

The Practical Inspirations Workbook

Elizabeth Stark



Growth

Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better. -- Samuel Beckett

Nurture a growth mindset.

Some folks see intelligence and talent as innate, fixed and unmoving. You've either got it or you ain't. Or as Gypsy Rose Lee's mother sings in the musical, "Some people got it and make it pay, some people can't even give it away." While saucy, this is not only an unhelpful attitude for a writer or any person who wants to grow, it is downright destructive.

Writing can be tough. You know that. When you are stuck in a fixed mind-set, you talk yourself out of doing the hard work necessary to get better, smarter and more talented. That's right: those qualities--intelligence, talent--are nurtured and improved by hard work.

A growth mindset--backed by a lot of studies--says that intelligence can be developed, that learning expands our capabilities. When you embrace challenges and set-backs as learning opportunities and really believe that you can become a more brilliant writer and a deeper thinker, each day's struggle will enliven and delight you.

Assignment: Adopt a growth mindset.

Write down three goals. Now for each of those goals, write down three ways you can practice and improve and move yourself toward that goal. (For example, if you want to write a great novel, you can read wonderful books, write every day, and take a class.)

Tips for embracing a growth mindset:

Adopt a growth mindset? Easier said than done. Those of us who've inadvertently embraced a fixed mindset naturally find it hard to believe we can change, even to change our mindsets! Accept that your doubts about whether you can adopt a growth mindset come from a fixed mindset. You'll grow beyond your doubts.

Praise yourself for your efforts, for your hard work. Shift, at least in your language, to a growth mindset: you do well when you practice a lot and work hard, not just because you're smart. So instead of saying to yourself, "Self, you are brilliant," and then later saying to yourself, "Self, you are stupid," say to yourself, "Self, you worked really hard and your hard work is paying off," or, "Self, here is a real opportunity for growth. Give it a try."

As you contemplate the day in front of you, try to ask yourself these questions. If you have room on your mirror, copy them over and tape them there, too. What are the opportunities for learning and growth today? For myself? For the people around me? -- Carol Dweck

Struggle

Every writer I know has trouble writing. -- Joseph Heller

If you are struggling, put your struggles into the book. Tips for using struggle in your writing:

We want peaceful lives--or we tell ourselves we do. Likely, we spend more energy avoiding conflict than searching it out. But we love to read about hardship and struggle, about fights between powerfully matched opponents, whether superheroes in the skies or litigants in a courtroom. The reason that in life we become masterful at minimizing difficulty is that we have many opportunities to do so. Struggle is part of being human, and thus writing whose content is full of struggle is very human.

Are you struggling to write, struggling to find or make time, struggling to feel inspired and keep going? Don't despair. Those struggles connect you to your readers and to your material. Use those struggles to power the conflicts in your book.

Honesty about struggles can be hard to come by, even internally. Some of us don't want to look closely at what is hardest; we judge ourselves and the harshness repels us. Pretend you are a beloved friend of yours. How do you talk with and offer comfort to a friend? How do you listen to a friend? Be that gentle, kind and compassionate. Remember, if your readers are going to connect to your struggles, it is because they share them--so don't belittle your experiences.

This approach is not necessarily about autobiography, though it can be. This exercise is about tapping into the human energy of conflict, obstacle, difficulty--those things that enliven the human drama on the page, stage and screen, even if they are a real drag down here on the ground. You can't get conflict out of your life, and no one else can either, so let it fire up your writing. You can tap the energy of it without necessarily talking about the specifics of your life.

The good writing of any age has always been the product of someone's neurosis, and we'd have a mighty dull literature if all the writers that came along were a bunch of happy chuckleheads. -- William Styron

Assignment: RANT& Roll

1. Set a timer for ten minutes and write about all your struggles. Make a list or a rant, but get down a minimum of five areas where you struggle. These can be small--my shower curtain constantly falls off its railing--and large--I struggle to be a good mother and also to have time for myself. 2. Now, for each of these struggles, consider how you can use it to fuel your writing. Can you lift some for plot material in your novel? Can you blog about some? Can you interview folks who have overcome one of these issues and write an article about that?

Passion

A man will turn over half a library to make one book. -- Samuel Johnson

If you are excited about something, follow your passion.

If you are reading an article on deep sea diving or wondering what happens to gifted girls when they get to high school, put those passions right into your book. Shift gear, change direction, but stick to what matters most to you.

Even fiction writers can do research, and this need not have the plodding and dusty tone of paper writing from days gone by. Instead, research can mean leafing through your favorite magazine (even the ones you don't actually let yourself buy and only read in the dentist's office), wandering the stacks of your local library, interviewing a neighbor about marriage or cooking or motorcycles. You don't have to know the relevance to what you are writing, so long as you are fascinated by what you are learning

Tips for following your passion(s):

Be open to surprises, to the unexpected. Be willing to find new answers to questions whose conclusions you thought you'd reached.

Look for the intersections of apparently unrelated interests; you might spark something wild.

People love talking about themselves. Sign someone up for an interview. If this is for a fiction or narrative project, focus not only on the facts and events, but on the textures as well. Try to get sensate details--the kind that paint a world: smells, clothes, colors, whatever details the person remembers noticing that might not seem relevant even to the interviewee.

Dancing in all its forms cannot be excluded from the curriculum of all noble education; dancing with the feet, with ideas, with words, and, need I add that one must also be able to dance with the pen? -- Friedrich Nietzsche

The writer writes in order to teach himself, to understand himself, to satisfy himself; the publishing of his ideas, though it brings gratification, is a curious anticlimax. -- Alfred Kazin

Assignment: Adopt a growth mindset.

Make a list of five questions you have that you'd like to explore. For each question, list 2 - 5 resources--places you could go to research that question, people you could interview, books you could read.

Promises

If my doctor told me I had only six minutes to live, I wouldn't brood. I'd type a little faster. -- Isaac Asimov

Keep your promises to yourself.

David Allen, the guru of *Getting Things Done*, makes a great point about why our long “to do” lists stress us out. It is not because we have so much to do and not enough time but because those “undone” lists represent promises to ourselves that we have broken. There are spiritual consequences to the heavy burden of these broken promises that we, as writers, cannot afford to carry.

You will have to address those promises and officially renege on some. Get realistic about what you can do; get a strong system in place for tracking what you must do; say no to as much as you can; and get to work. This might mean that you do not even get your email--not a glance or a download--before you do your writing. Dump everything you are juggling in your brain onto paper (or wherever you keep your lists). Make sure that the most important elements in your life make it onto your to do lists and then onto your done lists.

Tips on getting fewer things done:

You are a writer. You have a life. Those both involve a lot of doing. You can only do so much. So, pick only three major things to do each week from your lists. Each day, you can look at those three and make a mini-list of the three steps you are going to take that day. As you go through your week, if anything else occurs to you to add to your list, make a note of it; get it out of your brain.

Next week, do a brain dump again, review your entire list, and pick three again. Adjust to being human. You are not faster than a speeding bullet, nor should you be.

The best time for planning a book is while you're doing the dishes. -- Agatha Christie
Loafing is the most productive part of a writer's life.-- James Norman Hall

Assignment: Brain dump and getting it done

1. Do a “brain dump:” write down every single thing that you are holding onto in some part of your mind, every single thing you think you ought to do or might do or want to do. Paint your house? Buy milk? Read Dostoevsky? Make a note about that idea you had the other day? Clean the toilet? Call your uncle? Drink more water? Revise your novel? Get it out of your head and onto paper or screen. 2. Now, review your list. If there is anything on it that will not take more than two minutes, just do it now and cross it off. If you have to follow up on that action, add that to your list. 3. Now, of the more-than-two-minute items left on your list, pick three things you are going to do this week. Only three. Yes, only three.

Life

If you can't be self-expressed in other areas of your life – write naked. -- Angie Powers

Practice being fully self-expressed at your desk and in your life.

Writing is self-expression, even, maybe especially, writing fiction. You cannot tamp yourself down everywhere and then let loose at your desk. I mean, if you can, more power to you. But consider practicing being self-expressed in other aspects of your life. The more voice you give to your own ideas and feelings, the faster the flow of authentic inspiration.

Who are you? What do you have to say to the world? What do you think about that you haven't even taken note of because it's so internal--not necessarily secret or even especially private, but just ordinary to you? Speak out. Let your light shine. Bring forth what is within you. Enjoy yourself and that self will feed your writing.

Tips for for being fully self-expressed:

Listen to yourself. Writing can be a great way to do just that. Have you ever found something you know you've written--it's in your handwriting or it's got your byline--but the words seem unfamiliar, the ideas those of some delightful, brilliant stranger? Do not think your ideas will rotate back through when you let them go. Pay attention to your whimsy, your quirky thoughts; allow a conversation to flow from your pen.

Adults are always asking little kids what they want to be when they grow up because they're looking for ideas. -- Paula Poundstone

The greatest strategy for personal and business development on the planet is bold self-expression. -- Michael Port

Assignment: Express Yourself

1. Write down the answers to these questions: What did you want to be when you grew up when you were eight-years-old? How about when you were thirteen? What are the qualities and passions that those choices indicated that are still relevant to you today? 2. Make a note of how you can bring that passion back into your writing and life today. Take a day to be a cowboy writer, to write from the point of view of a movie star or a veterinarian or whatever caught your interest early on. 3. Write a story from the point of view of one of the characters you imagined you might be when you were a child.

If there's a book you really want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it. -- Toni Morrison

Read aloud from your favorite books.

You became a writer because you love books. I know this for a fact. So don't turn away from your original inspiration just because you barely have time to fit in your own writing. Start your writing day by reading aloud to yourself from a book you love. Bring the power of that language, of that voice, into the room with you.

Don't worry about imitation. A few of the rhythms of Morrison or Forster might leech into your writing--is that so bad?--but they will inevitably lead you back to your strongest voice. Strong writing begets strong writing. Exposure to vivid language, powerful imagery, rhythm, characters provides our training for greatness. Take note of what you love and learn from it.

Tips for getting and staying inspired:

Embrace what you truly love.

I took a class once from the formidable and glorious Dorothy Allison, who made us go around in a circle and admit to what we read that we wouldn't normally admit: *People* magazine or trashy romances or Hall-mark poetry. . . Tell the truth about the voices that move you, even if only to yourself.

Some writers retype whole pieces of another writer's work just to get under the sentences and learn from them. You can apprentice yourself to the greatest writer in the world in this way, for free.

An original writer is not one who imitates nobody, but one whom nobody can imitate. -- Chateaubriand

One must be drenched in words, literally soaked in them, to have the right ones form themselves into the proper pattern at the right moment. -- Hart Crane

Assignment: Imitate the Best

1. Put some of your favorite books on your writing desk. Go on and get them right now. I'll kick back and wait for you. 2. Copy a passage that you love and tape it to your notebook or computer screen. Bring those words into your life to offer you support. 3. Deliberately imitate the passage. Write three different versions of the passage, changing the words, the characters, the meaning, but echoing aspects, such as the structure, the twist, the use of imagery . . .

Myth

There are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before. -- Willa Cather

Tap into myth

Storytelling is an ancient art. Joan Didion famously said, “We tell ourselves stories in order to live.” The structure of these tales is in your DNA. At the very least, it is in your cultural DNA. Tap into it. Learn about the mythic forms and make use of them. Remember the folk and fairy tales of your childhood, the bible, the stories your parents told as warnings, the movies that shaped your vision of the universe. Let your own writing reach deep into you and through you.

Once you have mastered the basic structure of the mythic journey, your deep knowledge of the archetypal forms will allow you to play with expectations. When you understand what is expected, you can upend it. Surprising expectations and meeting them are the contradictory puzzle pieces of storytelling. The surprising yet inevitable ending so lauded comes out of using and abusing the mythic models.

Tips on mything the point:

Just as language must rely on a common understanding while lining up in a new way to create original imagery, myth operates through a set of common stories, used in original ways.

Check out *The Writer’s Journey* by Christopher Vogler.

Don’t stress about this; instead, let the myths fertilize your own writing. Roll around whatever you remember or read in your mind, let it sink deep--out of sight. It will surface in your writing.

The pattern of the Hero’s journey is universal, occurring in every culture, in every time. It’s as infinitely varied as the human race itself and yet its basic form remains constant. -- Christopher Vogler

Assignment: Myth Making.

1. Make a list of everything you remember about any cultural myths or classic tales. 2. Rewrite a myth or classic. Put your own twist on the characters and the story. If you want to use this assignment within the context of something you are already writing, just create a scene based on a myth or classic. Don’t forget the twist. First set up the expectation, and then upend it.

Readers

A book is always a dialogue with other readers and other books. -- Tim O'Reilly

Stay connected to people who love to read.

It's hard to write when all around you people are mulling over which ringtone to purchase. Surround yourself with people who love to read. Find them online--at Good Reads, on Facebook via the Bookshelf app, or in any e-conversation you are having. Find them in bookstores and libraries, at readings and book groups.

There are still worlds of people hungry for stories, longing to curl up in bed and read, or to lie out on the beach and read. These are people for whom the addition of a book makes any setting bearable and most settings heavenly. Writers need contact with these wonderful souls, readers. When you are around readers, making books will feel as useful and important as making food.

Tips for Finding Readers:

How do you find people who love the books you love? Get out there and talk about those books, online and in person. Post a comment about the book in your Facebook status line, create a discussion group at your local library, go to readings by the authors you admire. You can just start asking people about books, or maybe carry a book you love around with you and see what conversations begin that way.

Consider sending your favorite books to friends, including some up-and-coming readers. Convert the next generation!

Those of us who have been true readers all our life fully realize the enormous extension of our being which we owe to authors. -- C.S. Lewis

Assignment: Learning from Love

1. Make a list of the books you know well--the ones whose characters and settings you remember as you do real people, because you've read them so often. 2. Now write down your thoughts about the following questions: What do these books have in common? How can you infuse that in your own work? (Thanks to Donald Mass for this great exercise adapted from the wonderful book *Writing the Breakout Novel*.)

People

We deceive ourselves when we fancy that only weakness needs support. Strength needs it far more. -- Anne Sophie Swetchine

Use people. Write with others and report your work to others.

Set up expectations that you will write. Enforce them with daily check-ins to writing pals or a coach. Make writing dates at cafes and show up for them as you would for any job. Have a lot of people you can turn to for this support; you might have five people you write with, one for each day of the week. You might make a call to say, “I’m starting now,” and another to say, “I met my goal!” Do what it takes without shame. If people didn’t matter to you, you wouldn’t be much of a writer in the first place.

If this sounds difficult, if you have the inward personality of many a successful writer, great--do what you can on your own. But then venture out. Find an open mike or an online forum or a journal. Create structures of support and external deadlines for yourself.

Tips for Using People (and I mean that in the best way possible):

Ask what you can offer in return. Perhaps someone else has to study or run errands or accomplish something. Do a trade: Let’s tell each other our goals and then report back in three hours.

Keep your report as brief and upbeat as possible (another reason for accomplishing your goals--so you’ll have a positive report). Express your gratitude. People love to be helpful!

This manuscript of yours that has just come back from another editor is a precious package. Don’t consider it rejected. Consider that you’ve addressed it ‘to the editor who can appreciate my work’ and it has simply come back stamped ‘Not at this address’. Just keep looking for the right address. -- Barbara Kingsolver

I love deadlines. I like the whooshing sound they make as they fly by. -- Douglas Adams

Assignment: Set a Date.

1. Make a writing date with someone, a plan to meet at your home, theirs, a library or a café. Even if your friend can only be tentative, tell him or her that you will be there no matter what, and ask for no cancellation calls--no excuses for you not to go! 2. Ask a friend if you can call to report your progress. Set up your realistic goals and let your friend know what those goals are, then call each day for a week when you’ve met your goal. You can also do this by email--but if so, ask for a quick shot back saying, “Hurray!” 3. Find a deadline--a contest or journal submission deadline, a writing conference application deadline, something real and firm--and commit to it. Tell someone else about this commitment and let that person know when you’ve successfully done your part. (It doesn’t matter if you “win,” just meet the deadline and set up the next one . . .)

Questions

A writer is someone who can make a riddle out of an answer. -- Karl Kraus

Write to answer questions whose answers you don't know.

I once heard Barbara Kingsolver say that at the beginning of each novel, she asks herself a question whose answer she does not know. In the process of writing the books, she learns the answers to her questions. If you want your book to have originality and meaning for your readers, be sure that it has those qualities for you, too. Ask yourself questions so that you will find the answers. Send yourself on an adventure each time you sit down to write.

The original definition of the word “essay” comes from the French verb meaning, “to try.” The essay was a vehicle in which to explore a topic and find out. Fiction and narrative should accomplish the same thing. At bottom, our quirky, secret fears and desires tend to be those that make us most human, those that connect us to our readers. Even if the subjects or issues aren't the same, your genuine curiosity, your need to know, will fuel your book. Make sure your personal stakes are high in whatever you are writing.

I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear. -- Joan Didion

Assignment: Question Everything

1. Make a list of at least ten real questions you have, questions whose answers you do not know.
2. Now write a story or essay, or plan a book, that addresses one of those questions

Tips for asking questions:

Spend time with a toddler who is just discovering . . . everything.

Learn to attend to your own questions. Many of us have been taught to be frightened or ashamed of what we don't know or what makes us curious. Nurture the part of you that wonders. Ask real questions. Write them down.

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