helps your audience recognize your brand.

St. Claire said she makes it clear who is sending the newsletter. “I change the header to match the featured book and use my exact branding from my covers.” Occasionally, she shares excerpts from new books in an email with no graphics, which “gets in more email boxes.”

For author [Lauren Royal](#), “the biggest evolution” for her newsletter happened when she moved to the email service provider MailerLite, where she could use clickable buttons instead of links. “The buttons have neatened up the newsletter’s appearance and improved my click-through rate,” she said.

Content to include, editorial & visual

Royal, who has published a newsletter since her first release in 2000, features “Friday Freebie” content in her weekly newsletter. “Sharing similar authors’ free, 99-cent, and new books alongside my own promotions has been a great way to get opens from subscribers who are looking for books—exactly my target demographic,” Royal said.

“My newsletters often include links inviting the reader to attend an event in my Facebook group or visit some feature of my website,” she added. “I sometimes share fun details from my life, like a family wedding or a remodel project. Thought I don’t usually solicit replies with my content, I often get comments from readers and always respond.”

[Wayne Stinnett](#), author and president-elect of NINC, sent his first newsletter to 13 recipients when he had two books published and a third ready to release the following month. Since then, he has sent a newsletter every two weeks, which is what his subscribers sign up knowing.

In each issue, he updates readers on the coming book, tells them a little about what’s going on in his personal life, offers an occasional contest, and recommends a book he’s recently read. “I include photos sometimes, pictures of our pets, or us out on the water or down in Key West,” he said. “Occasionally, I let my subscribers name a new piece of equipment. My character has several boats and an airplane, mostly named by my readers.”

Cohen begins her newsletter with a conversational paragraph about the latest happenings in her world and features a photo or two, then moves into her book news. “Since I only put out a newsletter when I have something to say, there’s usually a new release or other announcement to share,” she said. “It helps to offer something exclusive to your subscribers, such as a first chapter preview, an epilogue, reader discussion questions, or deleted scenes.”

Author [Phoebe Conn](#) first started her newsletter via hard copy through the mail in the 1980s and ‘90s. Today, she “builds rapport and readership” through a monthly e-newsletter.

“I have a topic for the month, such as Making Dreams Come True,” she said. “I write a couple of paragraphs, add a pertinent quote, promote a new book if there is one, offer free print copies of my ‘classics,’ as well as book reviews, and recipes.”

St. Claire said she “announces new releases, first and foremost, and in between, I keep

readers apprised of what I'm writing with sneak peeks, cover reveals, and inside tidbits. I run the occasional contest, share some of my (home chef) husband's recipes, conduct a reader poll about once or twice a year, recommend books I've loved, and try to talk about dogs, because they are central to my series."

The Lily makes use of animated GIFs among their eye-catching photos. There are share modules featured prominently near the top of each newsletter (image links titled "Share This" and "Tell Friends"), and fun language is used to intro the email and snail mail contact information.

As for essential content, [this Federal Trade Commission webpage](#) notes necessary information to be in compliance with the CAN-SPAM Act.

Subject lines – is there a secret sauce?

Opinions varied about subject lines. Some respondents spent time creating them, others not so much.

King stated that subject lines matter and should be "a way to create a curiosity gap." They should have tension, she noted, though not be written as clickbait.

Author [Heather Burch](#) shared that she loves [subjectline.com](#), which rates a subject line for effectiveness. "There is a small subscription fee but worth it," she said.

Stinnett said he doesn't worry much about subject lines. "Being a fully organic list, there's no need to play with subject lines or content," he said. "My open rate is usually over 70 percent by the end of the day, and the click rate on recommended books is over 35 percent. I write the newsletter as if I'm just catching an old friend up on what's going on in my life."

St. Claire said she just tries to make each subject line compelling. "I'm always testing different approaches to see which ones work, but there really hasn't been a clear 'winner' for me. I write my newsletters myself—in my voice, in first person—so they are very personal."

Be ready to adjust

Whatever content you choose to add to your newsletter, King advised to be flexible in your approach and to check in with your audience. She suggested doing surveys and also asking questions in other places, like Instagram. After all, a satisfied reader is the goal.

For an in-depth look at developing a newsletter, please see "How to Grow an Effective Newsletter," presented by [Erica Ridley](#) and reported by [Margaret Daley](#) in the [November 2017 issue of the Nink Newsletter](#).

*[Lindsay Randall](#) serves as assistant editor of Nink. She is the author more than a dozen romance novels, including the award-winning *Phantom*.*

Creating Balance

Saying no

By Denise A. Agnew



Finding balance in our writing life isn't easy. Most people have lives that require awakening every morning with a plate already full of responsibilities. Many of us are abysmal at recognizing that our lives are *too* full and how this keeps us from doing something that gives us joy.

Writing.

In order to lower the chances we'll run off the rails and have a creative crisis, we need to analyze what is keeping us unbalanced. Yes, I meant to use that word.

Unbalanced.

I'm thinking of the line from one of my favorite horror movies, *The Shining*. Jack types, "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." It's true that if we have another outside job other than our writing life, we might also feel the need to pile on other social events for fun. Our kids have school and social activities. Add that all together and writing time might take a flying leap out of the window.

I'll give you a personal example. A volunteer organization I joined several years ago highly encourages a course, and I recently considered taking it. However, the course isn't required to be in the organization. I could have watched the videos, taken the tests, and done the projects at my own pace. The course takes an average of a year to complete. After thinking it over, I realized I'd be insane to take the course. Screenwriting and novel writing is my full-time job. Pressure to complete the course would have proven time consuming and created pressure. Alarm bells screamed inside me. I said no.

There are a few factors that determine whether you'll become unbalanced in your writing career.

Why do you want to write?

Your motivation for writing can have an impact on how likely you are to continue to do it or abandon it.

Are you someone who wanted to write fiction from the time you were a kid? If so, your desire to write despite all obstacles is likely to prove strong. It means you are motivated (generally speaking) by factors from within and a keen desire to write that may not be as driven by a desire to make money. You'll fight for the time to write and say no when outside factors demand your attention. This doesn't mean you'll always say no when you should, but the chances are higher you'll remind yourself how important writing is to your overall happiness.

Are you the writer who discovered creating stories when you were older and decided it might be a good way to make money? If you're this type of writer, you have a much bigger chance of making a decision to dropkick writing when family/other career/social obligations start to overwhelm you. Again, this doesn't mean this type of writer doesn't know when to say no. It can mean you're more likely to allow outside influences to derail your writing.

Are you following the herd?

Humans are social animals. We tend to group together for love, friendship, and survival. That's all well and good until it isn't. This tendency means we have a herd mentality. Herd mentality can mean conformity, and herds don't always like it when people color outside of the lines.

Western society, particularly in the United States, dictates that hard work is a tremendous virtue and packing in volunteering, clubs, and other social activities makes an even more admirable person. While none of these things is inherently bad, in the United States we sometimes denigrate the arts and apply virtue to hard science. Society often thinks of writing as a frivolous and unworthy profession. Right from the beginning, anyone who wishes to write isn't always taken seriously.

Are you an extrovert or an introvert?

Extroverts and introverts can have difficulty saying no to just one more thing. Extroverts usually get a charge off of it and like being with people and engaging out there in the world. Introverts can find the outside world and people draining. Introverts, however, might have an edge. An introvert is already less likely to take on extra outside activities.

Are you assertive or passive?

This one isn't tricky. Assertive people are likely to say no to outside obligations if they feel it doesn't serve them. Passive people often will agree to do things they don't want to do.

Are you a people pleaser?

People pleasing is sometimes a huge problem for people who overcommit and take on too many activities. If you're constantly concerned about whether people will like you or if you think people will only like you if you say yes to their demands, you are more likely to say yes to things you don't wish to do.

How to say no more often.

How can you assure that you won't be suckered into doing something you don't want to and watching your creativity drain away? Here are a few tips.

1. Creative writing is outside-of-the-box. Understand that not everyone will "get" you and why you want to write. Own it that you want to write. Don't care what anyone thinks about it. The more you don't care what others think about your writing, the less likely others will attempt to convince you that you're wrong for wanting to write. This also applies to what topics/genres you wish to write.
2. Take assertiveness training if you aren't already an assertive person. Sign up for a course or read a highly recommended book on assertiveness and how to apply it to your life.

If you think your time isn't valuable, what you want doesn't matter, and pleasing everyone else is more important than your own mental health and creativity...time to consider exploring therapy or some other form of self-help. Creativity coaching can also help, but if the problems are sufficiently deep, the therapy must come first.

In the end...

In the end, you're the ultimate architect. If you want to continue to create, you have to take care of yourself. That means your creative mental health must be a high priority.

Denise A. Agnew is the award-winning author of over 67 novels. Denise's novels Love From the Ashes and Blackout were optioned for film/TV by Where's Lucy? Productions. Denise is a writer/producer (Happy Catastrophe Productions/Bright Frontier Films/Where's Lucy? Productions), a paranormal investigator, Reiki Master, Certified Creativity Coach, and RT Academy Mentor. As a creativity coach, Denise assists anyone in the arts to maintain lifelong creativity. You can find her at www.deniseagnew.com and www.creativepencoaching.com.

That Full-Time Feeling

Structuring your day as a full-time writer

By M.C.A. Hogarth



Organizing my new schedule after leaving my day job to write full-time sounded easy, until I spent the first week lying on a chair wondering what happened to my energy level. (In my case that answer was “you are detoxing from your previous, awful situation”—don’t discount this when you first quit if you are leaving a toxic day job!) Once I recovered, I decided to plan for future pitfalls by consulting other professionals. I spoke not only to NINC members, but with friends and peers among both writers and artists. Here’s what I observed—may it serve you as well!

Common challenges

Most problems fell into the following four categories:

- **Not enough structure** — The most common challenge, bar none, was the sudden lack of external routine. Transitioning to full-time status not only requires you to set your own schedule, it often removes the “landmarks” imposed by your other activities. Many people reported having trouble, particularly at first, with the discipline needed to get the work done without someone else calling the shots... or they felt out to sea because they were no longer scheduling their creative time around their other job’s needs. A friend described it as “showing up to a new job to discover you have no office, no boss, no resources, and no deliverables. Surprise! Start making decisions!”
- **Not enough downtime** — On the opposite end is the problem of overdoing it. For people used to scheduling writing “windows” into any available free moment, the instinct to fill every minute with writing can be hard to turn off. It is, however, possible to overwork. Going full-time should not lead to burnout. This problem particularly afflicts people who were excellent producers before they switched to full-time status, because their habits work against them. For those people, scheduling downtime is of paramount importance, and enforcing that downtime difficult. It doesn’t count as “relaxing” if you’re still secretly working, or you quit

relaxing early to get back to work.

- **Not enough flexibility** — Compensating for a lack of structure often leads to the imposition of a routine too rigid to survive both “life happens” moments and the human tendency to rebel against too much order. Many creatives started out by setting admirable schedules, only to end up cheating on those schedules to escape the feeling that they were in a cage. Finding the balance between enough routine to foster productivity and enough flexibility to prevent boredom requires (surprisingly) a lot of trust in yourself: that you won’t go off the rails and not come back to your desk. Even pros with multiple projects under their belt confessed to sometimes worrying that they wouldn’t finish the next.

- **Not enough focus** — The proverb not to mistake motion for action is another pitfall. It’s not enough to “write something” or “work on some administrivia” ... you have to pick the right things on which to focus. Many people reported having problems with diffusion of effort, or an instinct to prioritize projects that never went anywhere. Also in this category was “not having a good place to work,” which led to disruptions either from other people, or in the creative themselves as they lost concentration (more about that later). The expansion of free time seems to particularly lend itself to the proliferation of dead end projects: it’s that urge to explore things we dropped in order to prioritize whatever was paying the bills. Figuring out how to cordon off experimental projects from paying ones is a crucial skill.

Common styles

Having identified common problems, I asked what finally worked for people once they beat them, and in those answers found a pattern: people tend toward either goal-based or time-based methods.

- **Goal-based** — This involves picking specific projects and gauging your progress based on milestones achieved. People who prefer goal-based methodology tended to make schedules, usually for the year or the quarter, and decide on project deadlines early in the process. They figure out how much work they need to complete—and in how much time—in order to meet those deadlines, and then they plan their months or weeks accordingly. Another type of goal-based thinking is word count or chapter goals.

- **Time-based** — Time-based methodology prioritizes “time in the chair.” People who like this method measure their progress based on how long they spend on each activity they’d like to complete. *This week I’ll be spending the hours between 9 a.m. and 12 p.m. in the chair for four days* is a typical time-based goal. People who like word sprints are also using time-based strategies. It’s useful to note here that while nearly half of the people I talked to prefer to get their creative work done before lunch, there was no real consensus on the best time to work. Some people preferred to do their writing after midnight while others wrote in the afternoons or evenings. “What works best for you, as long as the work gets done” was the rule.

Note that these styles are a gradient, with many people leaning toward one style or another, but that doesn’t mean people don’t sometimes switch based on their needs, their life, or their project load. There’s no reason not to use a mix of both if doing so appeals to you.

Common add-ons

Two other themes cropped up frequently:

- **Exercise** — A surprising number of creatives block out time for daily exercise; in fact, having the opportunity to do so was considered a perk by many. Some jog, others use machines. A handful do weights, take walks, or engage in sports. At least three people pestered their family members into accompanying them outside. Which leads to...
- **Family time** — One of the bonuses of working for yourself is having more flexibility to meet family needs. More writers than you'd expect are primary caregivers for sick or elderly family members, along with the expected number who are taking care of children. This led to a repeated piece of advice: you shouldn't let your work overwhelm your family time if that's one of the reasons you've decided to stay home. Plan to prioritize this—and enjoy it fully while you're doing it—if it's one of your goals.

An aside

While the topic of workspace is outside the scope of this article, finding the right workspace is part of the struggle when you start full-time; a space that might have worked for you for an hour might not cut it for five or six, or you'll find it's perfect for the morning when you previously had time to work, but horrible for the afternoon/evening. Some of the problems you think might be schedule-related might actually be workspace-related, so examining *where* you work can often solve problems with *how* or *when*.

Final observations

As with anything relating to your work process, reassess often. Your needs will change over time, whether that's because your life has or you've gotten complacent with the routine you've developed. There's no harm and much good in doing a regular check-in to see if you're both happy and productive—at the right things! If not, make changes.

Finally, the first, and most frequently reported phenomenon of those I consulted, was the settling-in period. I've left that for last, because the fact that everyone had these issues makes clear that figuring out how best to structure your time isn't easy. It took me a month, which was actually *faster* than the average among the people I polled. Half a year to two years was more common, with several outliers needing four to five! So if you feel like you're flailing, you're not alone. You're building the business processes for yourself from the ground up, and that's not the work of a day.

The full-time route is exciting for some, and for others—like me!—a chance to exhale. With freedom comes great responsibility! You are now in command of your productivity and your hours. Don't be afraid to experiment as long as the work gets done. Happy writing!

M.C.A. Hogarth is a former vice president of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, and the author of over 40 novels in the genres of fantasy, science fiction, and romance. She is also a professional visual artist, and doodles cartoon jaguars for fun. See samples at her website, mcahogarth.org.

This is Your Brain on Writing

By Michele Dunaway



I see dead people. Actually, I don't, but I figured this line from the movie *The Sixth Sense* would be a good hook for this article. However, I do see people in my head when I'm writing. It's like watching a movie and I'm trying to jot down on paper everything I see. There are times, like after my mom died, when the movie screen remained blank for years.

However, I didn't give my writer's block or my brain much thought—until I attended a workshop at the Romance Writers of America national convention this summer in Denver, where author Barbara Wallace talked about how “female artists have a special burden.” She mentioned how all writers often seem to battle depression and demons, and that we can have writer's brain, which she described as (and this is from my notes) “I don't want to be bothered, but I love having written.”

Then she hit those of us in the audience with the fact that writer brains are different, and upon getting home, I decided to follow up and do my own research.

On June 20, 2014, Carl Zimmer reported for the [New York Times](#) that after doing MRI scanning, the researchers “observed a broad network of regions in the brain working together as people produced their stories. But there were notable differences between the two groups of subjects. The inner workings of the professionally trained writers in the bunch, the scientists argue, showed some similarities to people who are skilled at other complex actions, like music or sports.”

But you have to read further down in the article to find out the most interesting aspects. While novice writer brains were engaged (as visible on MRI imaging), the more experienced writer brain scans revealed that the brains of expert writers worked differently. Other areas were engaged.

Zimmer wrote, “During brainstorming, the novice writers activated their visual centers. By contrast, the brains of expert writers showed more activity in regions involved in speech.”

The researchers further discovered that “deep inside the brains of expert writers, a region called the caudate nucleus became active. In the novices, the caudate nucleus was quiet.”

So in essence, the more experienced writers had developed an innate skill that they could rely on, similar to that of how a professional athlete reacts and plays better as compared to an athlete just beginning the sport.

In 2010, Rosanne Bane wrote an abstract "[The Writer's Brain](#)." She asserted that "In a survey I conducted with 350 professional and aspiring writers, 94% report experiencing some form of writing resistance. The most commonly cited forms of resistance include: distractions (94%), procrastination (84%), initial inertia or difficulty getting started (84%), anxiety or fear (70%) and writer's block (67%). Other forms of resistance cited include: staying too busy to write, self-doubt, self-criticism, fear, perfectionism, feeling overwhelmed, inexplicable exhaustion when sitting down to write."

She attributed this to the human brain where "The many forms of resistance can be categorized by the instinctive actions taken when the limbic system is triggered. When threatened, all mammals will freeze for a moment before choosing to fight or flee."

While her abstract focused mainly on how to help students focus on and manage their responses in order to be better creative writers, my takeaway of her premise was that when the limbic system is triggered, we will resist writing. We will fight it (miss deadlines, strive for perfection or be overly critical) or we will flee it (shopping, cleaning, doing other tasks).

Yet, declaring it to be neurological oversimplifies the fact that many writers we know struggle with mental health disorders, including depression. To delve more into that, I read an article from the July 2014 *The Atlantic* titled "[Secrets of the Creative Brain](#)." Psychiatrist and neuroscientist [Nancy C. Andreasen](#) wrote of the subjects she studied that "One interesting paradox that has emerged during conversations with subjects about their creative processes is that, though many of them suffer from mood and anxiety disorders, they associate their gifts with strong feelings of joy and excitement."

Her studies, which over the years have focused on why some of the most creative people have mental health disorders, especially mood disorders such as depression and bipolar, led her to an aha moment. "For years, I had been asking myself what might be special or unique about the brains of the workshop writers I had studied. In my own version of a eureka moment, the answer finally came to me: creative people are better at recognizing relationships, making associations and connections, and seeing things in an original way—seeing things that others cannot see."

After focusing on this aspect of her study (which you can read through the link above), she wrote, "One possible contributory factor is a personality style shared by many of my creative subjects. These subjects are adventuresome and exploratory. They take risks. Particularly in science, the best work tends to occur in new frontiers. (As a popular saying among scientists goes: "When you work at the cutting edge, you are likely to bleed.") They have to confront doubt and rejection. And yet they have to persist in spite of that, because they believe strongly in the value of what they do. This can lead to psychic pain, which may manifest itself as depression or anxiety, or lead people to attempt to reduce their discomfort by turning to pain relievers such as alcohol."

She also observed a few other things, including the following:

- Many creative people are autodidacts. They like to teach themselves.
- Many creative people are polymaths, as historic geniuses including Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci were.
- Creative people tend to be very persistent, even when confronted with skepticism or rejection.

Andreasen ends by giving an example of John Nash, winner of the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences and subject of the movie *A Beautiful Mind*. Nash was often institutionalized for paranoid schizophrenia. Andreasen relays a quote in Sylvia Nasar's biography where Nash told a colleague "The ideas I had about supernatural beings came to me the same way that my mathematical ideas did. So I took them seriously."

Basically, what I summarized from my reading is that highly creative people, who can get ideas from states of "rest," and who can teach themselves, can also get ideas that can eventually cause distress. Realizing that our brains create both good and bad and that we may receive these messages in the same way can be eye opening. Perhaps the first step is recognizing that if this is the way our writer brains are wired, and that researchers can see these differences on MRI scans, and if we realize this is how our brains work, then we can start to address what our brains need. That way we can not only create, but keep ourselves healthy doing it. Perhaps we can work on diminishing our fight or flight tendencies and those tendencies to attempt to reduce our discomfort through means that may simply cause more harm. There is no shame in seeking mental health services.

So my final takeaway? While I have no real answers, I found it reassuring to know that science can at least explain why I think differently, and why I perhaps see people in my head (although I don't talk back to them). It explains why I suffer bouts of self-doubt and why agents not returning my emails may bother me more than it should.

It's also one reason why, as your *Nink* editor, I've been so glad to feature Denise Agnew's Creativity column, because she's had great suggestions for when your brain simply isn't doing what you want it to do and how to work through some of your doubts and creativity.

One final note, let me repeat that there's no shame in seeking mental health services. Your brain may be sending you the wrong messages because of how it's wired. You aren't alone, and it's not "in your head." It literally is your head. Take care of you. You matter.

Michele Dunaway is your *Nink* editor. She thanks you for all the positive feedback you've sent her publicly and privately. It means a great deal.

Retrain Your Writer's Brain

By Michele Dunaway



"Genius is one percent inspiration, ninety-nine percent perspiration."

—Thomas Edison

"If that's the case, I'm the smartest person in the world and also the sweatiest."

—Me

About a week after I'd written the article "This is Your Brain on Writing," I attended my local RWA chapter workshop titled "Break Through Writer's Block and Unleash Your Creativity" with [Kelsey Horton](#), life coach for creatives and author of *Robot Coconut Trees*. Horton is one of those bubbly, upbeat speakers who makes an hour workshop fly by. Sitting there, I realized that I was pre-gaming the NINC conference. As *Nink* editor, with the October issue going to press during the conference, I found myself also wanting to whet your appetite for all the conference reports you'll get starting in November. I also found that this workshop continued on with the theme of getting into your writer's brain. So along those lines...

Before Horton shared what she called her "Five Pillars to Nurture Our Writing Lives," she said, "When we're writing, you are taking stuff that doesn't exist and creating something. We don't remember that enough."

And I realized she was right. My computer screen displayed nothing but a blank Microsoft Word document before I began typing this article, and by the time you are reading these exact words, you're over 200 new words in, the blank page starting to fill up.

Horton reminded my writers' group that we need to show up for ourselves, no matter where we are in our process or in our career, and that no one can do our work for us. Our creative journeys really are a journey. They are unique to us. Only we can walk our own path, whatever that path may happen to be.

Next she asked the question, how do we keep stoking the fires? How do we continue to capture that joy from when we were first writing? Even more specific, why did we first start writing creatively?

Think about that for a minute.

To be NINC members, we have written at least two published novels that met specific guidelines. I don't know about you, but I don't think I've really given a second thought as to why I started writing. Maybe I spent 15 minutes contemplating for a bio long ago, but certainly not since. For me, I started writing in first grade. In seventh grade, my English teacher put pictures on the wall and we chose one and wrote about it. Now I see this writing assignment as her time to grade papers while we all scribbled, but she'd glance over our stories and say, "Great job." By high school, my stepsister and I would type up stories on an old green typewriter, the kind where we had to constantly replace the worn-out ribbon. She wrote westerns and killed all the boys in the neighborhood. I wrote romance novels and married them. She was my first critique partner.

So why did you start writing? Was it because you had a need to share? That you couldn't keep good thoughts to yourself? Was it because you could see people in your head and needed to get them out? That was also me, and because I liked that reality I envisioned in my head so much better than "real life." Was your reason to write also because of an endorphin rush? My partner for this part of the workshop, Eileen Graessle, shared that she felt better with a happily ever after. "I liked the positive energy, and writing gives me that feeling," she said. She shared she also has one book she wrote that she loves to reread, and I shared that I did the same, and that I would get that "Who wrote this? It's good" feeling, and then I remember that hey, that author was me.

Perhaps you also began writing because you could turn a hobby into a job you love. We can bend time with our novels: no matter what else we have to accomplish in our days and weeks, somehow we also have this complete creation when our work-in-progress is finished.

Horton pointed out that your goal is to figure out how to get back to that initial feeling of when you first wrote *for yourself*, when writing was playful, when you didn't know the rules or formula, and when you wrote only because something compelled you to do so, not because you had a deadline.

So, without further ado, here are Horton's Five Pillars to Nurture Our Writing Lives, as taken from my notes, not the handout she generously provided.

Number One: Accept Ourselves Fully

You are a writer. Not everyone is a writer, but you are. It may not be convenient, as it may make you different from your friends. She suggested to look in a mirror and give yourself a talk as if you were talking to a friend. Own who you are. Say some version of "I am a writer and I accept myself fully." Say "I may be different but that's okay." Whatever you need to tell yourself.

Number Two: Daily Habits

Daily habits often involve limits and structure. Is it writing when your best time to write is? Is it turning off social media? Is it writing somewhere else? Is it doing timed writing? Is it placing time limits on your research so you don't get distracted? Is it doing something related to writing (like reading) on days you don't write? Whatever it is, you must find your best habit.

Habits are decisions you make. Why did you make these choices? Focus on the here and now. Be intentional.

Number Three: Creativity

Often we get disconnected from ourselves so our voice may not sound like ourselves when we are writing, or we get blocked because we are disconnected from our creativity (Denise Agnew's *Nink* columns have had great suggestions to help with this). Whereas habits are limits and structure, creativity is nurture and inspiration. You are creative in general, but now you need to figure out what to do when the ideas dry up and when the journaling doesn't help.

Horton suggested trying to tell someone else you're a writer, such as when the Starbucks barista says, "How is your day?" you answer, "Great. I've been working on my writing." The more you say it, the more your mind accepts it, that this is who you are and what you do. I'm a teacher, and I have no issue telling people that. We should be the same with saying we're writers.

Horton also suggested that we get in a rut when we get so much into a groove that we forget to stretch ourselves. In the early days of our writing, we had to risk. We had to do some scary stuff and put ourselves and our books out there. But after awhile, that becomes status quo. Safe. Sort of a "been there/done that." We need to find what Horton described as "our personal edge." While there is nothing wrong with the status quo, we must keep moving forward and take risks.

Number Four: Support

This part really hit home for me. Horton said we see or tend to focus on the bad: reviews, people who dismiss us, rejections, etc. Yes, that anger can be channeled into good, and we can feed on those who put us down and use our desire to prove them wrong as motivation. However, soon it feels normal to find motivation from the negative rather than the positive. People, Horton said, generally want to support you. They want you to succeed. Generate a list of how you are supported. Who watches the kids while you write? How does your day job perhaps support you—mine is by providing employer-covered health insurance, allowing me to know that's never a worry. How do your friends, who may not even be writers, support you? Make a list every day of who/what supported you and talk up the positive.

Change the narrative. It's a privilege to write. We get to take words and make something new (I'm over 1000 now, so time to start wrapping up).

Number Five: Future Me

Your next book already exists somewhere in the future. Your job in this moment is to bring it to life and channel what you see in the future into the now.

Final thoughts

As you get all these ideas, they may seem like another list of things to do, which isn't the point. Saying you will start habits can seem stressful, so take the pressure off yourself. Horton ended by talking about balance, using the analogy that we writers are on a hamster wheel. The

longer we try for balance, the longer we go in circles. Something will always happen that will throw you off.

It's easy to go to motivational talks, but when the pumping up fades and life returns, we fall back into the status quo. Horton suggests implementing an action to move your life in a direction you want, but start with just one action step, for a week. Don't overdo it. Listen to your body and listen to your mental health.

And from my chapter mates: Let go of perfection. When someone asks how you are, answer something besides "I'm busy." Busy shouldn't be a badge of honor. If one month is busy, okay, because some months are like that. But if your life is busy all the time, what can you change? We have a vision of our future selves, but the reality is that it's still really us.

Horton ended with a quote from [Natalie Goldberg](#), from Goldberg's *Wild Mind: Living the Writer's Life*: "You have to let writing eat your life and follow it where it takes you. You fit into it; it doesn't fit neatly into your life. It makes you wild. Let yourself burn. Let yourself want something badly. It's a life force."

However, I liked this Goldberg quote I found on the internet better: "If you want to write, write. This is your life, you are responsible for it. You will not live forever. Don't wait. Make the time now."

After all, your future self has already written that next book. Your present self simply needs to be ready to catch it.

Michele Dunaway, your Nink editor, realizes that she's written a lot of articles for October so that she could put the issue to bed early and take some time off before the deluge of editing wonderful conference reports. If you have a story idea for NINC, she's buying content for January 2019 and beyond. Send your story idea to newsletter@ninc.com.

The Mad Scribbler

A good story, well told

By Laura Resnick



“I like a good story well told. That is the reason I am sometimes forced to tell them myself.”

—Mark Twain

Demonstrating that we are indeed turning into our mothers, a close friend recently sent me a newspaper clipping, along with a handwritten note, saying she looked forward to discussing the article with me.

The article, published the first weekend in August in the culture-and-arts section of *The Wall Street Journal*, was “The Way We Read Now” by Adam Kirsch, and it was subtitled, “A new survey of America’s favorite novels shows that storytelling moves us far more than literary quality.”

My friend wrote to me that reading the clipping reminded her of something I have talked about for years, the satisfaction of “a good story, well told.”

The WSJ article discusses the results of the Great American Read, which Kirsch described as “a new initiative from PBS, which set out to produce a list of America’s 100 favorite works of fiction... based on a poll of more than 7,000 American readers.” You can find the list [here](#).

The list was released in spring, and the results were turned into a current PBS television series where a host discusses those 100 books and conducts interviews with people. There’s also related interactive social media, an online reading club, and a new book containing short essays about the 100 chosen novels. By the end of October, PBS will announce America’s favorite novel, to be determined by online voting. (Find out more about all this [here](#).)

First of all, let’s get the compulsive housekeeping bit out of the way: I have read 38 of the books on the list.

Although the overall list doesn’t reflect much of my own taste, some of my favorites are there, such as *Outlander*, by Diana Gabaldon; *Pride and Prejudice*, by Jane Austen; and *Catch-22*, by Joseph Heller. There are also some titles here that I liked but didn’t love, and others that I loved when I read them many years ago, but which I think I’d react to differently if I read them

now, such as Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With The Wind* and Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*; times have changed, and so have I.

Some titles on the list are novels that I found mediocre, disappointing, or a slog to get through. And I see some books on the list that aren't a particular author's best work, in my opinion (ex. there are at least 20 Agatha Christie novels I prefer to the one named on the list: *And Then There Were None*).

There are books here that I read in childhood (*Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White), as a teenager (*A Separate Peace* by John Knowles), as a young woman (*Tales of the City* by Armistead Maupin), and within recent years (*The Help* by Kathryn Stockett).

There are also a number of books I tried to read but never finished, including Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (at 587,287 words, I never had the stamina to get all the way through it), and about half a dozen titles there that I keep meaning to read, and some that I will definitely never read—not even if one of them turns out to be America's favorite novel at the conclusion of the PBS poll.

Looking at the list of my fellow Americans' 100 favorite novels reminds me of where I was in my life when I read those various books, and of what the world was like at the time. The novels we read become so closely associated in memory with who we were when we first read them.

Indeed, one of the things immediately noticeable when looking at the Great American Read list is how many of the titles are classics typically encountered in childhood, such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, by Lewis Carroll; *Anne of Greene Gables*, by Lucy Maud Montgomery; *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, by Mark Twain; The Chronicles of Narnia (a multi-book series counted as one title on this list), by C.S. Lewis; and *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott.

(Now I'm remembering my grandma giving me my mother's copy of *Little Women*, sitting on a bookshelf upstairs in my grandparents' house, when I was about 10 years old.)

J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series also makes the list, which isn't at all surprising—a whole generation of people grew up alongside Harry, the protagonist of the most influential new children's fiction of my lifetime.

I am surprised by how many school-assigned books appear on the list, including *Great Expectations*, by Charles Dickens; *Gulliver's Travels*, by Jonathan Swift; and *Moby Dick*, by Herman Melville. (My father, a science fiction author, wrote a novel called *The Soul Eater* that was inspired by *Moby Dick*.)

Probably the most puzzling entry on the whole list, one that I assume is also from readers' school years, is *The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan. Written in the 17th century, when prose was dense, syntax was puzzling, and spelling was whimsical, it is described on the PBS website as an "allegory for Puritan morals and teachings." I mean... *that* is the favorite novel of a portion of survey respondents? Seriously?

I have no explanation for this.

Another broad category of titles is major bestsellers, including recent ones: George R.R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* (another series counted as one title); J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (ditto); Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of A Geisha*; Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*; Tom Clancy's *The Hunt For Red October*; Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*; Gillian Flynn's *Gone*

Girl; E.L. James' Fifty Shades of Grey series; James Patterson's Alex Cross series; Stephanie Meyer's Twilight series; Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One*; Nicolas Sparks' *The Notebook*; and so on.

The trait that books in this subset have in common is that lots and *lots* of people read them and loved them. Otherwise, I don't think much common ground exists between *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Notebook*, or between *The Hunt For Red October* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*. But that one common trait—lots of people love that story—is really important. It's central. It's everything.

Well, I think so. The WSJ views it a bit differently. Kirsch's article explores why literary lions like Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, Joyce Carol Oates, Jonathan Franzen, and William Faulkner aren't on the list.

Surely one obvious reason is that since the list is limited to 100 authors, there just isn't enough room there for *everyone* who ever wrote a great book, or a book that people remember fondly, or a book that readers love. Most of *my* favorite novels aren't on the list, after all.

Kirsch also asserted that one conclusion which can be drawn from the Great American Read list is that "American readers don't care very much about good prose." He cited *Fifty Shades of Grey* (James) and *The Da Vinci Code* (Brown), both on the list, as evidence of this. While those two writers aren't celebrated for their prose style, the statement overlooks numerous prose virtuosos who *are* on the list, including: Oscar Wilde (*The Picture of Dorian Grey*); Joseph Conrad (*Heart of Darkness*); and Toni Morrison (*Beloved*).

"Another way of putting it," Kirsch wrote, "is that when Americans read, we mostly read for story, not style. We want to know what happens next, and not to be slowed down by writing that calls attention to itself."

Well, um, *yeah*.

Surely writing that slows down the story by calling attention to itself is the *opposite* of "good prose?" It's jazz hands. I may love a novelist's writing style or use of language, but it should be the most fluid and seamless language for telling that particular story. If the writing calls attention to itself, then it pulls me out of the story, rather than luring me to dive deeper.

With few exceptions, readers open a novel hoping for a compelling, absorbing experience: a good story, well told. Since everyone is different and all art is subjective, very different sorts of novels provide that experience for different people. This is why someone in your life can hand you "the best book I've ever read," and you find yourself bouncing off it within a few chapters, or wading through it with exasperation, or shocked to discover someone in your life loves a 17th century allegory for Puritan morals and teachings.

At any rate, I do agree with Kirsch's conclusion that what America's favorite books provide to the readers who love them is sustenance, and that titles on this list represent some of "the stories that we need to make sense of our lives."

Lists like this draw us in as readers, reminding us of the experience of becoming absorbed in good stories. Books are a crucial window to the wider world, and also a window into ourselves at times when we dearly need that empathetic insight. And for you and me, they also contain the stories and reading experiences that influenced us to become writers.

Columnist [Laura Resnick](#) has been a voracious reader even longer than she's been a novelist.

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As a NINC member, your benefits include industry discounts, newsletter and website articles, professional services directory, networking opportunities, and more.

We've compiled all of these—which you can also find on our website—into this list as a helpful reminder.

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Novelists, Inc., in acknowledgment of the crucial creative contributions novelists make to society, asserts the right of novelists to be treated with dignity and in good faith; to be recognized as the sole owners of their literary creations; to be fairly compensated for their creations when other entities are profiting from those creations; and to be accorded the respect and support of the society they serve.

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