

# How to make your writing flow

# **Flow Writing**

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## Introduction

One day, the writer James Joyce sat leaning over his desk and all in all appeared rather distraught. At one point a friend came by and tried to figure out what was wrong. After asking several times, Joyce finally muttered, that his bad mood came from having written only seven words that day. The friend encouragingly insisted that this wasn't too bad – especially for Joyce. Joyce agreed to that, but explained the problem further by saying he still didn't know the right sequence of the words.

To write enables the ability to think and vice versa. In other words: Writing makes you smarter if not necessarily happier or particularly productive. Many people find writing to be difficult and stressful. They often have to wait for the words and content to surface and feel unsure of the quality of the result, and all together do not derive much pleasure from the process.

With this book, I intend to help you to a writing process which is both more efficient, comfortable and joyful, and makes for better texts and a better work life - perhaps even a better life in general. In brief – this book is for everyone who needs to get more joy and efficiency into the process of writing – both the civil servant's memo, the academic who needs to produce a high quality text in his field of expertise, and the writer who wants to optimise his creative skills – not to mention the students at various places of education labouring over a written assignment – great or small.

Some of the methods and tools are particularly well-suited to texts and processes that require a certain element of idea exploration and perhaps even originality in form and content. Other tools – e.g. log book techniques and persona – are equally well-suited to support the work with assignments of a more set and format driven nature.

Your brain and your psyche cannot tell the difference: The productivity and flow in your writing process are tied to both your specific writing capabilities, routines, writing habits and ways of thinking and planning your work process, as well as whether you are interested in and find meaning in the texts you are writing. The genre or your job function does not – at the outset – make a great difference, and your flow will probably be strengthened by improving your language and consciousness of form – and by you approaching the writing task in a process-

oriented way and in some cases even through behavioural psychology. The latter – process orientation and psychology - is where this book will place its emphasis, since most of the other available literature in Danish focus on the writing capabilities.

In fact, the book is based on a mix of my own experiences as a writer of fiction and commercial texts, and after having been in conversation with thousands of writers in relation with the courses in *Powerwriting – process and Flow writing*, which I have been running for a number of years. Among other places at the Danish Film School's continuing education centre, as well as a number of different companies and public institutions. In terms of theory, the book leans against some of the greatest authorities within systematised and research-based knowledge of writing processes. Among others the two US writing professors, Peter Elbow and Robert Boice, who throughout most of their lives, though independently of each other, have pursued scientific studies of efficient, fluent and joyful writing processes. In 1994, the latter published the results of his long-running research and lecturing at the New York University – in his refreshingly thorough book publishing his thesis on '*How Writers Journey to Comfort and Fluency*'.

Among other things, Boice writes that the most productive, fluent and joyful writers have learned to control and convert feelings such as anger, insecurity and fear to a state of focussed and lightly euphoric productivity. In general, they combine a normal and extrovert life with their writing, a life including practical tasks unrelated to writing, as well as contact with writers and many other people. Also, they have developed a writing strategy and positive thinking, where writing problems and challenges are externalised, i.e., are seen as external and separate from the writer. Which means they can often find a practical solution.

Boice thinks that you consciously have to counteract negative inner dialogue and always strive for a light mood while you write, as if you are enjoying a conversation with a friend or working on a jig-saw puzzle, and this is regardless of writing out of duty or pleasure, whether deadlines are short or you are working on something longer. In this respect Boice talks from a cognitive psychological perspective: that your thoughts create your feelings and thus the range of actions available to you – not the other way around. The way you think about and perceive the writing tasks has significant impact on the flow. This way of thinking also lies as an undercurrent in this book.

As something new in a Danish writing context the writing process will be related to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow, which has left deep traces in research of among others positive psychology, stress, sociology and anthropology and the science of children's learning. Flow is the optimised condition, where you are so immersed in what you are doing that you lose track of space and time. You feel an intense joy and at the same time produce some of your best work – which is why this state of mind is worth pursuing when writing.

Furthermore, you will meet the British professor in education technologies, Mike Sharples, and his holistic perception of the writing process in the meta-level piece of work '*How We Write*'. The fundamental idea – in line with the holistic view in the theory of flow – is that writers are never in an ivory tower. Writing is, first and foremost, a mental activity, but always under the influence of – and in constant dialogue with – the surroundings, the environment. That is, your experience and way of handling the surroundings are significant. Essentially, trying to find a way of living well with your writing is a good idea, if you aim to maintain a focused, fluent and joyful writing flow with texts of high quality – not in the least in the long term. Among other things you can try to get constructive and appreciative feedback or simply credible praise as often as possible – which is relevant for everyone who cooperates with others on their texts – i.e., nearly all writers.

The book is divided into three main sections:

- **Chapter 1-4** are about the activities, routines and ways of thinking, which can support your professional writing process and life as a writing person.
- **Chapter 5-9** focus on the three main activities – planning, composition and revision. These activities are not phases in a linear work flow, but more like elements in a cycle where you as a writer alternate between the different activities. A brain- and flow stimulating interplay. There is also a chapter on non-stop writing and Fast texts.
- **Chapter 10-13** present some special techniques which can support your writing process and general life- and work flow: feedback, team writing, persona/character, and different log book techniques, among others *Method Writing*.

The book can be read cover to cover. But it is perceived as a reference work in which it should be easy for you as a reader to find what you need, by help of for instance side bars, sub-

headings, cases in text boxes and summaries at the end of each chapter. And a keyword index, off course.

Finally, I would like to mention that I have myself experienced writer's block. It happened a few years ago, while I was writing a novel – my fifth book – in between various teaching - and commercial writing assignments. It was a grand novel in the fantasy genre with everything from regular trolls and elves to a variety of creatures conjured up my own imagination – Rottenrats spring to mind. When the first draft was done, I sent it to the publishing house I was working with at that time. They returned it, after having read it, with a number of kind editing suggestions. I got mad and immediately called another publishing house. Who also read it and sent it back with another handful of editorial ideas. Again, in the most pleasant tone of voice.

This time I did not get mad, I *stopped* writing. In fact, seven years passed before I painstakingly worked myself back to being able to publish a book. So, what did I do to break this block?

Firstly, I started keeping a log book. I bought a 3 dollar black note pad and started writing in it freely and creatively – writing about loose ideas, specific writing projects, difficulties, blockages, life as a professional writer, worker and living person in general, as well as using some more specific techniques (for instance consciously controlled notions/visualisation) in order to focus on, sustain and strengthen the value of the work projects I took upon myself. I wrote in it regularly but always voluntarily – the process could not be forced and was possibly reinforce the negative associations, which were already weighing down so heavily on my writing process.

As an important dividend – besides increased work satisfaction and productivity, I realised that the log book helped me reinforce my patience in general and the sense of presence in language: by writing about the process and my feelings and stress – not the least – it became easier for me to localise those of my work patterns that were less desirable and my automatic negative thoughts. ("Come on, get that darned thing over and done with – work, work!" "Man, I just can't be bothered to write right now", etc). The log book provided an opportunity for catching this negativity mid-air, add nuance to it or replace it and thus create a more positive

mood. At the same time, just writing about the process and the difficulties, served as a way of taking them seriously and shed a light on them - as a form of self-recognition, which further released and inspired joy from writing.

Other than that, I started using non-stop writing - where you write fast and without stopping and do not edit the text until later – both for specific writing tasks and for more cathartic and clarifying writings. It put my inner critic on stand by and created that private, secret space that is sometimes required in order to put oneself on the line and in the process actually writing something original – or at least something with presence. In this process, I read Peter Elbow's *Writing With Power* and was both deeply impressed and inspired to write.

Finally, I put a lot of work into strengthening my concrete capabilities as a writer within the different genres in which I was or wanted to be writing – simply by reading 'how to'-books on writing, studying professional pieces of text and trying to learn from them, writing myself, rewriting, getting feed back, etc. At the same time I used the log book consistently to sustain a sense of patience and a basically positive and self-forgiving mood.

That way – I slowly but surely returned to finding the words and knowing the sequence in which to put them.



## CHAPTER 6

# Non-stop writing

**The easiest way to create an instantaneously productive and fluent writing process is by writing non-stop. It implies that you write for a pre-determined period of time – without stop. The chapter talks about how to use non-stop writing as a focused work tool, which will improve the quality of your texts *and* give you a more fluent and comfortable writing process.**

Non-stop writing has been known in Denmark for a number of years. At both universities, teachers' colleges and other places of higher education, where students have many written assignments, non-stop writing has been systematically taught, just as researchers and lecturers have been exploring this technique at a large number of European and American universities. Many companies and institutions specialised in communication, generating new ideas, conceptual development or personal development use non-stop writing more or less systematically.

### **Write fast and time it**

Non-stop writing, speed-writing or free-writing is described most thoroughly by the American university professor Peter Elbow in the writing classic *Writing With Power*. Non-stop writing means that you literally write without stop. You set a stop watch to run for five minutes or half an hour and then write as fast as you can without looking at the text – not until the time is up! That last one is an important point: Keep the production of the raw text carefully separate from the phases of analysis and editing.

Other than that, it is a good idea to convince yourself that this is not an attempt at writing a finished text. What you are doing is *prewriting* (read more in the chapter called *Planning*), that contains rough drafts of content, ideas, reflexions, which might at some point become part of a text.

### **Switch off your inner critic**

After having taught a few thousand people how to use non-stop writing I have a good sense of what it is that makes the technique so great. Academics, writers, journalists, copywriters and people, who have never written very much, almost unanimously stress *the relief of having switched off the inner critic* as one of the best features.

It is a relief and liberating to be allowed to write freely without being forced to listen to the voice inside you head, that meddles continuously with criticism and opinions on the quality – or lack of quality - of the text.

Many mention – in that connection – the many narrowly defined tasks they have encountered in school, further education, work life, with a recurring focus on errors and correctness. These are seen as the big sinners in relation to their reluctance and feeling of restraint in terms of the writing process. Non-stop, on the other hand, makes people think of something playful and explorative, which gives people a greater urge to write. The pleasure from writing grows and many say, years after they started using the technique, that they produce more finished pages – even if quite a few need to be re-written. Some experience a doubling of their productivity.

### **Write secretly – conducive to presence and originality**

Another thing emphasised by many writers as highly liberating is the *secret and private* character of the text: The fact that no one is ever going to read and evaluate the raw draft strengthens the urge to write and the courage to go out on a limb. As a writer you can confidently include *everything* in you first draft – even the more personal thoughts and preferences. Because you have made a deal with yourself about the character of the work you are doing: you are pre-writing and that means you will not have to think about the quality of the content until later.

In that respect, you have created a framework for yourself, where pursuing ideas and whims, which you otherwise would have perceived as unimportant and cut out even before you had written them down. It could be a strong sentence or an off-beat thought coming out of nowhere.

In that way, non-stop writing provides many new and original ideas and wordings – and often also a fundamentally greater presence in the language.

### **Benefits of non-stop**

My own experiences are consistent with the conclusions reached by both Danish and international writing research. The creative and innovative potential is often emphasised, since non-stop writing makes room for the chaos, individual courage, engagement and lack of formality which every idea generating process depends on. In brief, writers who integrate non-stop writing as part of their approach to working, generally experience:

- fewer difficulties related to writing (including blocks)
- that they produce more finished pages and get more ideas
- that they are less inclined to postpone writing tasks
- less stress
- time is freed up
- that they work more steadily, comfortably and productively
- that their language becomes more natural, personal and fluent
- greater joy in the writing process, among other things due to the playful character of the process, but also because they produce fast and more volume
- greater (self)tolerance of bad writing – which makes them more daring
- that they develop a constant momentum in the work process – because they also write about *why* they are writing the text (log book etc.)
- a more goal oriented research process, because they through writing locate the gaps in their knowledge.

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## CHAPTER 12

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# Persona

**Psychologists talk about ‘working with your characters’: describing how you find the leader in yourself, the sales person, the net worker, the human relations person, the father in yourself and uncover the limitations and opportunities for action in that character in order to grow. This chapter talks about how you can use different writing characters – *personas* – to write better and more freely, regardless of whether the task at hand is a scientific article, a report, a novel or a job application.**

16 business people have joined a course to learn how to write with greater presence and personality. Paper rustles, pens fly and there is an occasional hand running through hair. They are hard at work. The lecturers, both from the world of higher education, try all sorts of language exercises and tricks from journalism to loosen up the participants’ writing styles. Not with a lot of success, though. Until one of them suddenly asks the participants to describe the room they are in – mind you writing as if they were *hippies*, really taking on that character. 15 minutes later they are done. Almost all participants wrote texts in an improved and freed language than what they had used in previous exercises.

### **Personas are your masks and characters**

The 16 business people wrote from a particular point within their personality – their hippie-persona. The persona is derived from ancient Greek and originally describes the mask actors wore in Antiquity’s theatre. Today, the word is used about the role, character or mask we assume in social settings. The personas are the way we dress, live, go to work, speak to our husband, wife and children, etc. They express our attitudes and demeanours as we interact with the world.

The masks serve an important purpose as they make it possible for us to function in our environments. Without them, we would find it difficult to communicate.

But, when you identify with your persona, your character, to the extent that your true personality is put on stand-by – problems appear. You can see it in couples where both man and woman play a part when they are together, or in the work place where a manager or employee can merge with his or her inner administrator or fuddy-duddy organiser-character and pester each and every one with their control mechanisms. Or in people who identify so strongly with their victim-persona that they find it hard to step out freely and live fully.

### **How to get to a persona**

However, as I have already mentioned, you can use a persona to improve your writing. It demands concentration and immersion – and usually also time to get to a persona that works. You will have to feel your way at first. The technique is related to what an actor does when he or she gets into character. Or when a writer of fiction really gets hold of one of his or her characters, which then takes on a life of its own.

The persona is an inner space and an underlying state of mind into which you enter. A particular 'language' is how writers and journalists often describe it, and it requires a reasonable amount of empathy to bring the persona to life. Some writers find it easier to uncover new personas and get them to work than others. Those, for whom it works better, are probably those with the strongest ability to empathise, ear for language and possibly also most easily let go of their own self and pretend they are someone else.

### **Activating unconscious layers**

A productive use of persona in connection with writing, in other words, implies activating layers in yourself that you are not necessarily in touch with in daily life – you might not even know they exist.

Through deep empathy with the chosen persona, you release and integrate your unconscious resources, as well as benefiting from the new views on your surroundings and the language linked to the persona. Not until you are able to write automatically and semi-consciously from the persona, it is fully integrated: You have to forget to remember, the brain scientists say. (Read more in the chapter *This is how you write*).

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## CHAPTER 13

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# The log book

**Writing a log book allows you to hold on to your thoughts and feelings, making it possible to re-read, evaluate and develop new thoughts on the basis of the old. It improves your ability to focus, take action and self-develop. In the chapter you are introduced to a number of specific log book techniques, which can help you strengthen your thoughts and deliberations and thus your ability to live and write well.**

Try to remember brushing your teeth last night. Absorb yourself in the image: what are you seeing? What does it smell like? Do you like the taste of the toothpaste? Are there noises or is it quiet? Is it a black and white image or does it have colours? Are you in the picture or separate from it, observing yourself?

Now think of brushing your teeth tonight. Immerse yourself in this image also. Are the two images very different? Not very likely. Your brain does not easily distinguish between fantasy and reality, because it tends to fill out the blanks in terms of information that is apparently missing. In fact, both images appear equally real.

This explains why visualisation and positive thinking works, and is particularly popular in areas where high level performances are required, i.e. the world of sports or trying to improve quality of life for cancer patients: If you can get your brain to believe in something, your emotions and your entire body will respond as if it were the truth. A simple – and simplified – way of explaining it is the statement that you have to repeat something 21 times in the course of 30 days to get the message across.

### **The log book programmes your brain and your psyche**

The self-suggestive effect of the log book techniques, I will talk about later, makes them particularly interesting. These techniques are highly capable of repeating and enhancing your impressions, thoughts and feeling – and through this your entire experience of and actions in reality. With the log book you can in fact re-programme your brain and adjust how your psyche works. You might even say that by writing down what you experience and focus on what you wish to emphasise, you will eventually start to live what you have written. Your brain and your body believe in your words, so you actually live what you write.

### **The basic technique is free and honest writing**

The most basic tool in log book writing is your free-flowing, unedited and honest writing, concentrating only on immediately getting content, thoughts and experiences on paper. You are not concerned with either shape, genre, punctuation or whether you got the wording right. The free writing has many similarities with non-stop writing and writers of diaries and log books often experience that they forget themselves and become one with their subject. They write in flow.

One special condition for making your writing free and honest is that the text you produce is for your own eyes only. Others are not meant to have access to it and read it. If they did, there is a great risk that you will start to sort and edit your thoughts or even write with a particular reader in mind – which will derive the book of its cleansing and focusing effect.

If you find, that you – in spite of the secretive nature of the book – are still being dishonest, you need to consciously work to reverse this. This does not mean delving into the deepest and darkest corners of your soul, only that what you write in the log book is a true and vivid expression of what you think and experience. The text must be authentic. You might choose to invent a writer persona who is more honest and direct than you are yourself and let him or her write the text – as one writer I met had done.

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