

Reward Yourself!

Is Writing Its Own Reward?

When I blogged about using chocolate to bribe ourselves to write (www.baneofyourresistance.wordpress.com/2009/05/29/writing-life-lessons/), the post got three times more visits than any other post. But when I ask writers about consistently rewarding themselves for their writing efforts, many react as if I've suggested they do something immoral or indecent.

"Writing is its own reward!" they say, either indignant or scandalized.

Of course, when you're in the flow, when the words flow effortlessly, you know exactly what to write and you lose track of time, writing **is** its own reward.

But what about the times when you're nowhere near the flow state, when just showing up at your desk is a challenge and the words defy you, the minutes drag, and writing alternates between frustration and agony?

What about the majority of the time when writing is somewhere between bliss and agony?

If you wait for a guaranteed flow experience, you aren't going to write very often. If you force yourself to write without giving yourself some sort of reward, you won't write long. And not writing regularly makes it significantly less likely you'll ever get to the flow.

As shocking as it is to some writers, we need to reward ourselves.



How Rewards Work

When you get a reward, your brain releases acetylcholine and dopamine, the feel-good neurotransmitter. These two neurotransmitters help your brain focus attention and consolidate what you just learned. Rewards activate the anterior cingulate, the part of your prefrontal cortex that tells you "This is important. Pay attention to this."

In other words, because rewards feel good, we want to repeat the behavior that generated

the reward, and because rewards sharpen our attention and memory, they improve our ability to do that.

Some behaviors are self-rewarding, that is, doing the behavior releases dopamine, which makes us want to continue doing what we're doing. When writing isn't self-rewarding, we can, and should, reward ourselves for showing up anyway.

Running Is Its Own Reward

If you've ever seen a border collie run an agility course, you've seen the epitome of self-rewarding behavior. If you haven't seen a well-trained dog run agility, take a look at www.youtube.com/watch?v=D6RAc-UAGGk&feature=related OR www.youtube.com/watch?v=oDTt4lGhxjw&feature=fvw

Clearly, these dogs are eager to run the course. They love the challenge. You might think that

because these dogs are having so much fun, they never needed to be rewarded for doing agility, that agility was always its own reward. But what you see is the result of years of training with positive reinforcement, that is, rewards at the right time.

Smarter Than the Average Dog

Of course, you're smarter than a dog (or at least smarter than the average dog, border collies are in a category all their own). Unlike a dog, you've got a great big, wonderfully complex cortex that makes you want to and able to write. But your cortex is on top of and intricately connected to the limbic system, aka the mammal brain or the emotional brain. Your limbic system is not all that different from a dog's limbic system, and operant conditioning works just as well for humans as it does for any other mammal.

So why not use the principles of behaviorism to train yourself to be a more consistent writer?



Yes, yes, I know the writing is supposed to be its own reward. How well is that working for you? Are you writing everything you want with the quivering joy and eager anticipation of a border collie at the start line of an agility course? If not, don't feel

bad; I write about writer's resistance because I don't write everything I want with the joy and eager anticipation of a border collie either. I keep looking for ways to keep writing.

What I've found is that if we're smart enough to let go of beliefs that don't serve us, we can experiment with new tools that motivate us and give us joy and satisfaction in our writing.

Motivating Humans

I learned about behaviorism in undergrad psych classes and I studied motivation in business management and leadership classes. Of course, my recent research on neurology and the brain added to my understanding, but I learned the most



about motivation from a completely unexpected source: my dog, Blue.

Blue and I both enjoy the physical and mental challenge of playing agility

together. Over the years, we've worked with some amazing trainers who helped me understand my dog and myself. I never anticipated that so much of the training would be about me learning to get it right; I thought I'd be training the dog to follow instructions.

Instead, Blue teaches me, and she is the most consistently observant, forgiving and loving of all my teachers.

Let me assure you that even though I draw on my experiences in agility to explain motivational concepts like "rewarding approximate behavior," I do know the differences between motivating people and motivating dogs. I will connect the dots between using rewards to train a dog and how you and I can use rewards to motivate ourselves to write the way we want to write.

Blue Learns to Teeter-Totter

Most of what dogs do in agility are natural behaviors – running, jumping, climbing – but the teeter-totter is not. Take another look at those videos if you've



never seen a dog on a teeter-totter. The teeter is weighted so that one end stays on the ground. The dog has to run up the board, pause at just the right place where her weight causes the board to tip, and ride the board until the up-end touches the ground.

My trainer showed me how rewards would let Blue learn that the teeter-totter was interesting, not scary, and that interacting with it was fun, not work. Blue was only four months old when we

Rosanne was great – engaging and encouraging. She offered both practical information and motivation and inspiration, especially for those of us who feel intimidated by the writing process. I would definitely recommend this class (Writing Habit) to others. Thank you! – Mary Jones, Writer



started training (the teeter was scaled down for puppies). I praised Blue from time to time, but I never asked her to do anything. She initiated all her

movements; I just rewarded the ones that were close to a series of behaviors we were looking for (“rewarding approximate behaviors.”)

At first, I clicked the clicker and gave Blue a small treat anytime she looked at the teeter-totter, which made the teeter interesting, so Blue started looking for it when we went to class. After several short training sessions, I upped the ante just a little. I continued to click and give Blue a reward anytime she approached the teeter-totter, but stopped giving so many rewards for just looking at the board. When Blue sniffed or touched the teeter with a paw, she got extra treats.

Whenever she saw the teeter, Blue’s neurons started firing and her brain released dopamine. She was excited and eager to play because she associated the teeter with getting a reward. For several months, I rewarded Blue for doing things that would ultimately lead to the desired end result of Blue walking the teeter. I never ‘corrected’ her; there was no ‘bad’ behavior, just behaviors that were rewarded and behaviors that were ignored.

Can You Teeter-Totter?

To illustrate the connection between teaching my dog to walk a teeter-totter and helping you write more consistently and joyfully, consider how enthusiastic and confident a dog would be about approaching a wobbly, tipping board if the training had been negative, demanding, critical and required instant perfection.

“Bad dog. Hurry up. No, that’s not the way to start. Do this. You are totally undisciplined and lazy. You call that running a teeter? You don’t

have what it takes to be an agility dog.”

But that’s the sort of ‘motivation’ too many of us give ourselves as writers. “I’m a bad writer. I should be done by now. That’s a stupid way to start a sentence. I should be writing like _____. I’m totally undisciplined and lazy. You call this writing? Maybe I just don’t have what it takes to be a writer.”

Approximate Writing Behaviors

To motivate yourself as a writer with positive reinforcement, you have to access where you are now and where you want to be. Then you need to determine what intermediate steps will get you to the desired end result and reinforce those behaviors with rewards.

I wanted Blue to learn to run up a teeter, find the tipping point, tip the board and ride it safely until it touched the ground, and then run off eager to do the next obstacle. She could do none of those things in the beginning, but she can do all of them now with confidence and speed.

My trainer helped me figure out what baby steps along the way to reward: look at the teeter, approach the teeter, sniff it, touch it with her nose, touch it with her paw, put one paw on it, put two paws on it, stand on it with four paws, walk one step on it, walk several steps, walk to where it tips, tip it, walk the whole length of the board, trot the whole thing. It took months, but Blue learned to navigate the teeter-totter like a pro. She did it because it was fun and interesting, not because I demanded it of her.

Maybe it’s easier to give a puppy permission to play around and do something that only approximates the end result we’re looking for. You might feel silly giving yourself rewards for doing something simple that only approximates



The motivation that comes from opening up creative ways... was fabulous (in the Writer’s Workout class). I’ve never felt so excited to write. The class was even better than I’d imagined from the catalog. Two great instructors – very positive, encouraging and with tools and ideas I could put into action.

– Tammie Frost-Norton, Aspiring Novelist

the way you eventually want to write. But the technique will work. And when you finish retraining yourself, you won't need to reward every little step.

Where are you now in your writing habits? If you're completely avoiding your writing, you'll need to reward more basic writing behaviors than if you're showing up for the writing but not finishing projects. Some intermediate steps you may want to reward include:

- turn on the computer
- find the pages you last worked with
- open a writing file
- read what you've written before
- write one new sentence
- freewrite for a few minutes
- write several sentences
- freewrite for 5 minutes
- find one good thing in the writing
- write a shitty first draft
- revise one paragraph
- revise one page.



What's Your Teeter Look Like?

Create a checklist of the intermediate behaviors that will lead you from where you are to where you want to go. You should phase out rewards for more basic behaviors gradually over the course of weeks, even months. If it seems you are giving yourself far too many rewards for far too long, you're probably doing it right.

Remember we are rewarding approximate behaviors at this stage, not the final results. It may take months to change your perceptions and relearn that writing is fun and interesting, not scary. The longer you de-motivated yourself with harsh criticism and lack of rewards, the longer it will take to retrain yourself.

After years of training, I now reward Blue for final results. When we're at trials, I don't stop in the middle of a course to reward her for doing the teeter-totter or climbing the a-frame. She gets to play with her Frisbee (her favorite reward) after

we complete a course. When we're learning a new maneuver in class, she gets more frequent rewards to keep her engaged while I learn my part. I'm slower on the uptake than she is.

But if I had been stingy with the treats in her early years of training, if I had waited until she did 15 to 20 different obstacles before rewarding her, we'd have given up long ago. If I had expected a puppy to run like a trained, adult dog, we'd never gotten out of puppy class. Start where you are and give yourself what you need to progress.

What's a Reward?

Rewards are in the eye of the beholder. A reward is what the person (or dog) getting it wants. Blue loves her Frisbee and jerky treats; other dogs we train with love balls, fuzzy toys, cookies, cheese, tugging on a rope, and so on.

Rewards for writers can include:

- food: a bite of a cookie, a few M&Ms, a piece of chocolate, a cracker
- beverages: special coffee or latte, tea, hot cocoa, lemonade
- money: a quarter for every 5 minutes spent writing, a dollar for every writing session completed
- free time: for every minute of working on writing, a minute to do something frivolous and enjoyable
- self-praise and a smile: "Good for me" "Yes!" "Good job" "I'm really improving"
- praise from others: ask a trusted ally to give you positive feedback and ONLY positive feedback (discerning feedback that will help you revise and improve the writing is valuable, but it is not a reward)
- physical pleasure: taking a hot bath, getting a pedicure or a massage, going to a movie, even something as simple as stroking the inside of your arm.



This class (Writer's Resistance) really inspires students to use emotion and logic in order to dig deep and bring back joy that writing can bring to your life. I learned how to recognize what stops me from writing and take positive steps to overcome it. – Kris Lawson, Writer and Editor

Small and Frequent Rewards Work Best

Rewards need to be small so that you can reward yourself often. Some can be rewards you give yourself after writing, but most should be rewards you get while writing. It's better to give yourself a sip of lemonade for every 5 to 10 minutes of writing than to wait until you're done writing to enjoy a whole glass. Not only does your brain release the dopamine and acetylcholine every time you give yourself the reward, neurons in the anterior cingulate start to fire in anticipation of a reward. Frequent rewards means you'll focus better and both your writing process and the writing itself will improve faster.

If you frequently reward yourself with treats you really want in small, but generous portions now, you can gradually give yourself larger, less frequent rewards.

Eventually, you'll get to the place where writing is its own reward and treats will be a way to celebrate the completion of big projects. But sooner or later, you'll start a new project or try a new style of writing and you'll need to go back to rewarding approximate behaviors again.

Don't be afraid to reward yourself. Rewards are fun, interesting and enjoyable, and contrary to what our Puritan ancestors would say, that doesn't make them immoral or indecent. It makes them effective.



Please contact me to talk about how coaching and classes can give you the encouragement, motivation and rewards you need.

612-722-4139

Rosanne@RosanneBane.com

Reward and Challenge Yourself in a Loft Class This Spring

The Writing Habit at the Open Book (Wednesdays, 5 to 7 pm, Jan 27 thru March 3), or Eagan Wescott Library (Fridays, 1 to 3 pm, March 19 thru April 23). You'll be encouraged and supported as you develop sustainable writing habits, become accountable to yourself and take action to achieve your writing goals. Our weekly check-ins give you a place to celebrate and reward your success.

Writer's Workout at Eagan Wescott Library (Fridays, 12:30 to 3:00 pm, Jan 29 thru March 5). This class gives you the energy, inspiration and rewards of writing in the company of other writers. We'll start with writer's warm-ups that use creative play to propel you into the writing. The writer's aerobics and conditioning program will encourage you to explore your own characters and story ideas in response to directed exercises. Co-taught with Paula Granquist.

Writer's Resistance at the Open Book (Wednesdays, 5 to 7 pm, March 17 thru April 21). Weekly check-ins will help you recognize when and how you resist your writing. We'll explore motivation and rewards, which of the common forms of resistance you've used to avoid writing, and what resistance has to tell you. You'll learn the neurology and psychology of writing resistance and how respond appropriately to it so you can achieve your dreams and goals.

For more information or to register for Loft classes, go to www.loft.org or call 612-879-8999.