

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF PERSONAL WRITING

- THE INNER CRITIC -

One of the most common problems experienced by people attempting to do any sort of writing, even experienced professionals, is to develop ways to work around the inner critic.

That voice in your head that points out all the flaws in the phrases you compose, often before they reach the page, is just an expression of your understanding of what makes for good writing. Unfortunately, it is far too easy to let that inner critic take over the writing process, and the result is a crippling inability to write or the development of an equally deadly self-consciousness that results in flat, unemotional prose and meaningless clichés.

The challenge for any writer is to find ways to cultivate a mindset in which the inner critic is confined to its proper place. Often, a writer struggling with this variety of writer's block will wish for a way to turn off that voice, but rather than attempting to quash that inner critic, the most productive method is generally to divert or rechannel that critical energy.

Because the essential element of overcoming a crippling inner critic is the writer's personal mindset, there is no perfect method to achieve it. There are different exercises, techniques, and mental tricks that have proven successful for others, but ultimately it rests on the writer to use trial and error to find the best method for minimizing the distracting effect of an inner critic.

The most important thing is to remember why you have chosen to write. Don't focus too much on goals or expected results, but do try to keep a firm hold of the fact that you are writing because you want to and that it is your decision to continue. There will be moments of frustration, but if you can persevere and push past those blocks, the writing will often come forth with astonishing fluidity.

WRITING EXERCISES

Freewriting

This is a very basic exercise that is most helpful for those moments of total writer's block in which it seems impossible to get anything on the page. When freewriting, you want to choose a location as far removed as possible from any distractions, but it can be done pretty much anywhere in a pinch. Decide at the outset how long your freewriting session is going to last (10 minutes is generally a good length for the first time), and sit down with a pen and paper. Write without stopping for the entire length of time, even if this means writing incomplete sentences, complete nonsense, or simply "I don't know what to write," over and over again. Don't edit. Don't stop and cross things out. Don't worry about spelling or grammar and especially don't edit ideas. After the time is up, look back over what you've written to see if anything looks interesting, but don't expect to find anything. The goal of this exercise is simply to fill the page with words, which often has the effect of "priming the pump," but don't be discouraged if nothing comes of it.

Starting Phrases

Using the same sort of nonstop writing as the freewriting exercise, try using the following phrases as the start of a short writing session (5-10 minutes). Starting with simple phrases like these often helps to stimulate personal writing. Another option worth trying is to use the negative version of each phrase ("I don't see" instead of "I see," or "I hate" instead of "I love").

"I remember..."

"I have always..."

"I see..."

"I know..."

"I want to..."

"I wonder..."

"I love..."

"I try to..."

Letter Format

One method that often helps to minimize the effect of the inner critic is to adopt a form that is familiar to the point of being almost subconscious. The letter writing technique is to adapt the narrative into the form of a personal letter. It helps to imagine a recipient of the letter, but it is often more effective if that imaginary recipient is not a real person, such as a guardian angel or an authority figure like a judge. The goal of this exercise is to use the familiar format of the letter to help put the mind at ease, so make sure to include structure elements like the address (even if it is made up) and the salutation. It also helps to follow convention by beginning with brief pleasantries before launching into the body of the narrative.

Obituary

This is a simple exercise that can often help start strong personal narratives. Write your obituary from the perspective of an outsider. List all of your life's accomplishments. You can write it as if you died today or fifty or more years in the future. Feel free to abandon the obituary format if you find yourself getting into a strong narrative thread.