The Writer sits at the computer, struggling to channel the Muse onto the depressingly empty page. It worked before, but today, everything typed ends up deleted. It was all so perfect the other day!

A commonly held belief of writing is that it is an unchanging extension of our soul. Either can write or we can’t.

In the opening lines of Jack Hart’s A Writer’s coach, he says “Novices sometimes imagine writing as a dark magic, something known only to some mystical inner circle. They pick up a professional’s finished work, marvel at its seamless perfection, and think, I could never do that.”

But later he writes that we are often taught that:

“The invidious mystique of writing taints the curriculum in almost every school. IN literature classes, you read a great works and marvel at the genius of the writers who produced them. In composition, you struggle to knock a few clumsy sentences together. Nobody expects you to see any connection between the diva’s aria and your Neanderthal grunts.”

A better method of writing that takes focus away from divinity. I would argue that, in the words of James Clear, a writer and author on habits, it is better to focus on creating long term systems rather than short term goals:

“Achieving a goal only changes your life for the moment. That’s the counterintuitive thing about improvement. We think we need to change our results, but the results are not the problem. What we really need to change are the systems that cause those results. When you solve problems at the results level, you only solve them temporarily. In order to improve for good, you need to solve problems at the systems level. Fix the inputs and the outputs will fix themselves.”

-<https://jamesclear.com/goals-systems>

I thought I was a good writer. My natural writing got me far. As a columnist at National Geographic Traveller, my writing had appeared in publications like Esquire, GQ, Vogue, and Conde Nast Traveller. At several stages of writing I’d often be beset by writer’s block. I’d procrastinate, I’d obsess with one article, but more importantly, I was always uncertain.

In the newsrooms of the Oregonian, writing coach and editor Jack Hart discovered that many veteran journalists had this problem. He, along with with a cabal of writers, coaches, and professors like Janet Emig, Peter Elbow, Chip Scanlan, and Donald Murray, emerged at the forefront of what became the Process Theory of Composition. Process composition championed the idea that writing, even at a high level, could be treated like any other craft.

An important part of the process is reducing tasks to component parts. Author Timothy Ferriss describes this in his book The 4 Hour Chef, detailing a methodology to reverse engineer any skill.

<https://www.businessinsider.com/tim-ferriss-disss-system-to-learn-anything-2015-3>

He describes the first step, Deconstruction, as asking “what are the minimal, learnable units, the LEGO blocks, I should be starting with.” This prevents anxiety and erodes the scale and impossibility of any task. When applied to writing, it becomes clear that many writing issues comes from not doing this. Writer’s are traditionally taught to execute many poetesses at once. There are many ways to divide writing. For me as a nonfiction writer, the process involves layers of Creativity, Structure, Transitions, Ledes/Kickers, and Polishing.

The blank page is always the first challenge to any creative, and so necessarily generating ideas is the first step to the process. Perhaps the best methods to do this surprisingly come from the world of advertising. On Madison Avenue, creative were, perhaps for the first time, forced to adhere to corporate deadlines where millions were on the line. Scamping was one, powerful idea generator where creativity was tapped by lowering standards, setting time limits, and increasing output:

“Creativity is a physical process, not a mental one. It's also something that can be easily taught through certain exercises. While some people are naturally more creative than others, those that aren't can make up for their lack of creativity through simple processes.

This process, as described to me by the president of Ogilvy Advertising, Rory Sutherland, is called "scamping."

The trick is to think as little as possible, and work as fast as possible. You'll probably start out with some dumb ideas. That's fine. The goal is to bounce from one dumb idea, to a less dumb idea, and so on. You'll soon find nuggets within these dumb ideas, and start building upon them. Personally, I wouldn't stop until I'd gone through an entire stack, which would take about two hours.

Once you're finished, it's simply a process of elimination. Go back through all your ideas and start sorting them into two piles: good and bad. Once you've done that, take the good pile and sort them again by good and better. Keep doing this until you've narrowed it down to five ideas.”

-<https://web.archive.org/web/20160310221655/https://www.reddit.com/r/LifeProTips/comments/49u67x/lpt_when_trying_to_come_up_with_something/>

This manner bypasses the muse, or at least summons her when and where you want.

While the idea of the tortured artist desperately searching for ideas seems ubiquitous it wasn’t always so prevelant.

In fact in an article entitled Blocked, The New Yorker describes how it came from a certain place and time.

“Writer’s block is a modern notion. Writers have probably suffered over their work ever since they first started signing it, but it was not until the early nineteenth century that creative inhibition became an actual issue in literature, something people took into account when they talked about the art. That was partly because, around this time, the conception of the art changed. Before, writers regarded what they did as a rational, purposeful activity, which they controlled. By contrast, the early Romantics came to see poetry as something externally, and magically, conferred. “

-<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/06/14/blocked>

If the ideas are the blood and guts of a story, then structure is its bones, the organizational principles that make it stand.

Most of us were taught outlining as children, but I feel a method that interfaces better with scamping comes from Shani Raja, a former editor at the Wall Street Journal, Economist, and Bloomberg. In his Udemy course “Editing Mastery: How to Edit Writing to Perfection” he teaches specific steps to form a logical framework for an article.

<https://www.udemy.com/editing-mastery/>

The steps are simple:

1. Atomoize the ideas and list them out, one per line

2. Tag each one with a general family marker

3. List out all the families

4. Rearrange the families in an order that works best

5. Physically move the points to the families

6. Physically rearrange the points within each family

Jack Hart further talks about this in A Writer’s Coach where he dubs the process a “jot outline”:

“You go through your notes and list the main topics you want to cover, jotting them down or typing them on the computer screen as you find them. If you’re using a computer, you then block-move those broad topics into logical order.

The act of writing down your few main topics, in order, gives you a step-by-step approach to the chaos of details you often face when information gathering ends. It relieves panic because it allows you to ease into the writing incrementally. It creates some distance between you and the story. And it’s a relaxing ritual.

If you’re facing a deadline, you may think you don’t have the time to outline. Bu you probably don’t have time not to.”

-A Writer’s Coach, p. 35.

But another powerful force is also at work in writing.

When legendary BBC documentarian David Attenborough takes you from the rainforests of the Amazon to the mountains of the Himalayas the *way* he did it is what you forget. It seems effortless, like a magician whisking you away to another, far distant land.

Shani Raja describes them as “narrative turns.” They offer a smooth intro to each new section, forming a secondary infrastructure within the article.

And as a viewer you accept it. That’s the magic of transitions.

Great writers, documentaries, and especially stand up comedians use them to elegantly shift from one, seemingly unrelated topic to another. In this blog post CEO and Kibin Co-Founder Travis Biziorek describes how transitions make or break standup routines.

<https://www.kibin.com/essay-writing-blog/how-comedians-teach-you-to-write-good-transition-sentences/>

Transitions are so important that Conan writer Laurie Kilmarten shared a compilation of them used as a go to reference for fellow professional comedian writers on the show.

<https://www.vulture.com/2018/04/a-great-comedy-resource-the-conan-writers-transitions-list.html>

Categorization helps in writing it allows writers to hone in and practice various elements of the craft. By analyzing a number of articles, and how journalists move from one topic to the next, we can classify transitions into types. Luckily, there does’ seem to be many classes of transitions. Over the years I’ve only been able to identity about 20 of them.

Quote by Jack Hart Lexicon of Ledes TKTKT

Beginnings and endings are the other big issues, once even highly advanced journalists have issues with. John McPhee wrote an article discussing his problem finding good endings in Structure, his New Yorker article.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/01/14/structure>

But many of the process wise bguys have solved in the same way that I solved transitions. Jack Hart had his Lexicon of Ledes” (Hart, p. 49), and Chip Scanlan describes his “Encyclopedia of Endings” in an article for the Poynter Institute.

<https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2004/putting-endings-first/>

In the past, first drafts were the first high wall to hurdle over, and often I just didn’t make it. With the mechanics of the article sorted, the bar to jump is a lot closer to the ground. All the mechanics are at play, smoothly guiding you from introduction, families of points, transitions all the way to endings.

However, research can easily become endless, especially when you’re writing nonfiction. That is why it’s best to do it now. It’s very different from the usual method, which focuses on potentially endless research. While I think research is often necessary if you don’t know what you’re saying or have no knowledge in the first place, the problem is that it can end up being a time drain. Perfectionalism and ccompleteism, two traits all-too-common in writers, function to make this a dangerous stage where you can never emerge from.

If you’ve done some initial research you know what you have to say - then get to writing and figuring out the structures and transitions. Holes can be clearly marked with the tag “TKTK” - the traditional journalistic method for indicating that further information will be added later. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/To_come_(publishing)>

Then fill in the holes - this limits endless deep research because it has now become highly targeted - more a puzzle piece with clearly delineated borders rather than infinitely deep, time sucking maw.

While you might have the full article complete, it’s much like, as Stephen King describes in On Writing, like a fossil that you’ve found, still buried in the earth.:

“Stories are relics…the writer’s job is to use the tools in his or her toolbox to get as much of each one out of the ground as intact as possible…To get even most of it, the shovel must give way to more delicate tools: air hose, palm pick, perhaps even a toothbrush.” - On Writing, p. 163 - 164

I find polishing to be a matter of repetition. As with scamping, the key is writing and rewriting with minimal in-the-moment editing. Keeping a synonym finder open, continue changing small elements without really stopping, using intuition and gut reactions to know if a word or fragment is correct.

[Input gif of this for this text]

Done correctly it’s very similar to the adage of the monkey on a typewriters producing Shakespeare.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Infinite_monkey_theorem>

The only difference is you’re using discernment to know when you’ve managed to hit on an amazing turn of phrase.

Visually this almost takes the form of a miniature bit of evolution, with the constant writing, synonym finder, and repetition acting as a genetic drift across successive generations while your instinct in keeping fragments as selection protocol. The key is, like scamping, to make the process mechanical and continuous.

WSJ edit Shani Raja has another method. For him it’s all about adding another layer, especially with implanting thematic elements and evocative verbs. He also goes on a hunt for common mistakes, like redundant phrasing and passive voice. According to Jack Hart, this layer can also mean adding simile, detail, and color.

While the nitty gritty is very important, there are some general tips for the overall process.

One great tip is what Jack Hart calls his First Law of Writing Improvement:

“A problem visible at any one stage of the writing process usually results from something that happened at the immediately preceding stage.” - A Writer’s Coach p. 7

I have noticed this to be very true. In his MasterClass James Patterson says to keep things moving quickly - he mentions moving quickly moving from one draft to the next to prevent intertia from slowing the system. While King doesn’t usually do as many drafts as Patterson, he does advocate finding the outlines of a story as fast as possible.

Don Murray harnesses this for problems with writing beginnings and endings:

“Draft a dozen leads, or two dozen. Just the first line or so. Do it quickly – a matter one minutes for each one – until you find the lead that focuses the story. Then develop that lead.” - Writing to Deadline, p. 135

While it sounds tedious it can save time in the long run:

“Drafting leads or last lines can be a good technique for meeting a deadline. The time invested to draft just a half a dozen leads pays good returns if you find the right lead instead of stumbling through a piece following the false direction of a bad lead.”

-Writing to Deadline, p. 112

All of these techniques put continue to put focus on the mechanics of the overall process rather than having the article succeed or fail on individual stages of the writing.

Another useful manner to view the process is by recruiting different personalities.

For scamping, imagine a part of yourself that’s a confident yet whimsical creatives. I know several of these personality types, the ones that are free spirits, who often don’t have a lot of new or unique things to offer, yet boldly proclaim them online as though they’re god’s gift to literature, spelling mistakes and all. Fundamentally, they believe that they are special and should be heard. Or alternatively, it’s the monkey on a typewriter, never stopping, gleefully pounding away to the music of the keyboard. This is perfect for scamping, rough drafts and some level of polishing, where cynicism is definitentely is just not useful.

The Analytic is useful for mechanical aspects of the process. He’s the person who doesn’t like the confusion of soft skills, but loves puzzles, mechanics, and is utterly enthralled with simple tasks with discrete rules. Or, the architect, the person who is enthralled with the big picture, like Tony Stark amiusedly designing the first Iron Man suit, throwing this away, keeping that, changing it up just to see, with none of the urgency for a final product, engrossed in playing with concepts. The entire article is like a jigsaw puzzle, carved so every piece is unique and fits just so. This is perfect for the organizational phase, where word choice is inconsequential.

The Magician is trying to pull a beautiful fast one on the audience. His hand movements may be highly technical, his tricks may involve complicated bits of string and false thumbs and look oh so mundane in the light of day. But to the audience he’s a whisking them from one place to the next, effortlessly. These are transitions - there are only a few, they are very mechanical, but when done write you don’t even know they’re there.

The Archivist loves to dive into facts and figures. She’s also a bloodhound and a detective, sleuthing for details. Bookish, she has to be held on a tight leash, but when reigned in she targets searches, and comes back out again with summaries to be placed neatly into the wholes carved out for her by the Analytic.

And lastly the Queen is the editor, the one who must be appeased above all else. She’s arrogant, anal retentive, demanding, the ultimate fashionista with unquestionable taste, requiring the highest of standards. And if she doesn’t like what she sees, she banishes the piece to another one of her earlier compatriots. She’s the one in charge of the details, formatting.

The other steps are combinations of these personalities. The monkey creative pounds on the keyboard to get through the first draft and for polishing a turn of phrase, though it works with the editor to know what to keep. The Analytic works with the Magician for transitions, because really there are only a few and it’s a mechanical act of matching the two together. The same occurs with beginnings and endings - there are only a few categorically, but the magician makes it hit home with a flash, and the editor presides over it, making sure it all hangs together.

Writing is a dissociative art. According to Jack Hart:

“Somehow they’ve [productive writers] learned what appears to be the secret to successful drafting – operating with a split personality. They have one mind-set when they’re getting through a first draft. But they adopt a completely different approach when they go back to polish the copy into finished form.

The happiest, most productive writers approach their rough drafts as a literary version of Mr. Hyde. They cast civilized restraint aside, letiting an uninhibited process of creation carry them quickly through the first version of the story. They don’t stop. They don’t revise. They don’t look back…

Only when they’ve finished with the draft do they slip back into a Dr. Jekyll persona. Then they sweat each detail, checking facts for accuracy, revising sentences for rhythm, and scrutinizing words for precise meanings.” - A Writer’s Coach p. 38

Luckily we don’t have to just rely on some and mirrors to recruit different skills.

Scamping can be practiced. NaNoWriMo is a program that focuses on word output rather than content, with a supportive community and a gamfiied system in place to fuel mastering the art of pounding on the keyboard. While that was the system that really helped me master it Write or Die is another program for writing online. It offers a mode where the program starts deleting words if typing stops for a few seconds, forcing users to write with, as the Guardian put it, “a virtual gun to the head.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/shortcuts/2014/oct/07/write-or-die-software-for-struggling-authors-david-nicholls>

Synonym finders are key for word choices. Synonym finders can also offer TKTK.

Brainy Quotes is a great tool for beginnings and endings - while the quote beginning or ending is somewhat pause, it is definitely a great welcome addition, and can spur on thought on other avenues to begin and end pieces.

Having a list of Transitions, Ledes, and Endings on hand is key for those sections.

And scrivener, is a great program for layering drafts, and easily moving back and forth between them. You can view split screens of different drafts, which is handy when, say, writing a first draft while looking at a skeletal outline. It also has a cork board feature where you can move categories around visually.

Personally, the best advice I’ve seen on the overall process comes from Brandon Sanderson. Always be writing on something, he says TKTK - Youtube. In my writing pipeline I have many articles in various stages that I’m writing at once. This not only allows me to take breaks away from getting too close for my editor to discern what is good - Sanderson?? TKTKsays sometimes you have to put it aside for a while and then come back to it, but it also helps with emphasizing the process.

ADDITION OF WSJ Guy’s list of things to do to disassociate

As well as the technique to put a piece of paper on the screen to “Freewrite”

I use Trello to track my writing pipeline. With this program I can enter into any writing stage and now exactly where I am and what I need to do, while still having an eye on the overall writing work I’m doing. If I get tired of one stage of the writing process, I can go and work on another stage. When people ask me what I’m writing about, I often feel like I have memory loss. Before, I was working on a topic and I was incredibly, minutely involved in it. This disjointed method places emphasis on writing techniques rather than living or dying on the topic.

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For one, there’s a reliance on external tools. When you’re constantly referencing lists of ledes, or robotically reordering thoughts to produce structure, you emphasize how mindless the entire process can be. And that has clear benefits. Over thinking is perhaps the leading cause of writer’s block. And idea generation appears to be fueled by NOT being so attentive. The ability to push forward on writing despite being tired or distracted is also incredibly helpful, allowing constant forward momentum.

The line between mindless and mindful also offers a great diagnostic tool. When discussing Olympic lifting in his book Becoming a Supple Leopard, physical therapist Kelly Starrett describes that stressors reveal faults in the process. Add more weight or faster repetitions and a coach can clearly see the weaknesses in the mechanics of the lift. When adding stressors – writing while tired, or with distractions with a TV on – the process writer can spot weaknesses in the procedure. The cure is often more training or breaking down the process more.

This reliance on external tools underscores how mindless the entirety of the process is. Which makes sense - over thinking is perhaps the leading cause of writer’s block. Taking the editor out on holiday is a big part of what causes forward momentum to continue uninterrupted. Idea generation and tapping into the font of creativity appears to be fueled by NOT being so attentive. Transitions, beginnings, and endings are very rote, as is structure. But as writers we often don’t like to think o fit like that. And that’s problematic because it preserves the idea that this is all magical process not subject to ur control and improvement. Few writers practice the art of beginnings or endings or learn how to scamp.

But on the plus side, the flip between mindless and mindful offers a great diagnostic tool. TKTKKT When discussing form for olympic lifting, physical therapist Kelly Starrett talks about how good form can be diagnosed with stressors. When stress - either time or more weight - is added, it showcases faults in our form. I have found that the same can be said about writing. Write for time, or write when you’re watching tv. If you’re having difficulty in certain steps it might mean you either need more training or you’re process isn’t broken down enough.

Take Brandon Sanderson, a notable fantasy author. Unlike authors like Patrick Rothfuss or George R. R. Martin, who are known for their procrastination - Sanderson never stops writing. At one point, he wrote an entire novella on the way back from Taiwan as a break from his main writing. TKTKT

And that underscores the general benefits to this process. When done correctly there’s no stopping. The process offloads the weight from needing to think really hard about any one things. Which gives you more output, the ability to write virtually anywhere. More output also gives more opportunities to practice, rather than being cramped and stymied by needing a commission. It also prevents the biggest problem in writing - psychology. Writer’s are crazy drug addicts and depressed out he ass - even the successful ones end up committing suicide. There’s a reason for this. There’s no metrics for good writing. Basically any other type of learning has a metric by which we can improve. And if we can’t clearly improve and we assume writing I sa function of who we are, happy writers are the exception.

One of the most instructional experiences on writing I had was from visiting the Picasso Museum in Barcelona. Rather than showcasing just his famous pieces, it was an encyclopedic catalog of an artists life, where e each room was a phase of his life and creative development. I was lucky enough to go with an artist friend, who beckoned to a sketch of a hand. “This,” my friend said, “is where you knew he was going to be great.” Each room was a showcase of him mastering a vocabulary, a specific style, that gave him the solid building blocks to fully express himself later in the unique manner we all know. In writing we all too often minimize the discrete skills and building blocks. And yet, only when process is king and the humble steps mastered can we make the leap to art.

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For one, there’s a reliance on external tools. When you’re constantly referencing lists of ledes, or robotically reordering thoughts to produce structure, you emphasize how mindless the entire process can be. And that has clear benefits. Over thinking is perhaps the leading cause of writer’s block. And idea generation appears to be fueled by NOT being so attentive. The ability to push forward on writing despite being tired or distracted is also incredibly helpful, allowing constant forward momentum.

The line between mindless and mindful also offers a great diagnostic tool. When discussing Olympic lifting in his book Becoming a Supple Leopard, physical therapist Kelly Starrett describes that stressors reveal faults in the process. Add more weight or faster repetitions and a coach can clearly see the weaknesses in the mechanics of the lift. When adding stressors – writing while tired, or with distractions with a TV on – the process writer can spot weaknesses in the procedure. The cure is often more training or breaking down the process more.

The process offloads the weight from needing to think really hard about any one thing. Which results in greater output and the ability to write virtually anywhere. More output allows for more opportunities to practice, rather than being cramped and stymied by needing a commission or a perfect place to concentrate. It also prevents the biggest problem in writing - psychology. Writer’s are often crazy drug addicts and depressed - even the successful ones end up committing suicide. There’s a reason for this. There are no metrics for good writing. Almost any other type of learning has a metric that our minds can latch onto to improve. And if we can’t clearly improve and we assume writing is a function of who we are, happy writers become the exception.

Lastly, process writing is about actually practicing rather than just going by feel or instinct. One of the most instructional experiences on writing I had was from visiting the Picasso Museum in Barcelona. Rather than showcasing just his famous pieces, it was an encyclopedic catalog of an artists life, where each room was a phase of his life and creative development. I was lucky enough to go with an artist friend, who beckoned to a sketch of a hand. “This,” my friend said, “is where you knew he was going to be great.” Each room was a showcase of him mastering a vocabulary, a specific style, that gave him the solid building blocks to fully express himself later in the unique manner we all know. In writing we all too often minimize the discrete skills and building blocks. And yet, only when process is king and the humble steps mastered can we make the leap to art.