



# Relax Already!

## How to Relax Your Way Past Resistance and Into Your Writing

What stresses you as a writer? Is it a looming deadline? The fear of rejection? Is it having a lot of great material and no idea of how to fit it into a cohesive whole? Or the worry that you'll never get another good idea? Is it crafting the opener that will grab your readers? Or is it the yawning chasm of the middle that spikes your anxiety? Do you have free-floating anxiety about writing that makes it a struggle to get to the desk and nearly impossible to keep your butt in the chair?

No matter what stresses you and what form of resistance that stress causes – sweaty palms, searching for answers in the refrigerator, feeling distracted and unable to focus, suddenly remembering other things you “should” take care of before you write – the most important thing you can do is to relax.

I know that's easier said than done. When you're stressed, your brain is not working at peak capacity. You'll be lucky to remember that you should relax; figuring out how to relax may seem impossible.

Remember, the brain's toggle switch, the RAS (Reticular Activating System), will shift control from your creative cortex to your instinctual limbic system when you're stressed or perceive a threat, even if you are not consciously aware of the threat. [See the Volume 14, Issue 2 on the Writer's Brain for more info.] The limbic system has no interest in writing, so if your cortex is not in control, you won't write unless your life (your

job, your identity, etc.) depends on it. Even if you do manage to write something when your limbic system is in charge, it won't be the best writing you're capable of. The only way to get the RAS to switch the limbic system off and the cortex back on is to physically relax.

That's why it's vital to select a few, simple relaxation techniques in advance so you know what to do in 'writing emergencies' and to have an on-going relaxation practice to sustain you.

### How to Relax in the Moment

#### Breathing

Simply focusing on your breathing for a few minutes can relax you. Start by simply noticing your breath. Gradually aim to breathe slower and deeper (all the way down to your belly, not just in the upper third of your lungs). You might try counting your breaths, starting over at 1 any time you notice that you weren't paying attention to your breathing. Aim to count to 10. You might want to repeat a simple phrase; my favorite is from Thich Nhat Hahn's *Blooming of a Lotus*: “Breathing in, I know I'm breathing in. Breathing out, I know I'm breathing out.” But the primary thing is the breathing itself; keep the techniques to focus your attention on your breathing simple.





### Play with Process

Color a mandala or make something out of Play-Doh or sing or dance or fool around with an instrument. Do something just for the sheer joy of creative play. Process is something you do just to do it, not for the sake of any outcome or result. There are no mistakes in Process play (except to ignore doing it). Many writers engage in their Process habit before their writing to open them to their creativity and to relax into a playful attitude. But if you usually do your writing at one time of day and your Process at another and you find yourself stressed out or stuck during the writing, take 5 to 10 minutes for Process. This isn't a delaying technique or a detour; it's an investment that will pay off.

### Consciously Tighten and Relax Your Muscles

Start by consciously tightening the muscles in your feet, curling your toes and feeling the tightness in the arch and ball of your foot. Notice this tension and when you're ready, let it go with a sigh. Then tighten the muscles in your calves and knees and continue tightening, holding and relaxing the remaining parts of your body. It helps to have someone else prompt you so you can totally relax. If you want help, check out the relaxation track of my *Dancing in the Dragon's Den Guided Imageries* CD. You can hear a free sample at <http://www.rosannebane.com/main/ServiceBookCD.htm> (scroll down to the CD's Table of Contents to find the samples).

### Write Badly

If you want to write well, first you have to write. And to write at all, you have to be willing to write badly. As writers, we need to always have the intention that we will write something worthy of sharing with others, but with the awareness that on any given day, we can never tell whether we'll be writing great stuff or just shoveling dreck.

So take the pressure off yourself. Give yourself permission to write badly. Or to write mediocre stuff. To be clichéd or awkward. To write stupid dialogue and cheesy descriptions.

Every day you shovel dreck prepares you for the day you'll write the good stuff. You can't get to the good stuff without shoveling a fair amount of dreck.

It is always easier to fix something that's already on the page than to produce flawless, shining, perfect writing out of nothing. Good writing comes from rewriting, so it doesn't matter if what you write today is any good. If you write today and tomorrow and the day after that, eventually your writing will be good. But if you wait to write until you know you can write perfectly, you'll never write at all.

### Lighten Up

Of course, to be willing to write badly, you have to lighten up about your writing. The limbic system is a serious place; it is the part of the brain we rely on for survival. But we're talking about writing here, not the fate of the free world. Our writing absolutely matters and we have the right and the responsibility to share our insights and gifts with the world, and at the same time, our writing simply is not a life and death matter. We can lighten up. We need to lighten up. A mentor once told me that the reason angels can fly is because they don't take themselves seriously.

Recent research has shown that while stress reduces blood flow by as much as 35%, laughing increases blood flow by as much as 22 %, which improves oxygen levels and boosts your heart rate. Stress releases hormones like adrenaline and cortisol; laughter releases endorphins, which counteract the effect of these stress hormones. Laughter is the antidote to stress; can you even imagine staying stressed to the max while laughing? Gallows humor is better than no humor, but to get the maximum benefits, strive for genuine laughter.



The Improv Fiction class is a great place to:

- Play and have fun
- Lighten up and be silly
- Discover new characters and situations
- Write - good, bad or indifferent - just write
- Be inspired by your classmates

## Listen

Music can stimulate or, as the poet observed, “soothe the savage beast.” Research shows that music with a strong, fast beat increases alertness and concentration while more subtle beats and slower tempos slow your heart rate and breathing to produce a calm, meditative state. Classical music is usually suggested for relaxation, but Stephen King claims rock and roll keeps him writing, so experiment with what works style best for you.

Listening to “nothing” can also help you relax. Close your eyes so you’re not distracted by what you’re seeing and just listen to the small sounds around you. Notice bird calls, the steady tick of a clock, voices in the distance or the rhythms and sounds of your own body. The simple act of observing will slow the frantic thoughts that accompany stress and help you tune in to the quiet, inner voice of your muse.

## Be a Corpse

A corpse in yoga, not CSI, that is. You lie on your back and pretend to be, you guessed it, dead. The Sanskrit word is “savasana” if that sounds more appealing to you, but “corpse” always reminded me what this is all about: complete relaxation, nowhere to go, nothing to do. Most yoga classes will introduce you to this pose and the nuances of it, but it’s fairly intuitive: flat on your back with your feet slightly separated, your palms up, eyes closed, and just lie there. I know, I know, if you’re stressing about your writing (or anything else you need to do and can’t), laying down sounds counter-productive. Trust me; it’s not.

## Move – Take a Walk or Exercise

Some people can relax when they are still; others have to move. Vigorous exercise is a great way to expel nervous energy and leave you with calm energy you can direct. Walking, especially in a beautiful, natural setting, is another great way to transform frenetic energy into calm energy.



## Reap the Long Range Benefits

### Make Relaxation a Habit

Not only does relaxing help you in the moment, a regular relaxation practice will influence how your brain functions so that your RAS and limbic system are less reactive and the cortex is more likely to stay engaged.

Research shows that a test group who practiced daily mindfulness meditation for eight weeks reported feeling happier, more creative, more relaxed and more even-tempered than the control group (who didn’t do the meditation). Moreover, the test group’s brain scans changed significantly. After the test group practiced meditation for eight weeks, their brain scans showed increased activity in the left prefrontal lobe, an area that has been shown to inhibit the limbic system.

Your relaxation practice might be any of several forms of meditation, yoga, Tai Chi, Chi Gong or some similar practice. The longer you engage in a regular relaxation practice, the less you’ll need the Relax in the Moment Techniques. I’ve been meditating for 30 minutes a day, six out of seven days a week for almost two years. I’m more relaxed in general, have more equanimity and creative energy, and notice that situations that used to annoy me enormously aren’t worth getting into a lather over anymore. Funny thing is that not getting revved actually makes it easier to resolve those situations. Go figure.



## Get Ripped and Ready to Write

Just as a regular relaxation habit provides long range as well as immediate benefits, a regular exercise routine reduces overall stress and improves your physical, emotional and creative balance and well-being. So renew your membership at the Y and show up for your workout knowing it’s supporting your writing. As a bonus, many machines have racks so you can distract yourself with a good book.



## Develop a Crazy Writer's Quirk

An amazing number of famous writers are known for their strange writing rituals.

Alexandre Dumas wrote on pink paper for journalism, yellow for poetry and blue for novels. Charles Dickens had to rearrange the objects on his desk into a specific pattern before he could write. John Cheever sat naked on a yellow dining room chair, smoking and drinking while waiting for inspiration. Isn't it time you had your own writing ritual quirk?

There are solid neurological reasons why a writing routine or ritual pays long range dividends. Hebb's Law states that "neurons that fire together, wire together." What this means for writers is that if you get into the habit of always wearing a special writer's hat or always using a special pen with green ink or always sipping the same flavor of tea when you start to write, eventually the mere presence of that hat, that pen or that tea will "put you in a writing mood." In other words, you'll create a neural pattern where firing the neurons for drinking a specific, special flavor of tea will trigger the firing of the neurons you use to write, too.

What you choose for your writer's routine is less important than choosing something and doing it consistently. Just like meditation and exercise, long term benefits come from long term investments in the routine.

## Another Creative Polarity to Balance

You'll never completely eliminate writing stress. You wouldn't want to – too little stress would bore you. You want to find the level of stress that keeps you engaged and challenged without getting so stressed the limbic system takes over. In the moment and long range, relaxing is the key to achieving a healthy stress level and learning to move past resistance and into your writing.

**For more information or to schedule a free coaching session, visit [www.RosanneBane.com](http://www.RosanneBane.com) or contact me at [Rosanne@RosanneBane.com](mailto:Rosanne@RosanneBane.com) or 612-722-4139.**

## Spring Loft Classes

**Improvitational Fiction:** Relax – we're just playing here. Funny how much good stuff comes out of writers playing around, though. 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.

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

**Register:** Contact The Loft at 612-379-8999 or [www.loft.org](http://www.loft.org)

## Coming This Summer

**Entering the Flow:** Relax and see how easy it is to write while you're in the writer's trance.

**Location and Times:** Open Book: Tuesdays, June 17 thru August 11, 2009, 7:30 to 9:30 pm.

**Writer's Resistance:** We'll explore the neurology and psychology of resistance and how to respond appropriately to resistance and achieve your dreams and goals. **Location and Times:** Open Book: Mondays, June 16 thru August 10, 2009, 5:00 to 7:00 pm.

**The Writing Habit:** If stress has given you more of a waiting habit than a writing habit, this is the class for you! **Location and Times:** Open Book: Tuesdays, June 17 thru August 11, 2009, 5:00 to 7:00 pm and Woodbury Library: Wednesdays, June 18 thru August 12, 2009, 1:00 to 3:00 pm.

**For more information:** Contact Rosanne at 612-722-4139 or [Rosanne@RosanneBane.com](mailto:Rosanne@RosanneBane.com).

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