



PENCILS DOWN!

The art of *not* writing is a key tool for writers.
Here's how and when to use it.

BY ANICA MROSE RISSI



You're a writer. You write! Or, at least, you really *should* be writing...I mean, if you step away from the keyboard for this long, are you even still a real writer?

For goodness' sake, *yes*.

Writers who aren't writing are often consumed with guilt and doubts. But time away from your desk isn't merely good for your work-life balance. It's also a crucial part of the writing process.

Knowing how and when to step away from the page is an important element of craft – one that's no less essential than fine-tuning your ear for dialogue, sharpening your revision skills, or honing your voice. As with those other skills, you'll discover how best to wield time off through experimentation and practice.



The first step to getting good at not writing is to acknowledge, embrace, and believe that stepping away from the work – at the right times and in the right ways – is part of the work itself. Just as pages need white space, writers need breaks. You can't be all ink.

The second step is figuring out what those right times and right ways are for you and your project(s). No two writers' methods and techniques are exactly the same, and yours might differ from project to project.

As you practice and refine the fine art of rest, here are few kinds of writing breaks to try incorporating into your process. Be deliberate and purposeful about the time you set aside, and don't be afraid to experiment! Remember, (not) writing should be rewarding. Done well, it can even be fun.

The Fermentation Stage

Just as that sourdough starter you've nurtured during the pandemic needs time to bubble and rise, so your ideas must be fed with yeast from the air before they can produce great bread. (Just let me have that one? Thanks.)

The goal during this generative period away from the desk is to think a little about your project each day – while driving, washing dishes, reading, falling asleep – and jot ideas as they come, without worrying about *writing*. Keep notebooks and pens in key places, like your jacket pocket and next to the bed, but don't force the process. It takes the time it takes. If needed, remind yourself: Thinking counts as writing!



The Break From Routine

Are you a disciplined writer with a set-in-stone schedule and unbreakable daily routine? Amazing! As long as that's working for you, work it. But when you find yourself feeling a little stuck in your rut, give your brain new fuel and inspiration by changing your tried-and-true patterns. If you normally work at a desk on your computer, get up and bring a notebook and pen to the park. If you always write first thing in the morning, skip a session, and add a quick one to your evening instead. Introducing an element of novelty or surprise to your process can freshen up your draft and your brain.

The Snack and a Nap

Sometimes, you're too grumpy to be creative. Too distracted by life or social media. Simply not in the mood to write.

Don't force it. Get up from your desk and take a dance break or eat

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chocolate. Go climb a tree. Soak in some sunshine. Call a friend. Take a snooze. Do whatever you need to do to get reenergized and return to the work more focused and refreshed.

The Time to Forget

When you're too close to a draft, you can't see what's on the page – you'll only see what you *think* is there. Before you revise, get some distance from your manuscript and, ideally, forget what you've written. Put it away for a few weeks or months. Think about – and do – something else.

Don't let not-writing guilt seep in during this time. Reframe it to yourself not as time off but time invested. Sometimes not working *is* the work. Between drafts, the best thing you can do for your writing is ignore it.

The Skin Thickening

When I've taken a project as far as I can on my own, I'm often eager for feedback yet too fragile to receive it. If you react defensively to edits or a critique, you're probably human and might need a few days to stomp around, muttering "no one truly appreciates my genius" before you get over it. So take that time. Even if you're excited about the feedback, give it a few days to sink in before you tackle how best to approach it.

Wait it out until you're ready to ask yourself, "If I had to find a way to incorporate this feedback, how would I do it?" You might find that actually, *you* failed to appreciate the editor's genius. You just need a little time to get there.

The Brief Fling

When drafting feels like drudgery, push it aside and create something fun. Write a letter, song, or journal entry. Sketch a comic strip. Do a craft project. Pitch an article to *The Writer*. Jot limericks. Play with words and ideas unrelated to the project you're ignoring and reignite your creative spark by truly enjoying something else on the side. Take time off to play and



reclaim your joy. Remember what you love about creating.

The Someone Take That Toy Away from Her

Are you fiddling with your draft just to fiddle? Chances are strong it's not helping. Step back and, by all means, work off that anxiety elsewhere, but leave the words alone.

When you're obsessing over small changes that make a scene or sentence different but not better – or when you can no longer tell if that's what you're doing – you need to put the pencil down for a bit. Same deal if you previously liked many things about your draft but now find that you hate the whole thing.

Losing faith moments show up to every project. Wave, but don't hand them the keys.

The Satisfaction of Being Done for the Day

Do you feel constant guilt or panic because, no matter much you write, the work is never done? Do you avoid writing at all because you know you can't write *enough*? Give yourself a mental break.

Set small, achievable, realistic goals for each writing session – aim to position yourself for success. When you've met a goal, cross it off your to-do list and allow yourself to

feel finished, for now. Your work is done for the day, and it's time to go off the clock.

The Reward Break

Writing is a long game. As you take small steps toward larger goals, it's important to notice, feel proud of, and celebrate minor triumphs and achievements. Pause to savor your accomplishments. Admire your best sentences. Those small boosts will fuel you along the way.

The True Rest

Sleep. Relax. Let go of guilt. Do other things. Give yourself a vacation from writing.

True rest is most effective when you're purposeful and deliberate about applying it. Use the time well by absolving yourself from feeling bad about it. It will do the most for your writing (and your spirits) if you embrace it and just let it feel good.

The Necessary Diversion

A creative life has ebb and flow. It includes changes, surprises, interruptions.

It's OK to take breaks from your writing to apply your time and energy elsewhere.

It's OK to take breaks from your writing to live.

When you're ready to return, the

page will still be there. You'll figure out what to do.

The Pause Before the Finish Line

When you're done with a project – truly finished – and ready to hit *send*... wait. Give it a day or two (if your deadline allows it). A few more ideas or solutions might pop up and prove you weren't completely finished after all.



The Deep Breath

When you're feeling blocked and struggling to write – to keep going or begin at all – pause, take a deep breath, and acknowledge your feelings and fears. Recognize your stumbling blocks for what they are. (Fear of failure? Fear of success?) Figure out where they come from and why they appear. See them, set them aside, and keep writing. 📝

Anica Mrose Rissi is the author of more than a dozen books for kids and teens, including the new middle grade collection *Hide and Don't Seek: And Other Very Scary Stories*. Find her online at anicarissi.com and follow @anicarissi on Instagram and Twitter.

THE SURPRISING BENEFITS OF NOT WRITING

The **Writer** *Imagine • Write • Publish*

JULY 2021

2021
SUMMER
READING
PREVIEW

SHOW

'SHOW, DON'T TELL'
IS GREAT ADVICE...
IN THEORY.
IN PRACTICE,
IT'S NOT
THAT SIMPLE.

WE ASKED
THE PROS
HOW TO FIND THE
BEST BALANCE
BETWEEN
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