

Ways to level up

Ready to take your writing to the next level? Here's how.

BY ANICA MROSE RISSI

I see you, fellow writer: You're creative, talented, and ambitious. You take your writing seriously, and you strive to level up. You've written many things you're proud of, but you have not spun your magnum opus. It's in you, but sometimes you worry that you don't yet have the chops to let it out.

So let's build them.

It's time to push your craft and career to new heights – to reach for your artistic dreams and rise to meet or surpass them. You are ready to art harder than you've ever arted before.

But...how?

Good question. Start here.

Give in to the fire

You're a writer. Ideas ignite in you like sparks. They fly from the flame of your ambition. You've been feeding and protecting your creative fire, but you haven't allowed it to burn full and bright.

It's time to fan the flames and let that fire blaze. Stop containing and

confining this thing that is so important to you. Light it up. Let it roar.

What if this were the day, the week, the month, the year that you let your burning ambitions take over?

Live inside your work

Now that you've committed to following your drive, you must put in the time – not only toward writing more words but also toward living inside the world you're creating. Commit to mulling. Commit to daydreaming. Commit to letting your ideas simmer and regularly stirring the pot.

The time you spend thinking about your story *away* from the desk can be as important as the time you spend writing it. But you need to make it a habit. Find a regular time of day when you can turn off the podcasts, tune out other noise and obligations, and think about your characters, sentences, and scenes. Then do it: Use the commute to work, the minutes in the shower, or the miles of your workout to encourage your

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brain to wander through and around your story. How about first thing in the morning, right after you hit "snooze?" (Try tuning a clock radio to loud static instead of to beeping, music, or news, and train your thoughts to turn to your work-in-progress before your brain is fully awake.) Make it a routine. Weave it into your day, every day, until it's part of the fabric of your life.

Take honest stock

Know your own strengths, and don't coast on what's easy. Appreciate what's working well in your drafts, then set the bar higher for those areas. Whatever you're good at, challenge yourself to figure out how to do it even better.

Lean into your skills. Build scenes – or whole books – around the things you do best. Great at dialogue? Use it to liven up less-sparkling passages in your manuscript. Play with the form and content of your work to highlight and showcase your greatest strengths.

On the flip side: Know your own weaknesses – including which parts of the writing and revision process you least enjoy. Strategize ways to bolster, avoid, or eviscerate your weak spots.

Terrible at dialogue? Study movie and television scripts. Read your dialogue-heavy scenes out loud – or, better yet, get friends to read them to you – and take note of what makes you cringe. Get as specific with yourself as you can about what's not working so you can improve those scenes – or find ways to write around them.

Create accountability

Find and use a system of tracking, rewards, or accountability to push yourself toward the goals you're not quite reaching on your own. Want to write for 30 minutes first thing in the morning but have trouble regularly getting

out of bed? Use a calendar where you keep track of your writing sessions with a satisfying mark or sticker. Offer yourself a bribe that you know will give you the incentive. Commit to texting an accountability partner "I did the thing!" each morning after you've done it. Figure out the system most likely to push and motivate you, and use it.

Think bigger – and smaller

Set extremely specific goals for your work – not for what might happen to it in the marketplace but for what you hope will happen on the page, and within the reader. Strategize about everything you want to achieve on a craft level – and where and how. Be as detailed and precise with your goals for the work – and its component parts – as possible. Break each goal into its smallest steps. Go after them. Then reassess. Keep going until every sentence and every scene aid in achieving your vision.

Feel it in your chest

As you revise, stay open and attuned to that buzzing feeling of *yes* that happens inside you when your writing is at its best. Believe in it. Follow it. And challenge yourself to fix every word or moment in your draft that doesn't yet produce it.

Pay attention while you read

Read. Read deeply, widely, critically, thoughtfully, slowly, and swiftly. Read to open yourself up to new ideas, different voices, unusual perspectives, and unexpected turns of phrase. Read work you admire, and task yourself with noticing and examining – as specifically as possible – *why* you connect with it. Read work you loathe, and be equally detailed in your critique of what you wish the writer had done differently. Apply the lessons learned to

your own work. After all, the first reader you need to please with your writing is yourself.

Keep your eyes on the page

Treat writing like it's your job – but don't forget to identify, hold onto, and remember why it started as your passion.

The further you get in your writing career, the more industry concerns will enter your consciousness, and there are times when you'll need to think about those. But during your writing time, the work is all that matters. The writing is all you can control.

Block out the noise. Keep your eyes on the page and your heart in the story. Find the pieces of the process that give you joy, and let that joy feed and reward you.

Don't lose sight of how far you've come

For those of us who are creative and ambitious, the goal posts are constantly shifting. The better you get at writing, and the more you achieve, the higher your standards and dreams become. That's not a bad thing! But even as you aim for bigger and loftier goals, it's important to notice and appreciate the ones you've already met.

Remember to take stock not only of where you want to be as a writer but also where you started, how you've progressed, and what it took to get here. Avoid burnout and find more fulfillment on your continuous creative path by celebrating every small and large step along the way.

—Anica Mrose Rissi is the author of the *Anna, Banana* chapter-book series; the picture books *Watch Out for Wolf!*, *The Teacher's Pet*, and *Love, Sophia on the Moon*; and the young adult novels *Always Forever Maybe* and *Nobody Knows but You*. Follow her on Twitter and Instagram at @anicarissi.

TOP 20 WAYS TO PROMOTE A BOOK IN 2020

The *Writer*

Imagine • Write • Publish

MARCH 2020

HOW TO CURE A CASE OF

WRITER'S BLOCK

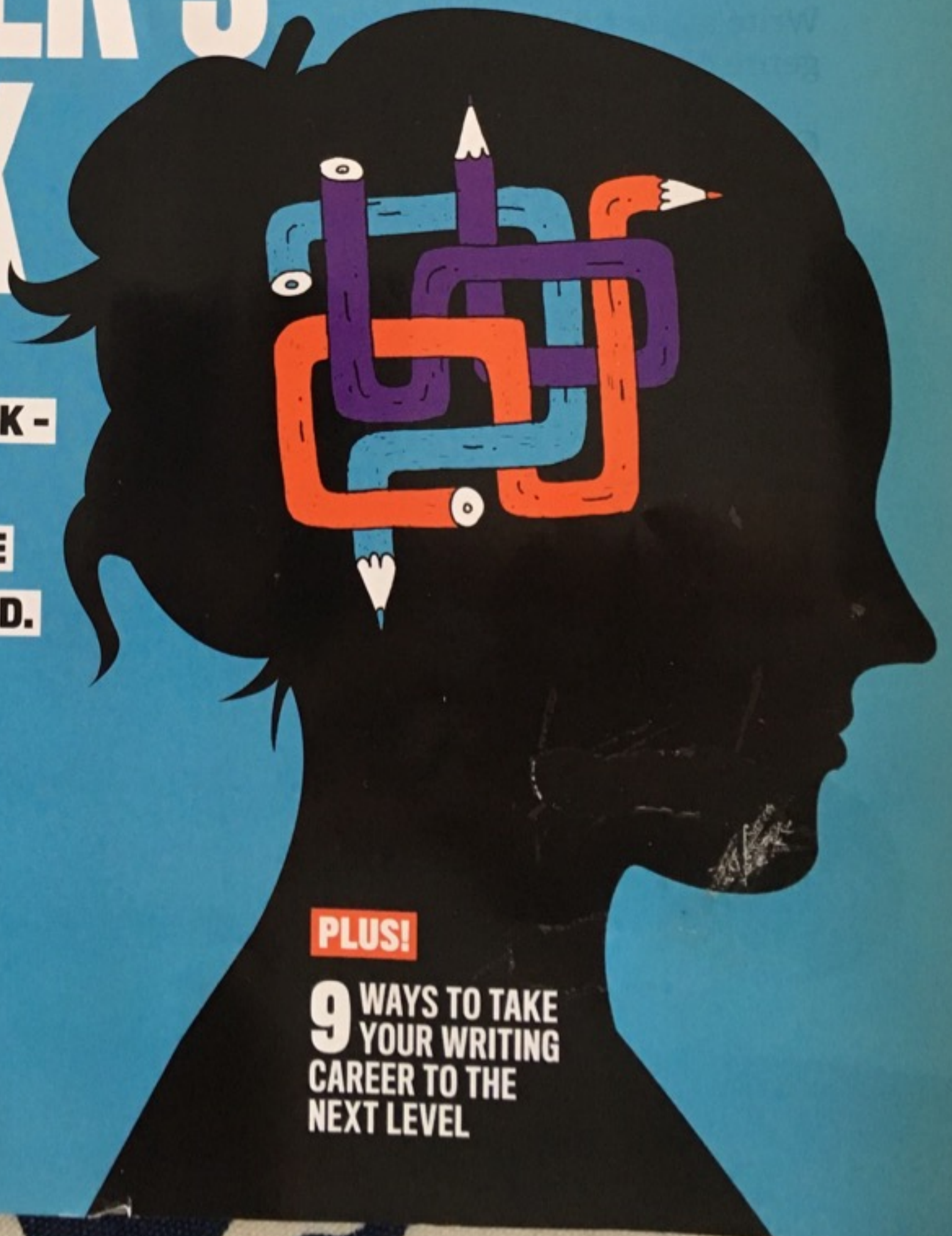
FIND THE **REAL** REASON

YOU'RE FEELING STUCK -

AND LEARN HOW TO

FINALLY OVERCOME

YOUR BLOCK FOR GOOD.



PLUS!

9 WAYS TO TAKE
YOUR WRITING
CAREER TO THE
NEXT LEVEL