

## How To Find Your Inner Writer

### How to find your inner writer

By Elizabeth Loudon

It's a good title, isn't it – how to find your inner writer? I can say so without embarrassment because I didn't come up with it. Ken Burnett did.

Therein lies one of the best tips I know for finding your inner writer. Steal one.

I'm not recommending outright plagiarism, which is neither clever nor polite (let alone legal), but I would recommend stealing inspiration from those around you. A writer's job, after all, is to tell great stories about other people. Charities are full of people who have done, endured, or learned things we ourselves may never do, endure, or learn. These people can give you heart-breaking stories, groundbreaking ideas, and startling insights. All you need do is listen, take notes, and get it down on paper.

If your inner writer is behaving well, your job's done. Sadly, however, most inner writers are moody and insecure, damaged by childhoods in which shortsighted teachers imposed dumb rules, such as never starting a sentence with *and* or *never split an infinitive*. Inner writers understandably like to hide, in case some retired teacher spots them and declares them less than perfect. The tougher they look on the outside, the more they dread exposure. They'd rather take a nap, or eat some chocolate. They'd prefer to write *anything* other than whatever they're supposed to be writing. They're rebellious as well as weak.

One way to entice your inner writer out into the light is to stand tall and read your writing out loud. Read it to a tree in the park, read it to your cat. If you think that's weird, bear in mind that Hilary Mantel, twice winner of the Man Booker Prize, sometimes places an empty chair in front of her, imagines the fictional character she's writing about sitting in the chair and then interviews the character: out loud. When you hear your writing rather than see it, you will catch all the

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mistakes your eye never notices. Even better, you'll also start to develop your own 'voice' – the trademark tone, whether sassy or formal, warm or earnest, that distinguishes your inner writer. That's the tone you want your donors to hear.

Next, nourish your inner writer with some passionate reading. Seek out the writers who delight you. Look at how they put stories together. Most good writers get off to a quick start, have a recognisable voice that's free of jargon and describe people facing a challenge – heartbreak, poverty, illness – then search for a way to describe how they overcome it.

Whether you're writing about scientists on the hunt for a cure for cancer, elderly people who can't afford to heat their homes, even a recent committee meeting, make sure that your inner writer gets to the point in the first paragraph. Cut the opening 'throat clearing' when your inner writer uses pompous words to cover up insecurity, such as 'unique issues' or 'significant long-term outcomes'. Ask your inner writer to show real people right away, people who may not be perfect but who move you nonetheless. Use vivid details that bring a place or a problem to life.

Next, give your inner writer a best friend – a writing buddy with whom you can trade drafts. There's just one rule: you will say only nice things about each other's writing.

Wait a minute -- only *nice* things? How will you know whether your work is any good if your buddy doesn't criticise you? Well, deep down, your inner writer already knows what's good and what's not. If you and your writing buddy ask each other kindly questions, your inner writer will come up with the answers. For example, you might ask each other:

- What do you like best about this piece?
- What would you like to do with it next?

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- What are you thinking of deleting or changing?
- Why did you choose to begin/end it this way?
- Is there anything else you'd like to include, but you're not sure whether to?
- What do you want donors to do, think, or feel after reading this piece?

By now your indulged inner writer may be getting carried away, so make sure you set some rules, too.

Actually, there's only one rule. Rewrite everything.

The difference between our inner writers and most professional writers is that *the professional writer writes more drafts*. 'More' doesn't mean two or three. It means 10, 20, or a hundred. It means writing freely, randomly, for 20 minutes at a time, just to limber up, then ditching everything except the last sentence. It means moving something from the end (such as a great quote, or the 'ask') up to the beginning, then moving something else to the end. It means ripping paragraphs apart and stitching them back together until each paragraph is about one thing only. It means cutting sentences in half, switching the verbs from flabby passives to powerful actives, then cutting them in half again.

Your inner writer will grow strong if you exercise it like this. So shut the door, switch off the browser and remember that procrastination is the enemy of good writing. If you start writing on the eve of a deadline, your inner writer will have an anxiety attack and freeze up. Be kind to your inner writer by being strict about time and space.

But... don't be too strict. Give your inner writer a break. Take it for a walk, play it beautiful music and above all, forgive it its imperfections. Every proposal, letter, or report you write is, after all, nothing but today's words on paper. It's not a final judgement by which your inner writer will be measured for all eternity. At worst, it's probably only a draft or so away from very good indeed.

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Tell your shivering inner writer firmly that we're all as good as our next draft, not our last.

Once your inner writer is ready to go forth into the world and dazzle your donors, make sure it's dressed to advantage. Place the writing out on the page with wide margins, use an attractive and readable font, usually a serif, justify both text and titles to the left, not centre or right (there are sound reasons for this, trust me) and give each piece a title that's a promising tease, such as a question, or has real names in it (think *When Harry met Sally...* or *Anna Karenina*). You don't want to read something called 'Case Study' or 'Annual Report' do you? Neither do your donors.

But *How to find your inner writer?* You might even read to the end.

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