CHALLENGE ACCEPTED
Your NaNoWriMo Toolkit
6 Essays for NaNoWriMo Success

Brought to you by: WRITER’S DIGEST
CHALLENGE ACCEPTED

Your NaNoWriMo Toolkit

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NaNoWriMo and Writer’s Digest
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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NANOWRIMO is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that believes in the transformational power of creativity. It provides the structure, community, and encouragement to help people find their voices, achieve creative goals, and build new worlds—on and off the page.

WRITER’S DIGEST is an organization of writers helping writers improve their craft, achieve their goals, and recognize their dreams—since 1920. Its mission is to help ignite writers’ creative vision and connect them with the community, education, and resources they need to bring it to life.
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Pause a moment and reflect on your image of a writer.

Did you think of a writer sitting in a room alone with wadded-up paper strewn around a wastebasket? A writer conjuring a story while taking a pensive walk? Or perhaps a writer banging away at a keyboard in the throes of inspiration?

We tend to view writers as solitary figures, dreamy or anguished creatures immersed in their work or questing for the necessary peace to write—searching for “a room of one’s own,” as Virginia Woolf put it. “Writer” and “solitary” practically go together like “rock” and “group.”

Solitude no doubt plays an important part in writing a novel, but in my experience as executive director of the nonprofit National Novel Writing Month, I’ve come to believe it takes a veritable village to write a book. And though NaNoWriMo.org brings together hundreds of thousands of writers from all over the world to share in a novel-writing challenge every November, this truth is far from new to the internet era. Virginia Woolf’s singular aesthetic was nurtured during nights of conversation with her spirited Bloomsbury crowd. Hemingway fed off
of the creative energy of Paris in the 1920s, not to mention the writing advice of Gertrude Stein and Sherwood Anderson. Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston defined their unique voices alongside each other as leading figures of the Harlem Renaissance. While writing *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel García Márquez exchanged letters with friends, giving them updates on how the novel was going, and he read passages of the novel in progress to his close friends and received their feedback.

And then there’s the story of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, who were just two men with a “writing hobby” when they first met. They bonded over their interest in Nordic myths and epics and began sharing their writing with each other. That led to the formation of the Inklings, a group of writers with “vague or half-formed intimations and ideas,” as Tolkien put it.

The themes that would later appear in each writer’s books first emerged during the Inklings’ weekly discussions. Although Tolkien didn’t outright credit Lewis for influencing his work, he referred to Lewis’s “sheer encouragement” as an “unpayable debt.”

“He was for long my only audience,” Tolkien said. “Only from him did I ever get the idea that my ‘stuff’ could be more than a private hobby.”

If you set out with the ambitious goal of writing a whole book of your own “stuff” in a month, you could certainly do it on your own schedule, any month of the year, shut alone in a room with your phone turned off, your meals delivered to your door, and an automated “away” message responding to your email. You might rationalize that without distractions, you can get more words onto the page. Why spend even a second of your precious writing time logging onto a discussion forum, tuning in to a pep talk, or driving yourself to a coffee shop where other writers are writing?

It may seem counterintuitive at first, but time and again I’ve seen that the writers who embrace the collaborative spirit of NaNoWriMo are those who are best equipped to meet their goals—and enjoy them-
What Makes NaNoWriMo Work

selves more along the way. Read on to learn what the NaNaWriMo com-
munity can do for you.

TEAMING UP TO CLIMB MOUNT NOVEL

Novelists need a supportive and stimulating community of writers for
a myriad of reasons, but perhaps principally because completing such
an arduous task is just plain easier with others rooting you on. Con-
sider why it’s difficult to beat the home team in sports: They have an
extra teammate, the crowd.

Writing a novel in a month is particularly formidable, if not down-
right Herculean. NaNoWriMo is an extreme sport—one part sprint, one
part marathon, one part mountain climbing, and one part wrestling
match (with some rollicking festivity thrown in)—as participants suit
up in their virtual Wrimo uniforms and play to “win” by completing
a 50,000 manuscript in 30 days. That’s 1,667 words every day, in the
pursuit of which all sorts of writing demons are likely to attack you: a
snarling inner editor telling you you’re a bad writer, a plot that falls into
a sink hole, a house crying to be cleaned, or friends and family who in-
ocently ask, “Why are you doing such an absurd thing?”

It’s important not only to hear some cheers, but to know that you’re
not alone.

“There’s power in numbers,” New Jersey Wrimo Hillary DePiano
says. “Having that global community at your back is so very impor-
tant because it legitimates what you’re doing and gives those who are
afraid to face the blank page the confidence that can only come from
thousands of other voices saying in unison, ‘We’re all in this together.’”

Nearly half a million people around the world sign up each
November at NaNoWriMo.org, including 100,000 kids and teens
in NaNoWriMo’s Young Writers Program. Throughout the month,
you can hear the buzz of novel writing through the wide-ranging
conversations in NaNoWriMo’s online forums, motivational “pep talks”
from famous authors, galvanizing round-the-clock “word sprints” on
Twitter, and live write-ins organized by NaNo’s 600 municipal liaisons
in communities around the globe.
“Being surrounded by fellow creators, all struggling together toward the same distant and seemingly unlikely goal, made me feel like I was part of something big, something dramatic, like the never-ending war of potential against stasis and apathy,” says Wrimo Clarice Meadows, of New York City.

There’s a reason not many runners run marathons alone. You might not know the people running alongside you, but they help you keep going because they’re headed to the same finish line. As Bill Patterson, a Wrimo from New Jersey, likes to say, “Writing is a solitary activity best done in groups.”

COMBINING SPARKS TO BUILD A FIRE

Hemingway wrote in cafés for a reason. Studies have shown that being surrounded by industrious strangers can increase focus and spur creativity.

That’s the purpose behind the write-ins organized by NaNo’s Municipal Liaisons. Write-ins—NaNoWriMo cafés, in effect—are gatherings where people write together, trade tips, and divulge war stories. The spirit is encouragement. The goal is empowerment.

“Other Wrimos are some of the most welcoming, enthusiastic people ever,” says Rebecca Leach, a writer from Austin, Texas. “Even if you’d rather not talk to anyone, you can still sit and write while surrounded by people who have the same crazy deadline and goal as you. Just being near other writers can provide a huge boost in motivation.”

If you can’t make it to a write-in, you can join thousands of people in NaNoWriMo’s online forums. Participants posted nearly a million comments last year on every imaginable writing topic. You can talk characterization in the Character Café, work out plot conundrums with Plot Doctoring tips, chat with folks writing in your genre, or even swap favorite writing tunes via NaNo Soundtracks.

“What job would best suit a fairy looking to pay her way through college?” Your NaNo peeps will answer your calls no matter what they are.
Forbes columnist and Wrimo George Anders describes the feeling as that of a “legitimate writers’ colony,” saying that “by having access to so many peers … [people] emerge from this process with better stories—and better ability to navigate past writing snags—than they would have enjoyed otherwise.”

Psychological studies back that up. Research shows that creations tend to emerge from a sequence of small sparks lit by others—as opposed to the common notion of a light bulb of inspiration occurring in isolation. An initial idea grows through the interchange of ideas, with one sparking another—and then the light bulb glows. Think of a jazz group, where individual musicians riff on a melodic theme. They don’t necessarily know where the song is going; the group has the ideas, not the individual musicians. As a result, unexpected insights emerge.

“Collaboration makes the mind more creative because working with others gives you new and unexpected concepts and makes it more likely that your mind will engage in the most creative types of conceptual creativity—combining distant concepts, elaborating concepts by modifying their core features, and creating new concepts,” writes psychologist Keith Sawyer, author of Group Genius.

NaNoWriMo’s Los Angeles region takes collaboration to even higher levels through writing exercises that mirror improvisational theatre games. Municipal Liaison Sara McBride got the idea after noticing similarities between improv and NaNoWriMo. “Both induce fear and creativity, which sets your brain in a very special place,” she explains.

Improv enforces the rule of saying “Yes, and …” to anything your fellow actors present—to follow story lines that might not have otherwise been apparent. Saying “Yes, and …” is at the heart of NaNoWriMo. Give yourself to permission to run wildly, even recklessly, with your own ideas while being open to the imaginative gifts others provide.

**STAYING ACCOUNTABLE—AND COMPETITIVE**

Meeting regularly to write with others is important not just for your creativity; it also keeps you accountable. Think about it. Are you more
likely to stop writing when your plot plays dead while alone at home or in a room full of other writers?

“There is a sense of accountability in every NaNo write-in, even if it’s just one person asking, ‘So, what are you working on?’” New Jersey writer Richenda Gould says. “In [completing the NaNoWriMo challenge] the last two years, I’ve seen individuals grow. Projects got finished because people made the time to join others and work on them.”

The age-old writer’s maxim is that writing a novel is 89 percent perspiration, 10 percent caffeine, and only 1 percent inspiration. But sometimes even when your butt is in the chair, your fingers don’t want to move on the keyboard. If that’s the case, then you can go mano-a-nano with other writers during NaNo’s “word sprints”—timed writing dashes with writing prompts sprinkled in. Word sprints are regular parts of write-ins, and they’re also hosted by @NaNoWordSprints on Twitter 24 hours a day throughout November.

“When I first started NaNoWrimo, I tried the old BICHOK method (butt in chair, hands on keyboard), but I would struggle,” says Mary Egan, a writer from Des Moines, Iowa. “I would sit down every night at 7:00 and try. I might get 500 words by 10:00. But once our area started doing word sprints at write-ins, my word count exploded.”

Writing 50,000 words in a month is all about forward movement. Hit delete only in cases of emergency.

“NaNoWriMo participants become cheerleaders for one another, congratulating others on amazing word counts and word sprint speeds, and reminding the slower Wrimos that every word they write counts, getting them closer to the goal,” Bahamas–based Wrimo Alicia Wallace says.

CELEBRATING AT THE SUMMIT

Even with the writer’s high of pushing your word count closer and closer to 50,000, NaNoWriMo can be a gnarly, snaggle-toothed beast. Only your fellow writers can understand why you haven’t showered,
or why you’re more concerned about a character lost in the space-time continuum than your own lack of sleep.

“The NaNoWriMo community is full of people who understand that sometimes characters talk to you at inopportune times,” wrote Gennifer Albin, author of *Crewel*, in a NaNo pep talk. “They understand what it’s like to live with a foot in two worlds. They know that reality and fiction blur, and they’re one hell of a support group.”

Support group and bon vivant celebrants. When you hit 50,000 words, you want to hear people banging pots and hooting and hollering. When the writer “Mithgariel” (her NaNo screen name) told people about finishing her novel, she wrote on a NaNo forum that most responded with a “meh.” “Even my best friend could not understand. And I really, really need some heavy patting on the back and other forms of adoration right now.” Scads of fellow Wrimos chimed in. “Sometimes it’s hard for people to wrap their heads around other people’s goals and accomplishments when it’s not on their list of important things to do or acknowledge, or they have no idea what kind of effort/skill/time it takes,” one writer reassured her. “This is a great place to have your very own winning party.”

Recognizing milestones along the way is critical to succeed in any grand endeavor. NaNoWriMo writers proudly shout out when they’ve hit 5,000 words or 50,000 words, whether it’s on Twitter, at a write-in, or in the forums. Municipal Liaisons host “Thank God It’s Over” Parties in December to toast all of the new novels spawned (and allow writers to commiserate about their sore hands).

Read the acknowledgments section of any book. Every novel is defined by the community of writers it belongs to. A novel isn’t written solely by its author, after all; it’s also a work of the people surrounding it—and supporting it.

“From the friendly ML whose late-night email pep talk kept you from quitting to the inspiring veteran who cranks out 50,000 words every month, NaNoWriMo is the only way I know of to be welcomed into the arms of a community of writers even before you’ve written a single word,” DePiano says.
YOUR NANOWRIMO SURVIVAL GUIDE

BEFORE:

1. Tell your friends and family you’re doing NaNoWriMo. The risk of public embarrassment has fueled many a grand creation. When they ask how you’re doing, you don’t want to say, “I quit.” Who knows, maybe they’ll wash the dishes for you.

2. Go on a time hunt. You’ll need approximately two hours a day to write. For one week, track how you spend your time—from forays on Facebook to commuting to work. What can you give up?

3. Don’t overprepare. Don’t underprepare. A thorough outline can box you into a stultifying corner; an idea that lacks proper marinating can go flat in an instant. Indulge in casual rumination and note-taking in October, then write like a whirling dervish during November.

DURING:

1. Banish your internal editor. Let your imagination loose like you haven’t since the third grade. Write boldly, in huge bounding strokes. Your inner perfectionist will come running back to help revise later.

2. Hope for the best, plan for the worst. Your imagination may be giddy at being let out during week one. Take advantage of that careening rush of ideas and get ahead of your word count. Week Two looms ahead like a black hole in NaNoWriMo lore. Plan to get through it.

3. Write to the end of the story. The middle of a novel can be a swamp of quicksand. If you have to, fill in some scenes with shorthand to ensure you experience that satisfying shoot-out between zombies and werewolves at the climax. Most novels are longer than 50,000 words anyway. You can fill in the flesh once you’ve uncovered the bones.
AFTER:

1. Keep the creative momentum going. You just spent 30 days digging for a rare, precious treasure: creativity. Don’t let it go. If you had any doubt before, you’re a writer now. Sure, you might need a break for a week or so, but keep writing. This momentum will carry you to greater heights.

2. Form a writing group. You’ve tapped into a community during NaNoWriMo. Keep meeting with your cohorts, whether online or in person. Encouragement breeds more encouragement. And they can be good beta readers for a polished manuscript, too.

3. Don’t fear revision. It can be just as creative and playful as writing a first draft. Take advantage of the resources and activities in NaNoWriMo’s “I wrote a novel, now what?” in the months that follow.
Expectation Versus Reality: 10 Truths You Should Know About NaNoWriMo

The Staff of NaNoWriMo

[This article previously appeared in the November/December 2019 issue of Writer’s Digest.]

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the largest writing event in the world: National Novel Writing Month (a.k.a. NaNoWriMo).

If you don’t know about NaNoWriMo, more than 300,000 writers sign up each November for a simple but audacious challenge: Write 50,000 words of a novel in a month. That translates into a very do-able 1,667 words per day.

The idea is to banish your internal editor, plunge into your imagination, and write your story today—not during that novel-killing period of time known as … “someday.”

One’s creativity shouldn’t be a hall pass from the stiff and forbidding demands of your life. NaNoWriMo’s gift is to make creativity a priority for a month—and, we hope, longer.

But NaNoWriMo is so much more than a 50,000-word challenge. In honor of the approximately three million writers who have taken
part over 20 years—including bestselling authors like Elizabeth Acevedo, Erin Morgenstern, Jasmine Guillory, Hugh Howey, and Marissa Meyer—we’re telling the truth about what you can expect from NaNoWriMo.

1. **EXPECTATION: YOU’LL FINISH NaNoWRIMO WITH A READY-TO-BE-PUBLISHED NOVEL.**

**TRUTH:** There’s lots of conflicting writing advice, but if there’s one thing everyone agrees on, it’s that your first draft won’t be perfect. NaNoWriMo is the time to let your imagination fly and explore all the possibilities of your story, so you’ll need to edit your mad dash of writing, fix the typos, and maybe write another draft (or two. Or 12). That’s why we provide an in-depth editing and revision initiative, “I Wrote a Novel … Now What?”, which occurs in January and February.

   Plus, 50,000 words is the equivalent of a short novel or novella. You may find that your story needs many more words before it’s finished.

2. **EXPECTATION: YOU’LL WRITE A LOT DURING NaNoWRIMO, BUT NONE OF IT WILL BE ANY GOOD.**

**TRUTH:** Just because your first draft isn’t perfect doesn’t mean that you should throw it out. As we said above, *no one* writes a perfect draft on the first go, and quantity can lead to quality because you’re likely to take creative risks and make imaginative leaps in order to keep pace with your daily word count. Besides, all that writing has another purpose: You’re practicing your craft and honing your skills to produce high-quality work. The more you write, the better your writing will get.
3. EXPECTATION: YOU ONLY GET SOMETHING OUT OF IT IF YOU REACH 50K.

TRUTH: The 50,000-word goal is great for inspiring writers who may feel stuck in their normal writing practice, but the NaNoWriMo experience is all about the work you put in to get words on the page. Writing with a rigorous goal in mind encourages you to sit down and write every single day as well as introduces you to some seriously enthusiastic writing buddies to keep you accountable. While that 50K win can feel pretty good, the real reward is in the process. Those benefits remain the same whether you write 10,000, 25,000, or 100,000 words.

4. EXPECTATION: YOU DON’T NEED A PLAN OR OUTLINE; JUST START WRITING ON NOVEMBER 1!

TRUTH: That’s one way to do NaNoWriMo, and some people swear up and down that it works. We call them pantsers, since they write by the seat of their pants. For the plotters and plansters (see what we did there?), an outline or plan of some kind is the key to staying on track in November. That’s why we provide NaNoWriMo Prep resources during September and October to help writers deepen their ideas, develop characters, build worlds, and outline the plots of their novels-to-be. But no matter what degree you prep for your novel, it’s always good to honor the “Yes, and …” improv spirit of your pantser side during November.

5. EXPECTATION: WRITING IS SOMETHING YOU HAVE TO DO ALONE.

TRUTH: There’s a whole community of writers you can join! Whether it’s at a local write-in at a library, coffee shop, or community center near you, at a Virtual Write-In with the NaNoWriMo staff, or using one of our group word-sprint options, you’ll be amazed at how writing with others to keep you accountable will help keep the words flowing. It’s
the good kind of peer pressure. Plus, if you attend an in-person event, sometimes there are stickers (and cookies)!

6. EXPECTATION: NANOWRIMO IS ONLY FOR PEOPLE WHO HAVE NEVER WRITTEN BEFORE.

TRUTH: While we certainly welcome brand new writers, there are plenty of established authors who use NaNoWriMo to help them write the first draft of their next bestseller (including Sara Gruen, Rainbow Rowell, and other big-name authors)—and everything in between. The spectrum of writing experience among NaNoWriMo participants varies widely, but our programs provide the tools, resources, and community to help writers at any stage or level of familiarity and education tell the stories they want to tell.

7. EXPECTATION: NANOWRIMO IS ONLY FOR PEOPLE WHO WANT TO PUBLISH NOVELS.

TRUTH: Writing, just like knitting, ballroom dancing, or any other art form, can be a robust and fulfilling hobby. If it’s not your goal to be published, you are not any less of a writer. NaNoWriMo is home to many writers who find joy in the practice of writing but have no desire to share that work in print. Those novels are still novels, and those stories have an important place in the NaNoWriMo community.

8. EXPECTATION: IT’S BEST TO WRITE WHEN YOU’RE INSPIRED.

TRUTH: Inspiration is often characterized as a thunderbolt—a brilliant flash that strikes from the heavens—and that metaphor certainly holds truth because moments of inspiration can be a sudden igniting force. But those big, gobsmacking moments of inspiration are rare. NaNoWriMo teaches that inspiration is conjured in the telling—in overcoming whatever lulls that strike with willpower, grit, and as much
caffeine as it takes. The words you create every day are fruit-bearing kernels of inspiration. Each word beckons for more words to follow. “If I waited for inspiration, I wouldn’t really be a writer,” said Toni Morrison.

9. EXPECTATION: I DON’T HAVE TIME FOR NANOWRIMO; I’M TOO BUSY.

Truth: NaNoWriMo isn’t for people who have time for writing, it’s about making time for writing. It’s about deciding that for just one month, you’re going to prioritize creativity in your life. Maybe that means the house gets a little messy or you eat a little more takeout in November, or your kids watch an extra show every day or you spend a little less time playing Fortnite. It’s all about finding the little pockets of time in your life that could make space for your writing and sticking to it all month long. We’ll be there to help you find those pockets and make the absolute best use of them that you can.

10. EXPECTATION: THIS IS JUST A ONE-OFF THING THAT HAPPENS IN NOVEMBER.

Truth: NaNoWriMo is a year-round, fully-staffed nonprofit that puts on programs to support creative writing and literacy around the world. That’s why our Young Writers Program provides a free writing platform and classroom resources to support creative writing in approximately 10,000 classrooms. And why our Come Write In program works with more than 1,200 libraries, bookstores, and community centers to create inclusive, welcoming spaces for their local writers. Not to mention our dedicated online community, who are always ready to share writing advice, act as critique partners, or just chat about writerly interests.

You can track writing and revision goals on multiple writing projects throughout the year, or you can sign up for Camp NaNoWriMo, a virtual writing retreat that happens each April and July. At any given time of year, a NaNoWriMo write-in could be happening in your neighborhood because NaNoWriMo isn’t just a November thing—it’s
a worldwide community of people who are passionate about creative writing and the change it can bring about in people’s lives.

One last truth: Some might expect that they have to pay for this big bundle of creative mojo, but it’s all free because NaNoWriMo believes that everyone should have the opportunity to write their story. So don’t wait to write your novel.
Grant Faulkner

When I first became a writer, I marveled at the magical worlds my favorite authors created—their lyrical prose, their riveting plots, their piercing characterizations. They wrote with such grace, such ease, that it seemed as if they’d been born to it, blessed with a talent and anointed by a higher power. They were masters, and I was a simple novice, a bystander who wanted in but was improperly dressed for the fancy dinner party they attended.

Their prose shimmered like diamonds, but what I didn’t realize was that they hadn’t just plucked those gems from an endless store and dropped them onto the page. Each precious stone was hard earned, burnished by the unsexy and often uncelebrated traits of diligence and discipline. When we praise the fine craftsmanship of a novel, we gloss over the roughest but perhaps most important roles in its creation: time management, accountability, work.
Every writer who becomes a master goes through a training ground, whether formal or self-imposed. The boot camp of choice for me—and hundreds of thousands of others like me—is the rollicking, spirited grind of National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo). With the heady goal of writing 50,000 words in just 30 days, participants at NaNoWriMo.org learn valuable approaches to the creative process alongside critical habits to becoming a successful novelist.

Here’s how a month of NaNoWriMo can improve your writing for a lifetime.

**THE 10,000-HOUR RULE**

There’s a concept popularized by Malcolm Gladwell’s book *Outliers* that it takes roughly 10,000 hours of practice to reach mastery, whether in chess, writing or brain surgery. What Gladwell calls “the magic number of greatness” comes from the research of Anders Ericsson, who studied the practice time that leads to elite performance and found the average was 10,000 hours (about 90 minutes per day for 20 years).

Gladwell gives such examples as The Beatles, who performed live in Hamburg, Germany, more than 1,200 times from 1960 to 1964, amassing more than 10,000 hours of playing time, and Bill Gates, who gained access to a high school computer in 1968, before they were commonplace, and spent as many hours programming before he became a doyen of computer code.

While your brain doesn’t *truly* tally your “practice” minutes and magically deem you a master at the 10,000-hour mark, it’s the concept that’s important. Most writers write several hundred thousand throw-away words before they begin to produce their best work. Ray Bradbury wrote 1,000 words a day when he first committed himself to writing: “For 10 years, I wrote at least one short story a week, somehow guessing that a day would finally come when I truly got out of the way and let it happen.”

NaNoWriMo enforces a similar process: To write a 50,000 words in 30 days, you have to write 1,667 words a day. That means banishing your inner editor and showing up to write on good days and bad days,
on hard days at the office, on lazy and uninspired days, maybe even on sick days. Your goal beckons you. Your daily word-count needles you. In this determined practice, you learn how a novel is built not by the grand gusting winds of inspiration, but by the inglorious increments of constancy.

Participants are cheered along by “pep talks” from bestselling authors sent to their inboxes throughout the month. “It astounds me every time, but the books get done,” Lev Grossman wrote in one such pep talk. “How? It’s not about having some triumphant breakthrough moment. Being a novelist is a matter of keeping at it, day after day, just putting words after other words. It’s a war of inches, where the hardest part is keeping your nerve. The number one reason why people who want to write novels don’t is that they lose their nerve and quit.”

A WRINKLE IN TIME

The reaction I most often hear from writers who decline to participate in NaNoWriMo is, “Sounds nice, but I don’t have the time.” And really, who does have the time to write 50,000 words in a month? It’s absurd.

But great writers have wrangled with time constraints for eons. “Time is short, my strength is limited, the office is a horror, the apartment is noisy, and if a pleasant, straightforward life is not possible then one must try to wriggle through by subtle maneuvers,” Franz Kafka wrote.

There’s an old saying that if you argue for your limitations, you get to keep them. NaNoWriMo is a crash course in time management—an exercise in discovering those “subtle maneuvers” to work around obstacles.

To write 50,000 words in a harried life, you have to closely evaluate how you spend your time. Each October, I go on a “time hunt.” I track how I spend each day, tallying minutes spent on social media, how many TV shows I watch, how long it takes me to shower and make breakfast—everything. It’s always a revelation to see what I fritter away, despite thinking I have no time to spare. Each year I find ways to open up nooks and crannies to hit my daily goals (sorry Netflix and
Facebook), whether it’s sneaking in five minutes of writing during my son’s soccer game or waking up an hour earlier.

In her book *Overwhelmed: Work, Love, and Play When No One Has the Time*, journalist Brigid Schulte claims that for many working parents, free time comes in bits of “time confetti”—a few minutes here and there. Bradbury wrote *Fahrenheit 451* on a typewriter during his lunch breaks. Toni Morrison wrote her first novel in the 15 minutes a day she could spare as a working mother. Those small but consistent maneuvers add up.

NaNoWriMo also teaches one of the most undervalued time management skills, one rarely discussed in a writing how-to book: learning to say no.

Saying no takes practice. I start by turning away from my email and social media until I’ve written my daily words. Then I practice saying no to an after-work gathering, a brunch on Sunday, an invitation to watch a basketball game. I don’t want to make life a narrow affair where writing is more important than being with friends and family, but I need to make sure that my creative time isn’t crowded out—and to find the time to write a novel in a month, something has to give.

I still dream of a time when I’ll have vast swaths of space to write, but NaNoWriMo has helped me realize that limitations aren’t all bad. One’s imagination doesn’t necessarily flourish in the luxury of total freedom. One of the many paradoxes of human creativity is that it seems to benefit from the pressures and boundaries of our daily lives. A time restriction of writing a novel in 30 days takes away choices that can cause one to dally and maybe not start at all. Constraints also keep perfectionist notions from eating away at you: You dive in and just start writing because you have to.

“The ticking clock is our friend if it gets us moving with urgency and passion,” Twyla Tharp says.

**THE HEROIC ROLE OF HABIT**

There’s a misguided notion that artists are freewheeling creatures more inclined to follow the fancies of their imagination than the rigidities of...
a schedule. Doesn’t routine subvert creativity? Quite the opposite. “Excellence … is not an act but a habit,” Aristotle proclaimed.

Not only does a routine help move your novel forward, but it provides a safe and stable place for your imagination to roam, dance, somersaults, and leap. But the writing habit isn’t an easy one to form. A habit, after all, is something we do almost without thinking. It’s automatic, like making coffee first thing in the morning.

NaNoWriMo helps you establish such a routine by demonstrating how it can be successfully implemented in such a short span of time. Nearly 90 percent of people fail to keep their New Year’s resolutions, largely because when they lapse, they quit.

One way to yourself accountable is to announce your goals. When you tell your friends and family about your goals and join the larger NaNoWriMo community in cheering one another online and in person, you’re reinforcing your commitment. When your NaNo buddy or next-door neighbor asks, “What’s your word count?”, you won’t want to disappoint him—or yourself. It’s all about “choice architecture”—designing your life and goals around the things you rationally want to achieve instead of sinking into the powerful claws of more impulsive needs. We tend to be myopic creatures, preferring positive outcomes in the present at the expense of future outcomes. But our “present self” often does a disservice to our “future self,” who will scream back into the dark hallows of the past, “Why didn’t you work on our novel?” NaNoWriMo helps you think about how your present self can better serve your future self. We are what we repeatedly do.

With the first 30 days under your belt, you’ve established the creative momentum to go further. Over time, your discipline will become a habit, a necessity, as instinctual as brewing that caffeine upon waking.

**IT’S GOOD TO HAVE GOALS**

If National Novel Writing Month teaches just one thing, it’s the power of setting a goal and having a deadline to keep yourself accountable. The words *goal* and *deadline* might not ring with any poetic allure, but
in the artistic life these two words should rank right up there with *inspiration* and *imagination*.

As Yogi Berra said, “If you don’t know where you are going, you’ll end up someplace else.”

Wharton professor Katherine Milkman and her colleagues found that we’re most likely to set new goals around “temporal landmarks”: a birthday, a holiday, the start of a new semester—or a new month, such as National Novel Writing Month. These milestones create a new “mental accounting period” (past lapses are forgiven, and we have a clean slate ahead of us) and prompt us to turn our gaze toward a better vision of what we want for ourselves and how we can achieve it.

Many accomplished writers apply this NaNoWriMo–style concept to be productive in months beyond November.

“I now treat every novel as if it’s a NaNo novel,” said bestselling novelist Marissa Meyer, who has been participating in NaNoWriMo since 2008. “Of course, it’s most fun to be drafting during November, because then you get the rush of being in a community, and of being part of something bigger than just you and your novel, but sometimes the timing with publication and deadlines doesn’t work out. So, whenever I am writing that first draft, I aim to have it done in 30 days or less.”

**THE JOY OF FAILURE**

None of that is to say that creativity itself doesn’t play an enormous role in NaNoWriMo, which in fact teaches many lessons about the creative process. One of the most important is that novels are essentially constructed through a series of failures. You’re dropped into a dark forest, and you have to walk down paths that might not lead anywhere. You’re a tracker, following the scents of your story, the markings left on a trail. You have to trust your instincts, read the signs in the sky, and try things … just because *something* has to happen next. Standing still is not an option.

“Piecing a novel together over a year or more, one paragraph at a time, with days and weeks off in-between, does not produce the same
quality for me as writing full-bore,” bestselling Wool author Hugh Howey says, having written novels during NaNoWriMo since 2009. “I want to write as breathlessly as readers consume the work. I want to live in my book and not leave until it’s done. This is the essence of NaNoWriMo.”

NaNoWriMo invites you to generate many new ideas—to rip through failures, learn from them, and build on them. Thomas Edison said, “The real measure of success is the number of experiments that can be crowded into 24 hours.” In the case of NaNoWriMo, it's how many experiments can be crowded into 30 days.

“I like to think of NaNo-ing as excavating. You uncover different things at the 30,000-word mark than you do at 10,000,” says Erin Morgenstern, who wrote the rough draft of her acclaimed novel Night Circus during NaNoWriMo. “Things that felt like desperate, random nonsense on Page 72 (the abandoned broken pocket watch, a partially obscured tattoo, that taxidermied marmot on the mantelpiece) are suddenly important and meaningful on Page 187. Everything could hinge on the fate of that marmot. Or the marmot may be a red herring. Or perhaps the marmot is just a marmot. You have to keep writing to find out.”

That sense of playful wonder is important for writing mastery, and NaNoWriMo teaches you to trust the gambols of your imagination, to test your ideas on the page. When you stop demanding perfection of yourself, the blank page becomes a spacious place, a playground. So what if the plot has gotten away from you? So what if your novel feels a bit sloppy? It’s just a first draft. Masters learn to be patient with their uncertainty, to tolerate moments of doubt and let their stories develop embryonically.

NaNoWriMo gives you the opportunity to reflect on your writing, to understand what creative approaches work for you, and to develop the grit, resilience, and can-do gusto of a true master. NaNoWriMo is an occasion to fill your writer toolbox with as many tools as you can. You can prepare by outlining or filling out a character questionnaire—or you can just jump in. You can write alone—or attend write-ins with
others. You can try a little from Column A and a little from Column B. The main thing, though, is that you write. Make it a part of your day, your life, and every day you write will be one day closer to mastery.
I sometimes wonder how many great novels are sitting in dusty drawers, half-finished, abandoned, perhaps forgotten. Novels that burst forth at the beginning, carrying their writer with them, but then hit a wall, before the writer gave up, exhausted, dispirited—perhaps not knowing that flagging energy is as much a part of novel writing as plot itself (and that there’s even a special type of creative magic to be found in such moments).

Too many novels have ended up this way. Writing a novel has been compared to months of pregnancy, running a marathon, climbing a mountain, or even going to war. And it can feel like all those things in one. This is why it’s worth thinking about the novels you’ve abandoned and ask if you gave up because the novel wasn’t good enough or because you lacked the stamina to see it through. Here’s a curveball for you: There aren’t any great novels sitting in dusty drawers, because the stamina it takes to finish a novel is the same kind it takes to make a novel good. So, your main task as a novelist is to train for endurance and believe that the very act of finishing is magic itself.
“It does not matter how slowly you go so long as you do not stop,” said Confucius, who had to be talking about novel writing.

As the executive director of National Novel Writing Month, I know that the 30 days of energetic writing required for NaNoWriMo is a powerful and wonderous kickstart to a novel, but it’s just the first tincture you must concoct to finish. Let’s explore some other ingredients of your storytelling mixology to help you reach the end.

**THE MESMERISM OF YOUR MINDSET**

One thing that prevents many writers from finishing their novels is simply the time it takes to see a novel through the many necessary drafts. The slow march of daily progress can abrade against the sparkling zeal that fuels the early creative stages, and the day-after-dayness of it all often exhausts writers’ attention spans. It’s critical to remember that training for a marathon isn’t just about physical training; it’s also about preparing your mind to run for such a long time. This is where the metaphor of pregnancy doesn’t necessarily apply: Some novels take nine months, but some might take nine years.

Writing *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* was anything but brief for Junot Díaz: It took 10 years. J.R.R. Tolkien labored 12 years over Lord of the Rings, as did Victor Hugo on *Les Misérables*. That’s fitting, you say, these are all big books. But *Catcher in the Rye* also took 10 years. You need to prepare your mind for the grind no matter what length or how ambitious your novel is.

“You don’t start out writing good stuff. You start out writing crap and thinking it’s good stuff, and then gradually you get better at it. That’s why I say one of the most valuable traits is persistence,” said Octavia E. Butler, award-winning science-fiction author.

Working on a book that seems crap (and every novel goes through stretches where it seems crap) requires a special kind of patience and determination. Think of the many days that a marathon runner’s legs are stiff with fatigue, when every stride is the definition of slogging along. You’re going to wake up some days and stare at your novel and have to proceed with a similar slogging stride—through the terrible, the
mediocre, the not-quite-there, the I-don’t-think-I-can-get-it-there, the I’m-not-a-writer, and the definitive “I quit.” Yes, you’re going to want to stop. Perhaps often.

Every novel requires a simple four-letter word that is as important as imagination itself: grit. Grit is that extra something that separates the most successful people from the rest. Research has shown that grit is even more important for success than intelligence or talent.

Grit is a super heroic elixir. It’s a persistence that’s fortified with passion, optimism, and hope—a combination that coalesces into a steely and unwavering purpose that keeps us moving with consistent effort toward our goal even when we struggle, falter, or outright fail. Grit equips us with a shield that deflects naysayers and doubts. It’s an energy drink, a pep talk, a sprinkle of fairy dust, and a compass all in one.

“Grit is sticking with your future, day in and day out, and not just for the week, not just for the month, but years,” said Angela Duckworth, a psychological researcher who focuses on studying grit and has given a popular TED talk on it.

Years. Years made up of days of work. As British novelist Martin Amis said, “Novelists are stamina merchants, grinders, nine-to-fivers.”

Developing grit leads to another writing superpower: resilience. Resilience allows you to adapt in the face of adversity and push yourself through obstacles. So often we think that mental toughness is about how we respond to extreme situations—bouncing back after getting fired or divorced or surviving a traumatic experience. There’s no doubt that extreme situations test us, but the everyday work of writing a novel requires you to approach your mental toughness like a muscle that needs to be worked to develop. If you haven’t pushed yourself in hundreds of small ways, you’ll wilt when things get difficult.

TRUSTING THAT THERE’S GOLD IN THEM THAR HILLS

I’ve been using words like grind and push, but it’s also important to remember there is something beyond the constant persistence and determination necessary to finish a novel: There is the magic of excavat-
ing layer after layer of your story’s depth and finding new riches where you don’t expect them. It’s the scent we follow through the wilderness when we think we’re lost—scents that give you the nuances and musings that are your story’s gift.

To capture these scents means paying attention to the language of your story—the rhythm of your sentences, the music of your words, the timbre of your voice. It means looking at your story world with a telescope to view its horizons and a microscope to understand its cellular interactions.

National Book Award finalist George Saunders says that revising a novel is like being an optometrist—always asking, “Is it better like this? Or like this?” As you work through revisions, you see your story from all angles and you discover things you wouldn’t have ordinarily been able to see. A deep revision can give you the clear vision of laser eye surgery.

If we write to make sense of the world, then we persist to reach the finish line not only to understand that world, but to expand, decorate, and inhabit it. Your novel can become a home that’s even homier than your real home, a relationship that nurtures you more deeply over time even if you have days you want to ditch it all. Think of it as a marriage you’re committed to, not a summer fling.

Such commitment doesn’t just happen, though. It takes work and strategy. To develop the outright moxie you need to finish your novel, consider stirring in the following six ingredients into your novel-writing cauldron to make it to that land of enchantment: The End.

**INGREDIENT NO. 1: SMALL INCREMENTS ACCUMULATE INTO BIG THINGS**

One way to lessen the daunting nature of writing is to wave a wand over it and make it into a lot of small things. This is when simple math comes in handy. If you write a “mere” 200 words a day, that adds up to 6,000 words a month, which is 72,000 words per year—which is a decent size novel. If you focus on a manageable chunk of work, it has a way of creating momentum and carrying you further along. Think of
how five minutes of writing often turns into 15 or 30 minutes without you even knowing it.

**INGREDIENT NO. 2: USE OTHERS AS ACCOUNTABILITY ENFORCERS**

Research has shown that the best way to quit smoking is to tell people you’re quitting. Humans don’t like to fail in front of others. The same thing goes for writing. Tell the world you’re going to finish your novel, and when you bump into that Facebook friend in the grocery store, they’ll likely ask you about your novel. You don’t want to tell them you gave up.

But it’s best to get even more strategic than that. The writer Clifford Garstang joined an accountability group in which each member pledges a measurable progress, and they meet every week to review results. I’ve also heard of writers who simply text or email weekly word counts to each other—just the word count, nothing more because the exercise is about accountability, not feedback.

**INGREDIENT NO. 3: A DEADLINE**

“A deadline is, simply put, optimism in its most kick-ass form. It’s a potent force that, when wielded with respect, will level any obstacle in its path,” NaNoWriMo founder Chris Baty wrote in *No Plot, No Problem*.

Anyone who has participated in NaNoWriMo knows the power of a simple goal and a deadline. Goals are the lighthouse that guides the boat to shore. And a goal combined with a deadline is the horsepower of your creative engine.

There’s no need to write 50,000 words every month, though. Break your novel into milestones and decide on a good pace. If you have a first draft in hand, maybe a good goal is to have a revised second draft in three or six months. Start at the beginning of the month and track your progress, whether in words, page count, or time. It’s so easy in the revision stages to lose track of progress because the words and pages tend
to decrease instead of increase. The important thing is to keep mov-
ing—with a deadline keeping you honest and on track.

**INGREDIENT NO. 4: TAKE A BREAK**

But sometimes you need to stop moving. When you feel your synapses fraying or when your main character starts to feel like a house guest who has over stayed their welcome, give yourself permission to take a break and replenish for the next leg. When running a marathon, sometimes the best strategy to finish is to walk for a while.

“Good writing is a subconscious mind activity,” said the novelist Daniel Torday. “Sometimes your subconscious needs a break. The only way to make that happen is to relax, let go of it, and find the joy in the work again.”

The art of letting go can hold its own type of “work.” Spend some time reading, letting your mind wander through other worlds as a way to wander back through your novel’s world.

If you don’t want to put your novel down entirely, NaNoWriMo writer Alison Hawke says to skip to the good bit. “Write that thing you’ve been planning and looking forward to and have fun with it. Then take a walk and write the next fun bit.”

I’m going to call this approach “skipnoveling” because it needs an official label. Your novel might be linear, but that doesn’t mean you have to write it linearly.

**INGREDIENT NO. 5: BE CURIOUS**

While you’re letting go, think about what made you curious about your story to begin with. We write best when writing in anticipation, and if you write with curiosity, you’ll fill your reader with curiosity, so try to keep the curiosity you started your story with until the very end. You are Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*: You want out, but the way out is to go further and further in.
INGREDIENT NO. 6: IT’S ABOUT THE GAZILLIONTH DRAFT

Bestselling YA novelist Libba Bray said that the phrase “second draft” is a misnomer because “there are a gazillion revisions, large and small, that go into the writing of a book.”

John Irving estimated he spent two-thirds of his life as a writer rewriting. National Book Award-winner Ha Jin, said he revises his novels as many as 30 times. Pulitzer Prize-finalist Karen Russell said that only about 10 percent of her rough draft makes it into her final draft. Writing, cutting, tweaking, moving, reflecting. Again and again.

THE PROMISED LAND

Sounds like a lot of work, but what if we view ourselves not as authors, but as alchemists? What if our rewriting is a matter of sprinkling charms upon a story, casting spells, looking under rocks (aka words) for enchanted kingdoms?

We are diviners, following the mystical pull of our stick in search of the nourishment of water. Yes, we sometimes have to walk far to find an underground stream, but when we find it, has the water ever tasted as clear and cool?

In many a tale, the hero faces the worst kind of hell just before finding peace. The same can be said for the peculiar hell that finishing a novel can inflict on a writer. “The road to hell is paved with works-in-progress,” said Philip Roth. But the road to heaven is also paved with works-in-progress.

Our stories remind us that we’re alive, and what being alive means. Stories are the oxygen our souls breathe, a way to bring the unsayable, the unseeable, the unspeakable to life. They take us beyond the grueling grind that life can become, beyond the constraints of the roles we find ourselves in each day, to make the world a bigger place.

For a writer, life hasn’t really been lived until one’s stories find their way onto the page, so don’t doubt yourself. The signature of your singular self is formed by the work you put into your story. Making art tells
you who you are. Making art in turn makes you. So, it’s your duty as a writer to build a world through your words and believe in your story as a beautiful work of incarnation, to see it as a gift to yourself and others, as something that elevates life with new meaning—you meaning.

Therein the magic lies.
The Art of Seduction: How to Entice & Captivate Your Readers

Grant Faulkner

[This article previously appeared in the February 2018 issue of Writer’s Digest.]

“Is not the most erotic portion of a body where the garment gapes?”

French literary critic Roland Barthes poses this question in his 1973 The Pleasure of the Text, and I find myself pondering it frequently—not only to understand the nature of desire, but as a fiction writer who aims to create stories full of suspense and intrigue.

Desire manifests itself around hints and signs, those feints and teases that keep us captivated by the mere suggestion of future fulfillment. Indeed, it’s like living in the tension of a riveting story, where suspense is created by an author’s loving flirtations—a game of seduction meant to draw the reader in through a coil of thrills and dodges. In a sense it’s an erotic relationship—the author calculating just how much and when to touch or reveal.

A novel is similar to sex, in fact. Most of a novel is essentially foreplay, and after the climax, you’re left wanting more, sad that it has all
ended (at least, if it was a good book). Reading is a uniquely intimate relationship—a melding of two, reader and writer.

That’s why every writer must learn the art of seduction—to be a lover. Seduction means “to entice or beguile into a desired state or position.” A good writer lures the reader from the first sentence of a story. A question is posed, but not answered. The reader is invited into another world—a world of mystery and excitement. The lyrical allure of a writers’ words attract like the aroma of a fine perfume. A good author is always offering peeks into the garment but doesn’t strip off the clothing—or doesn’t do so until exactly the right moment. The moment of complete seduction.

So, how might you become a Casanova on the page?

FIND YOUR INNER SEDUCER

“Above all, a great writer is always a great enchanter,” Vladimir Nabokov said in a 1948 lecture.

When I first read that quote, I had to question my identity as a writer. I knew when I put words on the page, I certainly didn’t conceive of myself as an enchanter. Instead, I inhabited my “natural self,” as most writers do, and my words on the page flowed from that self. As a result, my stories lacked the tantalizing allure that spawns enchantment.

I considered how seducers take pleasure in the artistry of their performance, in their flourishes and nuanced touches. They aren’t weighed down by the limits of their identity. They decide to be, as the famous Venetian author and playboy Giacomo Casanova put it, “the flame, not the moth.” I needed to transform.

There are countless ways to be enchanting—through a riveting plot full of red herrings and cliffhangers, or by way of complex characters who are not as they seem—but your persona as a writer influences how you engage the reader. Are you a siren who lures her subject with titillating teases and a seductive pose? A rake who promises decadence, abandon, and sin? Are you a dandy whose ornamental prose attracts? Or perhaps a combination of the above?
You can be dangerous or fanciful, vulgar, or quietly alluring, depending on the nature of your aims. The main rule: Don’t be ordinary.

As Oscar Wilde said, “A little sincerity is a dangerous thing, and a great deal of it is absolutely fatal.”

REMEMBER WHO YOU’RE WOOING

Don’t forget the target of your stimulations: the reader. Readers want to be seduced. When they open a book and read the first sentence, they’re offering themselves up to love. They want their emotions to be touched—to be overwhelmed, to lose themselves. How will your words penetrate their defenses? How can you provoke such surrender?

Casanova was a great seducer not because of his looks, his dress, or his riches, but because he focused on the happiness of his mark. His goal wasn’t just his own pleasure, but for his beloved to cherish their relationship forever. He described a kiss as “an attempt to absorb the essence of the other person”—to truly meld with them.

A writer seeks a similar oneness with the reader, a similar immortality. The relation between writer and reader is one of mutual yearning and desire, and in such intimacy, the reader’s world is re-drawn.

How can you write your story as if your reader is the object of your desire? What will move your reader in surprising ways? What turn of phrase will spark a smile across her face? How can your words beckon with a tantalizing promise of fulfillment? Think of your novel as a love letter meant to be absorbed, puzzled over and devoured.

PRACTICE THE RULES OF ATTRACTION

Play the Coquette

Pleasure doesn’t necessarily come from the satisfaction of a desire so much as from its pursuit. A writer’s materials are the wiles we conjure with words—and what we choose to omit, or subtly suggest. As Casanova said, “Love is three quarters curiosity.” Storytellers must think with the mischievous mind of a flirt, writing with clues and signposts. Never tell all.
Flirting is a silent language, a way of signaling interest and attraction in the space that exists between lover and beloved, writer and reader. The best flirts can strike the right balance between sending a signal and then withdrawing, knowing how each gesture changes the storyline. A smile, a lingering glance, the brush of a hand. You’re left with the question: Did that mean what I think it meant? How can you be open and vulnerable on the page, yet not disclose too much?

A veil exists between writer and reader, and it’s up to you to decide to lift it. If you reveal too much information, you leave your readers no room for imagination. But if you’re appropriately coy, the reader will crave more.

It’s like playing with a cat with a string. If you dangle a piece of string in front of it, the cat will try to catch the yarn over and over again, even as the string slides through its paws. But when you stop, the cat loses interest and wanders away. Every paragraph you write is like the string with which you tease the cat. Every paragraph needs to have the quality of a come-hither gaze, teasing out a question that goes as yet unanswered.

A good storyteller has to master this “art of the bluff.” Bluffs move through insinuations. Once an idea is planted, we crave to find the answer, and our craving intensifies according to the elusiveness of the hints. The best horror writers know that monsters are scariest before they’re seen, that their threat is most acutely felt through the noises they make, the shadows they live in—not in the sharpness of their teeth or claws.

That’s why in *Jaws*, Steven Spielberg kept the great white shark unseen for so long. The anticipation of horror tends to elicit a stronger reaction from the audience than the horror itself. Focus on how to be suggestive, not revelatory.

I often think of the tagline from the TV show “The X-Files”: The truth is out there. Each episode brings the main characters, FBI agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully, closer to the “truth,” yet as soon as the answer to the web of paranormal phenomena seems within reach—just as the viewer begins to feel tingles of fulfillment with the revelation of
a final puzzle piece—the story shifts, and the ever-elusive truth slithers away. Mulder and Scully are back on the trail following breadcrumbs.

Thriller author Lee Child posits that the fundamental question a writer must ask is how to cook a meal for a reader and make them hungry at the same time. The answer? Make them wait for hours to eat. Says Child, “The basic narrative fuel is always the slow unveiling of the final answer.”

In other words, on the first date you don’t say “I love you”—and maybe not even the 10th date. The more you relinquish the air of mystery in a story, the more you lose your power on the page.

“Once certain of arriving, why hurry on the journey so fast?” says the seducer Valmont in Les Liaisons Dangereuses. Shine the beam of your words on the story like a flashlight in the darkness, but then keep moving the beam along so that the story becomes a series of luminous dots. Delight in your story’s subterfuge.

**Ratchet Up the Stakes**

Such a slow reveal isn’t enough, though. We need to escalate the tension until, at its most taut moment, a thoroughly satiating climax wins over the reader. Love and desire exist in a perpetual “What If?”: What if I call? What if I lean in for a kiss? What if I ask her to marry me? A novel moves within a similar pace of hypotheticals in the intimate collaboration that forms the relationship of reader and writer.

Raise the stakes by making the threat in your story more imminent and potentially devastating. Make promises to the reader at the same time you threaten to foil those promises. If tension doesn’t escalate, the suspense you’ve been developing will evaporate.

Consider this: If you’re writing a romantic comedy and the obsessively disapproving father decides to go fishing instead of spy on his daughter, the rivets in your riveting story will begin to loosen. There’s a dramatic reason Romeo and Juliet had to maneuver through several acts to truly be together.

The peaceful love they seek against the odds infuses each scene with suspense and hope, yet, at the same time, this anticipation is fraught
with the encroaching threats of the Montague-Capulet feud that promises to destroy all.

Ask yourself how you can create a state of anguished desire in the reader? How can you lead the reader into a crisis, a moment of danger or an uncomfortable position? How can you press your reader to cling to desperate hope in the face of looming peril? How can you stir up taboos to take your reader to the enticements of their dark side?

**GIVE THEM YOUR HEART—IN THE END**

Without a rising trajectory of tension, without anxiety and suspense, there can be no feeling of release, of true pleasure and joy that the denouement of a story provides. It is your task to create tension in the reader, to lead them to and fro, so that the culmination of the story has real weight and intensity.

Help the reader climb slowly up the roller coaster, and then, just as they feel that spike of adrenaline, let them fly with the rushes of fulfillment you’ve been holding back as they tip over the crest and plunge downward.

When we exist in the suspense of falling in love—whether with a person or a novel—it eclipses our entire world. It speaks to a greater truth, one that can be both beautiful and terrifying, one we pursue despite its perils.

Through art we achieve an intimacy we might not be able to attain in real life. We live in the poetics of our primal drives. Now you’ve been schooled in the art of seduction. But to be a truly good lover, in the end, you must give the reader the heart of your story. After all that holding back, you can finally say, “I love you.” You can finally tell all.
The Key to Whole-Hearted Writing

Grant Faulkner

[This article previously appeared in the July/August 2015 issue of Writer’s Digest.]

For many years, I didn’t show anyone my stories. I had a Master of Arts in creative writing, so I possessed all of the hardened calluses that workshops stories builds. Still, I wrote in a solitude protected with ever-thickening barricades. I suppose somewhere within myself I believed my stories weren’t good enough—or feared that others’ reactions would prove they weren’t good enough. Perhaps I worried about being exposed as a creative charlatan, a dilettante, a fool.

I sent stories to literary journals because there, only anonymous editors would read them—and their reactions didn’t matter as much to me. Even when a story of mine was published, I rarely gave it to friends and family, and I declined invitations to read in public. I like to write about the underbelly of life, the sordid moments and unspoken desires that lace through people’s consciousness, and I suppose I feared that people would make judgments of me based on such stories.

It’s a common writer’s fear: that one’s life will be confused with the text. Since I grew up in a small town, where lives were constantly under
scrutiny, such a fear was embedded within me and had surely become magnified over the years.

But then one day, I randomly started sharing pieces with a friend at work. It was an enlivening experience to suddenly have a reader. The simple act of giving a story to another and hearing her reactions made me realize how the closures of solitude had made me into a stingy writer, how the act of writing changed when I did so with the idea of touching the person who would read it. The urge to be a writer is a generous act at its core, after all: We want to share our story with others, to give them a world that will open doors to insights and flights of the imagination.

The only way to achieve that is through an openness of spirit that can feel dangerous—or even be dangerous. A good story occurs when an author travels, or even plummets, into the depths of vulnerability and genuinely opens his or her soul in the search of truths that otherwise go untold.

Telling such a story, however, is among the most challenging things a writer can do. I have to work at being vulnerable in every piece of writing, even this one. I want to share a few things I do to write with the sort of openness I hope connects with readers in deeper and more meaningful ways.

**PUTTING TRUTH ON THE PAGE**

We’re reared in a culture that prizes invulnerability, privileges a stoicism that forms a shell over our deeper expressions. Openness can feel like weakness; telling our truths can seem like shameful exposure.

Brené Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston, strives to flip that concept. To be vulnerable is not weakness, Brown says—rather, it’s “our most accurate measure of courage.” The original definition of courage comes from the Latin word *cor*, meaning heart. Brown says that to tell the story of who you are with your whole heart takes courage. It’s only through such vulnerability that the connections that give purpose and meaning to our lives are formed.
“Vulnerability is essential to whole-hearted living,” says Brown. It’s also essential to whole-hearted writing. It’s the birthplace of creativity. Our stories won’t truly connect with readers unless we take the emotional risks that spark kindred feelings of authenticity. “Good writing is about telling the truth,” Anne Lamott writes in Bird by Bird. “We are a species that wants and needs to know who we are.”

Telling such truths is challenging, though. It requires overcoming the fear of shame—”the intensely powerful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging,” says Brown.

Shame can be a noisy beast. It screams, “You’re not good enough,” in a myriad of ways to writers. Your story isn’t original. Your characters are cardboard cutouts. Your love scenes are laughable. Your dialogue is overly sentimental.

I suppose such unspoken thoughts were why I didn’t share my stories for so many years. But I had to ask myself, Why did I become a writer in the first place? I made a list. And here’s what I discovered was on it: I wanted to put words to the shadowy corners of people’s souls, to understand the desperate lunges people take to give life meaning. I wanted to explore the enigmatic paradoxes of being, how desire can conflict with belief, how yearning can lead to danger. Life is so mysterious, nuanced, ineffable—equally disturbing as it is beautiful—so I decided it was my duty as a writer to be brave enough to risk ridicule in order to bring my truths to light. Why write a sanitized version of life?

“I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised and misunderstood,” wrote the poet Audre Lorde. “For it is not difference which immobilizes us most, but silence.”

If you’re immobilized by silence, the first step is to attune yourself to those moments when you’re hindered. Pause to identify the niggling and naysaying voices within yourself. Ask yourself these questions: Are you evading a truth in your story? Are you shying away from subjects that make you uncomfortable, subjects that might draw attention to yourself and make you feel exposed? Have you conjured characters
who won’t disturb others’ sensibilities, who reside in the safety zone of conventions? Have you stopped and turned a different direction out of the fear of another’s judgment?

**SAYING, “YES, AND …”**

A brain formed around ruts of resistance and reflexes of rectitude doesn’t easily open itself. Barriers can pop up in front of fresh ideas within moments of their creation, so it’s necessary to find ways to push ahead.

Creatives are often advised to embrace the foundational principle of theatrical improvisation: “Say, ‘Yes, and …’”. Although we do our work on a theoretical stage rather than a physical one, the correlations are clear. Improv actors are trained to accept whatever fellow actors offer in a scene instead of stiff-arming the action in the direction they want it to go. Improvisers take risks and make mistakes by definition—they let themselves fall into the most foolish behavior, allow themselves to speak what’s taboo—but that’s what leads them in fresh directions and helps them connect with their audiences.

I first discovered improvisational writing during National Novel Writing Month’s word sprints. Word sprints challenge writers to write as fast as possible in a set time limit, often with a prompt to get them started (similar to how an audience gives improv performers a word, object, song lyric, etc., to build a scene around). You can do them with a group (as during NaNoWriMo every November) or privately, setting a limit of five or 10 minutes. As the clock is ticking, it’s important not to hesitate. A word sprint invites you to turn off judgments by entering the flow of intuition that high-velocity writing taps into. If improv actors pause before jumping into a scene, it shows they are planning what’s to come, or even pausing because of a hindering social norm. The purpose is not to over think, but to just go—follow the “yes, and” your mind presents to other “ands” and “ands.”

I especially like to do this when my head gets filled with condemning and judgmental voices. Do I end up writing foolish things? Blessedly, yes. In literature the archetypal Fool babbles, acts like a child, and
doesn’t understand social conventions (or at least pretends not to), so the Fool isn’t held culpable for breaching any rules. As a result, the Fool can speak the truth in ways others can’t. You might say the Fool is the ultimate storyteller: He takes the conniving risks necessary to tell the tale only he can see.

“Looking foolish is good for you. It nourishes the spirit,” wrote Twyla Tharp in *The Creative Habit*.

I find that the more improvisational, the more foolish I am, the more likely I am to chase bolder angles and discover unexpected plot developments and surprising character pivots—and open the door to what I call “happy accidents.”

As you attempt improvisational writing, if you find yourself channeling words that feel forbidden, remember that making art is fundamentally an act of exposure. An artist opens the closets, dares to go into the dark basements, and rummages through the attics of our souls.

“A work of art is a confession,” as Albert Camus said. Camus didn’t mean a personal confession, but a revelation of the raw truth of the soul.

**BEING AN OUTLAW**

Shame can take a deeper and even more noxious form than just inhibiting your story; it can swat the pen out of your hand by not allowing you to admit the dreams that form your identity.

Writers tend to have an especially difficult time calling themselves writers. (Visit any writers’ forum online, and you’ll likely find actual debates on this very topic, as if it were scandalous: *When did you first do it? What made you decide it was OK? How did you feel afterward?*)

The life of the imagination can feel trivial or even forbidden in the adult world where life’s practicalities rule. I didn’t call myself a writer for years because I thought it was pretentious to do so until I’d published. I needed a badge of validation from the external world.

But by not calling myself a writer, I realized I was not only putting up a shield, but I was also unwittingly diminishing myself. A secret identity weakens one and brings on the urge to hide yourself in your
words. To write with verve demands asserting yourself as a creator—to yourself and to others.

You might go even further. Philippe Petit, the author of the book *Creativity: The Perfect Crime* (and the only man to have ever walked across the World Trade Center Towers on a high wire), says that as a child he felt the entire world was against his creative ventures. Creativity felt illegal. So, he decided that the creator must be an outlaw. Not a criminal outlaw, but “a poet who cultivates intellectual rebellion.”

“Develop unabashedly your own set of morals, cling to your own logic, inhabit your own universe,” Petit writes.

Here’s your task: Start proudly, and even defiantly, telling people you’re a writer (or better yet, an outlaw writer). Note how that assertion emboldens your writing. By recasting yourself into a more gutsy, rebellious figure, you’ll give yourself permission to break the laws that prohibit you from being vulnerable. You’re a writer, just because you write, so you can push the limits of your prose as much as Marlon James or create fantastical universes that rival N. K. Jemisin’s. Just as a robber breaks into a bank, it’s your job to pick the locks of the human soul.

By doing so, you won’t find shame, you’ll find enlivening connection. People will appreciate your moxie and your generosity. They’ll applaud you for telling their story, the one they can’t tell themselves.

**THE DELIVERANCE OF VULNERABILITY**

Being vulnerable as a writer is a never-ending quest, no matter if you’re published or not. Each sentence, each paragraph, each story holds its own particular demand of bravery, and the possibility of shying away.

I recently published a collection of short stories, *Fissures*, and when I received the cover design, I decided to post it on Facebook. I was proud of the book and wanted to share it with the many people far and wide who didn’t know about it. But my hand quivered on my mouse as I moved to click “Submit.” The cover was a bit risqué, so I worried about people’s reactions—everyone from my childhood friends from Sunday school to family members to author friends who fashioned themselves
urban aesthetes. I suddenly experienced the oddest pang of anxiety: I didn’t want people to buy the book or read the stories.

But I paused and asked myself, *Why put a book into the world with hesitation? Why be ashamed of a creation that I’d put my heart into?* I posted the cover, and I was overwhelmingly, blissfully touched by people’s reactions. People who I hadn’t seen in 30 years posted the kindest comments and even pre-ordered the book. As the likes and comments mounted, I started to feel more pride in my book, and that pride has fed into every aspect of the book since then.

I now read in public with regularity—and even seek out readings. I won’t say that I don’t sweat each time, but it gets easier with practice. No one has thrown a rotten apple at me; in fact, people have approached me afterward with the most thoughtful, encouraging comments. As a result, I’ve met other writers and expanded my writing community. I’ve learned that there’s an even greater power when saying, “I’m a writer,” in a community of other writers. We share our foibles and fears. We know that it’s not perfect prosethat defines writers, but the pursuit of it.

The old Grant might not have posted his stories on social media, but I do now as a matter of personal policy. The likes and comments not only buoy my confidence, but they’ve also helped me develop a widening circle of readers. My stories no longer fall into a vacuum. They’re read.

I often think back to my list of why I became a writer. Because I’ve embraced vulnerability, I’m fulfilling my purpose. Each day, I explore the mystical realms of the human heart through my words. I unearth revelatory, renegade, and rapturous moments of life that would otherwise exist in silence. I’m a better writer for my vulnerability. I’m a better person as well.
1. No matter what point you’re at in your novel, chances are, your character is frustrated by something—at least, they should be. There should be conflict—things standing in the way of your character getting what they want. Write a scene in which your character is standing on the edge of a cliff, or a building, or the universe and they scream into the distance all of their frustrations. What do they yell about? What language do they use? What sorts of gestures do they make? Hopefully you’ll discover something critical about your characters desires and motivations and you can carry some of that emotion into the next parts of the story.

2. Choose one of your main characters and take them to a new place. Maybe a change of scenery will do them good! Write a scene in which your character travels somewhere new to them—perhaps it’s a work trip, or a vacation, or a class field trip, or clue in the mystery guiding them—whatever the reason, this is an opportunity to see the place through the eyes of a specific character as it pertains to their goals in the novel.

3. Write a scene in which you trap your protagonist somewhere. Perhaps it’s on a boat in close quarters with someone they don’t like. Or maybe it’s in an elevator when they need to be elsewhere. Maybe
it’s in an office during a lockdown. How does this entrapment factor into the larger story? Is it a minor inconvenience, a setback? Or is it an opening to meeting a new character who could help them? Perhaps it’s the final challenge they have to overcome (or not) to end the story.

4. Now, take the scene you wrote for number three and rewrite it with the antagonist as the character who is trapped. Consider how this changes the dynamics of the story.

5. Write a scene in which your character creates a meal. Are they cooking for themselves or for others as well? Is this a meal they make often, or something for which they need to follow a recipe closely? Does “cooking” for your character mean slapping a sandwich together and hoping for the best, or does your character cook regularly with some success? As you write the scene, be sure to consider the aromas, the space and tools used in preparing the food, your character’s attitude about the meal, etc.

6. If you’re finding your inspiration lagging, throw in something that your characters won’t expect: a love confession, a mystery package, a call for help … the stage is yours!

7. Get a little deeper into your MC’s psyche: what’s currently bothering them? What emotional wounds haven’t they healed from? What triggers them to behave angrily, erratically, or shrink in on themselves? Use these answers to inspire an emotional conflict within your story.

8. What’s the absolute worst thing that could happen to your characters right now? Got an answer? Good. Now think of something even worse than that and start writing.

9. What’s the tone of your book? Are you writing a hair-raising horror or upbeat sweet romance? What do you want your reader to feel as they’re reading? Hold onto that feeling and have your next scene exemplify it.

10. One of your characters has a secret they never meant for anyone to know … reveal it and have the rest of your cast react.
11. What’s something your character’s wouldn’t expect to find (like a knife in the nursery or wads of cash in a friend’s closet)? Have them come across it and remember: The more that it complicates your plot, the better!

12. Take a break from your main story and write a scene from before your narrator knew your other characters. If they’re lifelong friends, write about the first time they met each other or their earliest memories of each other. Fleshing out some backstory on the page might lead you to some unexpected inspiration!

13. Think about one of your favorite literary or cinematic characters (hero or villain). What do you like about them? Now create a character that shares those characteristics and throw them into your story.

14. Write a scene where your characters are somewhere they shouldn’t be—then write about them getting caught.

15. Let’s switch it up: Write from the perspective of a character who hasn’t had a chance in the POV spotlight.

16. Most stories start with a disruption to their daily lives: they’re introduced to a potential love interest, they’re called into a world of magic, they come across a case no other detective can crack. Take that disruption back out of your story; the love interest moves away suddenly, the narrator’s access to magic is revoked, a fellow detective solves the case before your narrator. If your narrator suddenly finds themselves back in the world Before, how would they handle that? What would they learn? What would they do to get back to the After?

17. Someone close to your character tells them, “I’m not who you think I am.” Write the scene that follows.

18. Give your narrator a bad habit—they gamble, party too much, lie, steal, etc.—and then write a scene where they succumb to this habit.

19. Write a scene where your character is asked to help out with something, but they don’t really want to. Would they agree or refuse the offer? How would that change the way the other characters feel about them?
20. Have a character deal with a recurring problem or hang-up. For instance, your character may be really good at dancing ... unless people are watching. Or perhaps she has all the best ideas, while lacking the self-confidence to share them or conviction to stand behind them when questioned. Heck, a character could just have vertigo and be put in multiple situations where this presents itself as an issue.

21. Have your characters make plans for a rendezvous. First, there’s the planning part of the rendezvous. Two or more people decide they’re going to meet. But why? Is it for a fight? A party? A date? Pleasure? Duty? Figuring out the why is the first step in setting the tone for everything that follows. Is the buildup to the rendezvous one of suspense? Or excitement? Speaking of buildup, the next consideration for the rendezvous is when it happens. Is it the same day? Next week? Next year? Later? And what happens between? Are there obstacles between setting the rendezvous and actually having it? And then, where does it take place? And what’s the fallout from the rendezvous? If it even happens.

22. Let your characters have a dream. The dream could be one where everything goes right and reveals their deepest desires. Or it could be a complete nightmare revealing their darkest fears or foreshadowing trouble yet to come. Either way, make it interesting.

23. Make one of your characters start acting out of character. Have the bad guy do something nice or endearing. Have the good guy do something questionable. Or maybe a normally reliable character suddenly can’t be counted on for anything.

24. Write a scene where your character doubts themselves. The moment of doubt at one point could shape all future actions (or inactions). Perhaps that moment of doubt starts a string of hesitations, and the character will need to overcome that character flaw to find success. Of course, it could also swing a character in the opposite direction, so that they are foolhardy with their lack of doubt (or consideration) in the future.
25. What is something that your character fears above all else? Is it loss, failure, embarrassment, loneliness? Whatever you choose, write a scene in which the character is forced to encounter this fear.

26. Write about an approaching deadline. First question: What is the purpose of the deadline? Is it for a wedding? A graduation? A term paper? Maybe some work project? Or is it even higher stakes like delivering a huge sum of cash by a certain time or someone dies or gets their legs broken? Maybe war will break out between two countries if X doesn’t happen by Y. Second question: What are the obstacles to meeting that deadline? This is where you can really ramp up your story. Maybe there are multiple tasks that need to be completed before hitting the deadline. Maybe your character(s) gets distracted easily. Maybe there’s traffic.

27. Introduce an authority figure to your story. There are so many directions you could go with this one. Maybe two characters think they know who the villain is, so they try to break into his or her office only to get caught by a security guard or a police officer. Or a character tries to sneak away from class to do a good deed but runs into the principal or a teacher.

28. Put a character on the spot. In a classroom setting, this could be a moment when the teacher calls on a student. In a work setting, the boss may ask a character what they think about a project. In a club setting, this could be a moment when a spotlight literally shines on a character.

29. Have two or more characters complete a business deal. Business makes the world go around in many ways and can lead to big time consequences in a story. Does the deal go smoothly? Is it complicated? Does it cause your characters to fight?

30. Have a character make a resolution and try sticking to it. The resolution could be something normal like trying to lose weight or quit smoking. Or it could something more unique like an assassin trying not to kill anyone or kleptomaniac resolving to quit stealing.