



The Writer's Brain

What Neurology Tells Us About Writing and Creativity



Why Do We Do That?

Why do we sit down in our writing space or studio, only to pop out of the chair to look for answers in the refrigerator, empty the dishwasher, check the mail, or get another book to research?

Why do we have great ideas when we're in the shower or driving on the freeway, but then freeze and not know how to start when we can get to our writing space/studio?

Why do we distract ourselves with a multitude of other things to do and think about?

Why do we paralyze ourselves with self-criticism and perfectionism?

Why do we keep promising ourselves that someday soon we'll go back to the novel, the poems, the essay, the art project and never quite get around to doing that?

Why do we have such a love-hate relationship with our writing/art? What is it about writing/creating that both attracts us and repels us? Why is it so difficult to do the very thing we love to do?



If I Only Had a Brain

There is a temptation to blame ourselves, but there is more at play here than lack of discipline, ambition, intelligence or experience. Look at the evidence: sometimes we enter the creative flow state and write/create effortlessly, creating powerful images and crafting compelling words and images; at other times, we are completely paralyzed, distracted and unable to write/create.

The reason so many of us are left asking “Why do I do that?” is because we don't have a brain – we have a brain system.

Just like the digestive system consists of separate organs with different jobs that work together to make it possible for the body to digest food, process nutrients and get rid of the excess, the brain consists of separate areas, each performing distinct purposes. All those different parts of the brain system collaborate remarkably well to orchestrate and monitor bodily functions and to make human thought and consciousness possible. But sometimes those parts compete.

The human brain is typically divided into three major systems: 1) the brain stem or “lizard brain,” which is located at the core of the entire brain system and maintains body functions like respiration, digestion and circulation; 2) the limbic system or “leopard brain,” which surrounds the brain stem and provides the capacity for emotion and relies on the fight-or-flight instinct in response to threats; and 3) the cortex or “learning brain,” which surrounds the limbic system and gives us the ability to solve problems, use language and numbers, create, anticipate the future, motivate ourselves, and reflect on and modify our behavior (Pierce J. Howard, *The Owner's Manual for the Brain*).

It is the potential conflict between the limbic system and the cortex that is most relevant to those painful questions about our creativity.

Limbic System Takeovers

The Reticular Activating System (RAS) serves as a kind of toggle switch that determines whether the limbic system or the cortex is in control. When we relax, the RAS flips control to the cortex and we are capable of the symbolic, logical and creative thinking that is the hallmark of human evolution.

With the cortex in control, the individual is able to focus attention on and engage in behavior to support creative aspirations. On the other hand, when we perceive a potential threat, the RAS flips control to the limbic system and we rely on our instinctual fight-or-flight response. Creativity is dismissed as trivial compared to the serious business of staying alive and safe.

When the limbic system has been activated, we react automatically from instinct or training. Combat soldiers endure intense training and airplane pilots practice emergency maneuvers in flight simulators so that their training will override their instincts when their limbic system is activated. With the limbic system in control, the cortex is effectively shut down. We are still conscious, we can still speak and calculate, so we often don't know that the cortex has turned off, but what we say and how we act is based on previous training. We are not capable of innovative, nuanced thinking and our choices will be instinctive. None of the higher thinking functions, also called "executive functions," are available.

Consequently, we're literally of two minds about our creative work. Our cortex seeks novelty and wants to be creative. The limbic system cares only about being safe and staying alive. When the limbic system is in control, we respond instinctively with behaviors that later make us shake our heads and say "Now why did I do that?"

I Don't Know

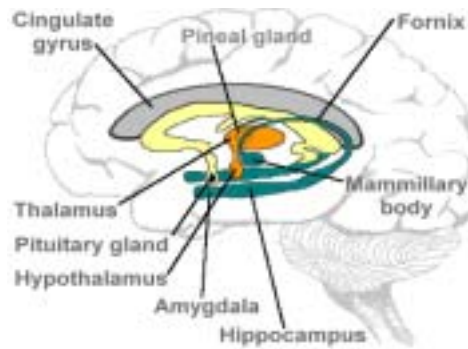
Strangely enough, we often can't explain our own behavior. That is, the cortex can't explain behavior initiated by the limbic system. In *The Emotional Brain*, Joseph LeDoux explains how the cortex is often unaware that control has shifted. For example, if you see a snake, you'll later say something like, "I saw a snake and thought I should get away, so I jumped." However, the faster limbic system made your body jump *before* your cortex had the conscious thought "I should jump." In other words, the cortex does a very poor job of recognizing when it is not in control.

LeDoux also shows how the limbic system often reacts to threats the cortex is not aware of and prompts action the cortex cannot explain. Unaware that control has shifted or why, the cortex invents reasons to explain and justify behavior.

Rather than admit we just don't know why we did something, a profound statement of vulnerability few of us are capable of, we rationalize, make assumptions and draw erroneous conclusions from inadequate evidence. Writers and artists often assume the worst: that we're lazy, undisciplined, lacking willpower, intelligence and ambition. Or we complain about writer's block or creative block. Or we distract ourselves and fill our schedules with other priorities to give us the illusion of virtue and allow us to say "I'm too busy to write/create. Maybe after I..."

Unfortunately none of these responses helps us get past the resistance caused by the limbic system's takeover. In fact, negative assumptions and rationalizations often make us more stressed and increases the need to keep the limbic system in control. Unchecked and misinterpreted, resistance can lead to an ongoing cycle where the anxiety of anticipating not being able to write or

The Limbic System



Learn more about the neurology of resistance during one of the six sessions of the Writer's Resistance class starting March 12 at the Loft.

create triggers the limbic system and reinforces the resistance.

What We Do Know

Since we all have had negative experiences around our writing/creating at some time in our lives, we often come to our writing/art with our limbic systems triggered, even if we aren't aware of it. It is simply impossible to write/create well when the limbic system has precedence over the creative cortex.

Until we learn how to flip the RAS from limbic system to cortex, all our efforts as creators are futile. None of the higher cognitive functions necessary for writing/creating are available. It is imperative that we understand the neurological causes of resistance, recognize resistance in its many guises, and find ways to relax so that our cortex can reengage.



Recognizing Resistance

In a survey I conducted with 350 professional and aspiring writers, 95% report experiencing some form of writing resistance. The most commonly cited forms of resistance include: distractions (94%), procrastination (84%), initial inertia or difficulty getting started (84%), anxiety or fear (70%), and writer's block (67%). Other forms of resistance cited include: staying too busy to write, self-doubt, perfectionism, self-criticism, fear, feeling overwhelmed and inexplicable exhaustion when sitting down to write.

The many forms of resistance can be categorized by the instinctive actions we take when the limbic system is triggered. When threatened, all mammals will freeze for a moment before choosing to fight or flee.

Freeze: This “deer in the headlights” response is traditionally called “writer’s block” or “creative block.” The cortex is turned off and the writer/artist literally cannot think what to write/create or how to start. There can either be emotional numbness or intense anxiety and frustration. This is quite painful and not a state anyone would willingly put her- or himself in.

Fight: The fight response can be directed at the writer/artist her(him)self, at another person, or both. Fighting yourself includes excessively harsh criticism, negative self-talk, hating the writing/art or yourself, perfectionism, and sabotage behaviors such as missing deadlines, losing files, having accidents, etc. Fighting others can include refusing to hear suggestions for revision, criticizing other writers/artists or other people in your life, and denying the need for improvement.

Flee: The behaviors that rise from the urge to escape the discomfort associated with writing/creating are the most common forms of resistance.

These include: distractions (social life, work and numbing activities like excessive gaming, shopping, drinking, TV watching); the inability to stay in the chair to write; creating other tasks that must be completed first (emails, cleaning the desk, researching beyond what's necessary); overscheduling or overcommitting to other priorities that

“must” be addressed before the writing/creating; waiting until the last minute to start and other forms of procrastination.

All forms of resistance are confusing and frustrating. We seem unable to honor our best intentions and efforts to be better writers/artists. It helps to remember that we are struggling so much because our limbic system is in charge, which leaves us unable to use our cortex for nuanced thought, self-reflection, sophisticated analysis or the ability to foresee future outcomes.

Hope Is Not Lost

The good news is that there is a lot we can do to identify and manage our responses so that we can write/create effectively. In my roles as teacher, creativity coach, and professional speaker, I've helped over a thousand writers and other artists move beyond their resistance to tap their full creative potential.

An important first step is to bring resistance out of the shadows. To learn more about the neurology of resistance, you can start with the brain books listed under Recommended Resources at my website www.RosanneBane.com (enter

through the Readers door). Talk openly about your resistance with other writers/artists, reminding each other that this is not an excuse to avoid our creative work, but an opportunity to devise and share strategies to overcome common forms of resistance. The Writer's Resistance class I'm teaching at the Loft (starting March 12) will give you more information and a community of other writers looking for ways to move past resistance.

Send an email (Rosanne@RosanneBane.com) or call me (612-722-4139) if you'd like a detailed list of relaxation suggestions for writers/artists. Resistance is one of the topics that often come up during coaching; fortunately, discussing how to reward action and celebrate success is also frequent. I'd be delighted to answer any questions you might have about how creativity coaching can help you resolve your resistance or to schedule a free sample coaching session with you.

Creativity Coach,
Instructor and Speaker
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Rosanne@RosanneBane.com



Maximizing creative energy for writers/artists at all levels!

“The Writer’s Resistance class really helped me get my writing back on track.”

Miriam Queensen, Screenwriter & Novelist

“Coaching with Rosanne has given me new energy to re-engage with my creative vision. I got down-to-earth, practical guidance and I lightened up!”

Kate Green, Novelist and Poet

“Rosanne walks with me on my creative journey, helping me identify opportunities in my writing and clearing the hidden snares and dead ends from my vision.”

Gordy Paquette, Writer

Spring Loft Classes

Writer’s Resistance: We’ll explore both the neurology and psychology of resistance and how to use tools like the 3 Recommended Practices, Polarity Management and Motivational Interviewing to respond appropriately to resistance and achieve your dreams and goals. Weekly check-ins will help you notice when and how you resist your writing. Exercises include demystifying which of the six common forms of resistance you’ve used to avoid writing and exploring what resistance has to tell you. We’ll look at the connection between creativity and destructivity, plus engage in playful ways to energize your writing self. We’ll shine a light on excuses, obstacles and illusions. At the end of class, you’ll write/draw your action map for where you’re going and how you’ll get there.

Location and Times: Open Book: Thursdays, March 12 thru April 16, 2009, 5:00 to 7:00 pm

Register: Contact The Loft 612-379-8999 or www.loft.org.

Improvitational Fiction: If you wait for inspiration to strike, you can spend a lot more time waiting than you do writing. If you drive yourself to grind out pages anyway, you drain your creative energy and you don’t produce the sparkle you want. This class gives you a third alternative. In improvisational fiction, writers don’t wait until they know what happens before they write, they discover what happens as they write. We will play some improv games to warm up and inspire the writing. We’ll spend most of our time doing in-class writing, generating energy and ideas for both new material and stories students are already working on. You’ll have opportunities to share some of your in-class writing.

Location and Times: Open Book: Thursdays, April 23 thru May 14, 2009, 6:00 to 8:00 pm

Register: Contact The Loft 612-379-8999 or www.loft.org