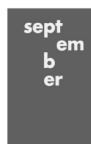


**Ten  
Things  
About  
Writing**

**JOANNE  
HARRIS**



An extract from  
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# Introduction

Creative writing is a great deal more than just a professional skill. Yes, a good, clear, graphic style and the ability to tell a story can help in all kinds of professions, from teaching to advertising, from writing a marketing report to writing a bestselling novel; but making art for pleasure is a valid objective in itself. Writing for pleasure promotes articulacy, empathy, understanding, lateral thinking. It gives us insights into other lives; windows into other worlds. It allows us to harness our creative energy and gives us a sense of achievement. It's cheaper than therapy. Also it's *fun*. Fun is a worthwhile end in itself. And we tend to enjoy what we do well, and want to improve and build on our skills. I hope that this book will give you the chance to do just that, however far you choose to take it: whether you're a complete beginner, or an experienced writer looking to take your writing to the next level.

Part of improving your writing is learning what other writers have to say, and taking from them what is useful to you, which may vary from person to person. There is no single way to write, no cast-iron rules for making art, and what works for me may not work for you at all. That doesn't make either of us wrong. We all approach these things in our own ways – and, whatever your chosen method, if the end result satisfies you, if it gets the results you were hoping

for, then you chose the right way for you. But here are some things that I have learnt over my years as a writer – I have shared some of them as part of a regular Twitter hashtag series, which some of you have found useful. Many of you have asked me to collect them and put them together into a book. So here they are: and whether your aim is to become a published writer or just to improve your written style, I hope you find something here to help, encourage or motivate you. Take what you need from these pages; and most of all, *enjoy what you do*. Joy is such a vital part of creative writing – because if you don't enjoy what you write, how can you expect anyone else to?



First novels ideally should be between  
80,000 - 100,000 words.  
I know about 2,000 words, so that's  
about 50 times each. Easy!

*Moose Allain*

# Starting Out

**T**here. That was easy, wasn't it? You've taken the first step already. You've decided to explore and expand your potential as a writer. Whatever your objective, it's a great thing to do, and I hope it will bring you joy and success in whatever you hope to achieve.

Now to look at a few ways to get you started.

**1. Don't try to do too much at once.** Although it may be true that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, try not to think about where the journey will take you. Instead, try to focus on what you can do on a day-to-day basis.

**2. Decide what you *want* from your writing.** Do you write purely for your own pleasure? Do you write as therapy? Do you enjoy sharing your fan fiction online? Are you writing a story to entertain your grandchildren? Are you seeking to be published commercially? Whatever your reasons, and on whatever level you choose, writing can be a rewarding, enriching occupation that can bring joy to you and to others.

**3. Manage your expectations.** Don't assume that by writing you're going to make millions, attract girls (or boys), or get

to hang out with famous people. For the most part, the best that will happen is that you'll do a lot of writing. Make sure that's what you *really* want. If you don't actually *enjoy* writing, you're unlikely to sustain the effort.

**4. Manage your time.** If you don't actively *make* time to write, then you'll never get round to it. (More on ways to do this in the next chapter.)

**5. Manage your workspace.** A designated workspace is the key to good writing habits. Decide where you are going to write and try to make it as accessible and as welcoming as possible. (More on your workspace later.)

**6. Make sure you have the right tools** to allow your writing to fit into your lifestyle. If you're on the move throughout the day, you might prefer a laptop or a writing app that you can use on your phone. If you're going to be working from home, you might prefer to work on a PC. And of course there's always the time-honoured notebook-and-pen combo . . .

**7. Find a beta reader.** Not everyone wants to share their work, but writing can be a lonely business. It can help to get feedback from a sympathetic, honest reader – and having an audience, even of one, can help with motivation.

**8. Join an online community.** It's so easy nowadays to get in touch with other writers, bloggers, editors or agents – and you can learn a lot from interacting with other people who may be on the same path.

**9. Join the Society of Authors, or the Writers' Guild.** (If you haven't been published yet, you can still join the society as

an Associate Member or Friend). With its quarterly magazine, free legal advice, contract services, social events, literary prizes, grants and lectures on different aspects of publishing, it's well worth the membership fee.

**10. Finally, *give yourself permission to write*.** You can do it. It's allowed. No one's going to laugh at you or say you're not a proper writer – not anyone who matters, anyway.

Got it? Good.

Take a deep breath. You're on your way. Good luck, and may your writing bring you as much joy as mine has brought me . . .



## Permission

A task that many new writers find unexpectedly difficult is *giving themselves permission to write*. They waste time and energy worrying: *Am I a proper writer? Will proper writers laugh at me? Am I being ridiculous in believing that actual readers might enjoy reading what I've written?* So here's a little checklist to help you get through this. And if you ever start to feel uncertain of yourself, come back to this page, take a deep breath, reread the list . . . then make yourself a cup of tea and get to work. You're allowed to do it. I said so.

**1. Stop thinking in terms of 'proper' writers and the rest of the world.** You're not an 'aspiring' writer, or an 'emerging' writer, or a 'budding' writer. If you write, you're a writer. So *write!*

**2. Banish your fear of inadequacy.** Do you write as well as you want to? Probably not. No writer does. But then, why would you be any different from any of the rest of us? We all have insecurities. We're all trying to improve our game. And like all games, yours will improve with practice, and with time.

**3. Banish your writer's guilt.** Ever feel guilty at the amount of time you spend watching TV, or reading, or exercising, or

being with your friends? No? Then don't feel guilty at the time you spend writing. It's not a selfish indulgence, it's something you care about, and into which you're prepared to put work and energy. Make sure the people around you understand that, and support you. If they don't, find better people.

**4. Stop comparing yourself to other writers.** Compare your work to the last thing you wrote. If you're improving (and you *are*), you're doing fine.

**5. Don't waste your time obsessing over getting an agent, or getting published, or thinking about all the money you think you'll make, or identifying market trends.** Write until you have something worthwhile, then find someone to show it to. Anything else is just a distraction.

**6. Find a support network.** Online or off, it's comforting to know that there are others who feel as you do. Writing circles, blogger groups, fanfic communities, social media groups – all of these can help a writer feel connected. You are not alone, and the support of others can be an extraordinary comfort, especially if you hit a rough patch (and you will).

**7. Establish a regular writing routine.** Getting into the habit of writing is just like getting into any other habit – it takes a few weeks to establish. But stick with it; and before long it will feel as natural as any other part of your life.

**8. Don't put yourself under unnecessary pressure.** It can take a long time to get a book into publishable shape, so be careful how much you reveal to the people around you – that is, unless you want your colleagues at work constantly asking: 'How's the book going?'

**9. Don't expect too much, too fast.** Everything about writing a book takes a lot longer than you think it will. Live in hope, but pack for the long haul.

**10. Don't worry if you end up trashing some or all of what you've written – nothing you write is ever wasted.** Remember that every word you write is part of your ongoing training, and that anything you discard now may one day be reused, re-imagined or rebooted. For now, don't look back. You have work to do.

## Habits

**N**o one is born good at writing. The ability to spin words into gold is a skill that comes from hard work, patience and lots of practice. Some people may have an aptitude; others will struggle to gain momentum. And yet, whatever our writing ambitions – whether it’s to create a bestseller, to self-publish a memoir, to write better fanfic or just to improve our blogging style – all of us can benefit from improving our writing skills.

Of course, we all have different styles and different approaches to writing; but getting into good habits can really make a difference. These are the ones I think are essential.

**1. Read as much as you can. To be a writer, you *must* be a reader.** Comics, games, fan fiction, literary fiction, commercial fiction, children’s books, e-books, magazines, non-fiction – it’s all part of your training. *All* reading is worthwhile. All reading teaches you something. Anyone telling you otherwise doesn’t understand the nature of reading at all.

**2. Read outside your comfort zone.** We all have our favourite writers, and we often write in similar genres. To avoid going stale, occasionally swap your usual genre for something

different: fiction for popular science; crime fiction for fantasy; fiction for non-fiction. Read widely: newspapers, comics, bestsellers, biographies, genre fiction. Nothing – *nothing* – you read is ever wasted.

**3. Look off the page.** Writing isn't limited to blogs and books. It's part of almost every aspect of our lives. You can learn a lot about fiction from a well-written film, a stage play, TV show, a game. Be aware of the quality of the writing you encounter. Be critical. Learn to identify what works and what doesn't, and why.

**4. Get into the groove.** However much or how little time you have, try to write *something* every day. Even if it's only a sentence, it helps you stay in the world you're creating. And once you're in that world, your mind will be quietly working on your plot and characters throughout the day.

**5. Don't forget to daydream.** Most writing happens *away* from your desk. So make room for some thinking time – whether that's a morning walk, a run, an hour's commute, or a long, relaxing bath. Switch off your phone whenever you can. These are often the times when inspiration strikes. Learn to identify it when it does.

**6. Be observant.** The best writers seem to *notice* more than the average person does – and then they show what they've seen to the reader. So watch the people around you; notice their mannerisms and behaviour. Watch the clouds; recall your dreams; remember colours, tastes and scents. You'll soon find you're noticing many more things – and they'll all help improve your writing.

**7. Keep a notebook.** Carry it with you at all times. In it, record anything you see or hear that you find interesting, new, striking, shocking, funny, singular. Dreams and day-dreams; thoughts and ideas. You never know what might fit into a story one day.

**8. Read aloud.** Words are like music; they have their own rhythms and beats. Reading aloud helps you understand the ebb and flow of the language.

**9. Don't write because you want to be a writer.** Write because *you want to write*. If you don't actively enjoy what you're doing, you'll never have the staying power to finish even a first draft.

**10. Don't beat yourself up on the days when your writing isn't going well.** Some days the dream machine won't work. That doesn't mean it's broken.

## Workspace

Every writer needs a place to work. It's psychologically important for a writer to have a designated workspace – be that an office, a room of your own, a favourite café, a shed in the garden, even the back seat of your car during a half-hour lunch break. The point is to designate a space that you use *only* for writing. If you have the luxury of a home office or a room of your own, then there's no limit to what you can do. Furnish it the way you want: make it suit your requirements. But whether you do or not, here are a few ideas to get you started.

1. **Find a really good desk chair.** So many writers have back and neck problems from slouching over a laptop all day.
2. **Find somewhere you won't be interrupted.** Interruptions are more than annoying; they take you out of the writing zone. If you're working from home, make sure your family understands your need for uninterrupted time. Lay down some ground rules to ensure you have some unbroken time to work – even if it's only for twenty minutes every day.
3. **Turn off your phone.** You may find it easier to log off the internet, too (although I quite like my little water-cooler

moments on Twitter). It's all too easy to lose focus with the distraction of screens and phones. It's better to spend twenty minutes a day focusing completely on your writing than to spend hours at the computer with one eye on social media, fooling yourself you've been productive.

**4. Check the temperature.** Don't be too warm – warmth will make you sleepy. (Obviously, you don't want to be freezing, either. There's a limit to how much an artist should suffer.)

**5. If you're working from home, try to rid your space of clutter.** Clutter is often stressful and distracting, and may erode your concentration.

**6. Go for a walk** every once in a while, or do some stretching at your desk. I suggest every half-hour or so, or when you need five minutes' thinking time. It keeps you alert and energized as well as keeping you active.

**7. Make sure you have enough natural light.** Light makes a big difference to our energy levels, so for winter and on dull days, if you feel lethargic, consider getting a light box to make up for the lack of sunlight.

**8. Remove any reminders from your space of any other things you have to do.** Housework, letters unanswered, plants to be watered, dogs to be walked, emails from your workplace. This is your designated writing space; at least for the time you have set aside, nothing else should intrude.

**9. Plan your snacks in advance.** It's very easy, when working from home, either to miss meals (bad idea), or to be making toast every five minutes. Neither extreme is helpful.



**10. Have a bottle of water to hand.** It's easy to forget this when you're wrangling a tricky chapter, but dehydration affects your brain power and inhibits concentration.

## **Headspace**

If your lifestyle makes it hard to find a designated workspace, you might benefit from a few headspace exercises. After all, if you're in the zone, your surroundings shouldn't matter. And many writers just don't have the luxury of a room of their own – they may sometimes have to write in airports, hotel rooms, railway stations. (I spent several years writing on the floor of my living room, surrounded by my daughter's toys, and with my husband watching football on TV.)

Most people have a visual imagination. A minority have very limited visual imagination, but do respond strongly to sounds, movements, tactile stimuli, even scents. Here are some shortcuts into the zone, based on sensory prompts and triggers. They may not all work for you, but you may find that one of them helps. And if this all sounds a bit too New-Agey to you, remember that creative visualization, self-hypnosis and meditation are all just ways of achieving an altered state of consciousness, which is just another way of saying 'getting into the zone'. Try it. You may surprise yourself.

**1. The portable desk.** Choose two objects (for fifteen years I used a candlestick and a paperweight, but they can be anything at all), put them in front of your laptop as you sit at

your desk, or your kitchen table, or on your chosen piece of floor, or at your table in Starbucks. Handle them before you sit down to write. Get used to having them with you. Use them wherever and whenever you settle down to write – and *only* then. What you're doing is creating a *writing prompt*, which will work like any other psychological trigger, telling you: *This is your writing space – access it*. It's amazing how well this works, especially if, like me, you travel a lot, and can't get to your own desk every day.

**2. The red door.** This is a prompt that works best for people with strong visualization skills, and although it takes time to set up at first, it can become a useful means of getting into the zone. First, close your eyes and relax. Imagine a red door in a wall. Imagine the colour and shape of the door; the texture and colours of the wall. When you can see the door in your mind, take out the key from your pocket. Visualize the shape of the key, its weight, its texture. When you can do this, unlock the door and look inside.

Inside, is your perfect workspace. It can be anything you like: a garden, a beach, a lighthouse, a marvellous library. Go in, and spend a little time furnishing it. The better you do this, the better the visualization works. Then, when you're ready to start work, lock yourself in, using the key. Open your eyes. You should be ready.

When you've finished working, leave your space through the red door, making sure to lock it behind you. The next time you try this, it will be much quicker and easier, until eventually the visualization will only take a few seconds.

**3. Identify your dominant sense.** Some people (about 25 per cent) have no visual imagination. That doesn't mean they're not imaginative; it just means that, for them, other senses

override the visual. If you think you're among them, identify which is your dominant sense, and tailor your prompts to suit. For instance, for a tactile memory, make sure your portable desk (if using this idea) consists of two tactile objects, rather than just visual reminders.

**4. Make a writing playlist.** Another useful prompt for non-visual thinkers is music. I prefer not to listen to music when I'm writing, but I like to create playlists for my characters to get me into the writing zone. Try it out: find what motivates you.

**5. Build a scent library.** Scent is another powerful way in which to access your creativity. The smell of rosemary has been proved to aid memory, and lavender helps with relaxation, but *any* scent can be used as a memory prompt. Just as actors often use scent to get into character, a writer can use scent as a means of getting into the zone. I use a different scent for every book I write. I use it *only* when I am writing, and before long I begin to associate it with the book, its characters and its progress. It's a great shortcut when I'm travelling, too.

**6. Find your voice.** Read the last chapter or page you wrote *aloud* before beginning your new day's work. (This isn't always practical in public spaces, but it really helps me find my voice.) This especially helps those who have an auditory memory, or who are affected by rhythms and cadences.

**7. Find your writing uniform.** We often associate being at work with the wearing of some kind of uniform. Some writers like to choose a special piece of clothing or jewellery to help them into their headspace. Rings are a common

choice, but you may find that a favourite scarf, blanket or beanie can also help. The main thing is that you should *only* use it when you're writing: that way you associate it with being in the zone.

**8. Create a memory book.** To access certain emotions – love, happiness, grief, nostalgia and so on – put together a book of photographs or pictures that are deeply meaningful to you. It helps you access feelings that may be important in building a scene, in setting the tone, in getting into character.

**9. Banish toxic influences.** Many writers find that they are negatively affected by current or political affairs. If you find that you can't get current affairs out of your mind, it sometimes helps to devise a cleansing ritual – be that showering, washing your hands, casting a protective circle or burning sage before getting to work. Whatever your choice, if it works, it's all good. Like all other acts of creation, magic is just a state of mind.

**10. Sometimes, whatever method you try, you find you just can't get into the zone.** Don't beat yourself up about it. Dreaming on demand is an unpredictable business. Instead, go for a walk, watch a film, play with your kids, walk your dog. Remember, only a small part of the writing process actually happens at a desk. The missing piece of your story may be waiting just around the corner.

## Time

The most common excuse people give me for not writing is not being able to find the time. But here's the thing: we all of us have the same twenty-four hours to work with. The trick is *managing the time we have* to prioritize the things we find most important. If writing is important enough to you, then you *will* find the time to write. You may have to make sacrifices, however (I mostly sacrificed ironing and dusting). Here are a few things you might like to bear in mind while you're deciding where your priorities lie.

**1. Be realistic about the time you'll spend writing.** Making time to write is often a challenge in a world that makes so many demands on us. But remember, you don't need to spend hours writing every day. Even if you only write 300 words every day, in a year you could already have the first draft of a novel.

**2. Be mindful of what you do with your time.** Is it *all* time well-spent? Chances are that some of it isn't. How long do you spend watching TV programmes you don't really like? Checking your social media? Pottering around aimlessly? Could you redirect some of that time into your writing instead?

**3. Don't be afraid to enlist help.** Women writers in particular are often left with the responsibilities of cooking, housework and childcare on top of their regular jobs, leaving even less time for writing. Consider delegating some of these tasks – ask a family member to cook instead, or phone for a weekly take-out – to give yourself some extra time.

**4. Consider getting up an hour early to write.** Or, if you're a night-owl, stay up for an extra hour. Try both, and decide which works best for you.

**5. Use your lunch break to good effect.** Half an hour a day, every day, adds up to a good weekly total.

**6. Don't forget your regular commute.** Use it, if not physically to write (not easy on a crowded Tube), to plan your writing and go over ideas.

**7. Plan your writing in advance.** You're far less likely to skip a day's work if you've already put the time aside.

**8. Find a writing buddy.** Writing is like running, or any kind of exercise: it can be motivating to share your experience with someone else.

**9. If you've never tried NaNoWriMo, give it a go.** (It's a yearly event, held online throughout November, during which writers from all disciplines challenge themselves to write, plan or finish a novel in a month.) The result won't be a finished novel, but many people benefit from the sense of community it brings them, and it might help you get into good habits.

**10. Don't tell yourself: 'If I miss a day, I'll make it up at the weekend.'** While it's true that you may have more time at the weekend, you'll end up putting yourself under unnecessary pressure, and your writing will suffer.



## Getting Ideas

Inspiration is a mysterious concept, and one over which people too often feel they have no control. This is quite untrue; the search for ideas is an active, not a passive process. The idea that we must wait for the Muse to inspire us was invented by effete young Victorians who wanted an excuse to sit around doing nothing all day. Most of us don't have that luxury, which means forgetting about the Muse and doing some actual footwork instead.

**1. Don't just sit there.** Inspiration is like lightning: you can't necessarily predict *when* it will strike, but you can create the right conditions. The first is to *actively* pursue those things that may inspire you.

**2. If you can, travel.** Discovering new places and cultures is immensely enriching and educational. (And remember, for those of limited means, books allow you to travel, too.)

**3. You don't have to go far to find ideas.** There are stories all around us; the trick is learning how to see them. Train yourself to question everything you see, and to imagine the stories behind the people you meet.

**4. People are fascinating.** On public transport, put your phone away, take out your earplugs and observe other people. Listen to their conversations. You might hear something that sparks an idea.

**5. Learn about people who are different to you.** Explore the art, poetry and writing of different cultures. Look at the many diverse perspectives from which we can look at the world, and ourselves.

**6. To make art, you must consume art.** Go to galleries, watch plays, listen to music, play games, watch films, read books. But do it mindfully – think about what you're seeing and hearing, and think about what it makes you feel.

**7. Be more aware of the world in general.** That means noticing what you see, what you taste, what you smell, what you feel in all kinds of different circumstances. All these things will feed your writing if you allow it to. Write your impressions down in your notebook, or on your phone.

**8. Get out of your comfort zone.** Try to do things that will challenge you – whether that's training to run a marathon, or taking up a new hobby, going to a new place, or just saying hello to a stranger every day. Unexpected situations are creative, and might lead you anywhere.

**9. Don't forget that you already have a library of memories.** Draw from your experiences; your childhood, the key events of your own life. Not only will these give you ideas, they will also add to the emotional realism of your writing.

**10. Give yourself a story prompt every day.** Base it on the things you see on the way to work, or in the street outside your window. An abandoned shoe by the side of the road – what's its story? How did it get there? A woman running for a bus – where is she going? Who is she? It's surprising how often these small things can grow into something bigger.