



FIVE LETTERS

THE RIGHT BRAINS SOCIETY

is a digital club for creative-types,
brought to you by the literary
food blog, Eat This Poem.

I write monthly letters filled with
content to fuel your creativity,
generating conversation and food
for thought about the topics we
face as writers and dreamers.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. 5 WORDS THAT WILL CHANGE EVERYTHING
2. TO BEGIN, BEGIN
3. WHAT TO DO WHILE YOU WAIT
4. HOW MUSEUMS CAN MAKE YOU A BETTER WRITER
5. 10 WAYS TO LEAVE YOUR COMFORT ZONE



5 WORDS THAT WILL CHANGE EVERYTHING

We should get something out of the way: Change is hard. Change forces us to answer difficult questions, removes us from our comfort zone, and requires us to try new things. We have to follow our instincts, walk down dimly-lit paths, worry less, and trust more.

Change is all the more difficult when we only vaguely know what we want. If you're feeling a nudge that something is off (perhaps you long for deeper friendships, more time to pursue creative projects, or the adventure of moving to a new city), the only way to start the process of change is to ask yourself practical questions that will identify the root cause of your frustrations, and provide an action plan to move forward.

I've recently gone through this myself. As a person who tries to make moves as infrequently as possible, you can imagine the roller coaster ride I've been on when in just three months, I've left a job I held for more than five years, started a new position, and also moved from a place I called home for more than four years. (We're still not fully unpacked yet.) All good things, but as joyful and grateful as I've been, there was also a fair amount of hesitation, doubt, and a general sense of being overwhelmed. But now that I've emerged on the other side of the journey, I wanted to share how I made it through.

First, I wrote this quote on a post-it note and stuck it to my dashboard. I looked at it every day. I pondered it during yoga class. I reminded myself of it when I sent in job applications. I just lived and breathed it for a while.

With my mantra memorized, there was one last hurdle to overcome: Setting priorities. As a creative person, this was not easy for me. I had a lot on my plate, many projects vying for my attention, and the nagging fear that if I let something go, even temporarily, I would never find my way back. So I clung to five words wholeheartedly that empowered me throughout this process.

ONE. THING. AT. A. TIME.

Really. It's the simple secret to making big changes, because nothing comes all at once without first putting one foot in front of the other. Here are a few more tips:

1. Know what you want. Say it out loud! Hear it! It's important to know what you're really after. Try making a list of everything frustrating you (like your sister's late night phone calls, your job, your lack of an exercise routine, etc.). See what rises to the surface.

2. Identify the root cause and prioritize it. Spend your time making changes that will offer the biggest impact. It's a hard step to embrace (it was for me!), because it might mean other things in your life need to be set aside temporarily.

3. Focus on what you can change now. Start small. Put one foot in front of the other. Don't waste time. Don't do things because you feel like you should. If meeting people for drinks won't bring any added value to your week and you can spend that time exercising or taking a graphic design class instead, do it. Protect yourself. Don't forget what you want or how bad you want it, and don't stop until you get there. It might take longer than you think, but just remember, one thing at a time.

*Until next time,
Nicole*



TO BEGIN, BEGIN

To begin, begin.
William Wordsworth

When I posted this quote on Facebook last week, it seemed to resonate. I took 24 likes and 12 shares in a matter of hours as a good sign, and it got me thinking about the struggle artists face to begin the task at hand.

In college, I was the student who started brainstorming her term papers the day assignments were handed out, and proceeded to outline and do research over the course of several weeks leading up to the due date, never staying up all night writing a paper. Then I joined the ranks of “the real world.”

I still don't consider myself a procrastinator, but sometimes it's easy to walk in the opposite direction of the computer or say I'll get to it later because life intervenes. It's a balancing act to both give ourselves a break, but also use the time we're given to be productive.

During a recent afternoon free, I carved out time to write. I made tea and set off for my desk in our back bedroom, my dog trotting behind. I adjusted the blinds, sink into the pillow on my chair, and closed two open books. Instead of beginning, I checked Facebook, answered a few emails, and added three new songs to my Spotify playlist. What's wrong with me? I thought. This is uninterrupted time, and here I am distracting myself and sabotaging the precious hours I have to do what I need to do. I eventually started writing, entered a rhythm, and had a productive afternoon, but it was slow start.

As it turns out, when we talk about how to begin, we're really talking about fear.

Fear of not having the words, not being inspired, not having anything to say, or the fear of failing can be paralyzing, manifesting itself in the hesitation and resistance we feel when we finally sit down to create. And in today's fast-paced world, there's a long list of distractions ready to help us avoid the task at hand.

On the topic of fear and procrastination, much has been written. Here are a few helpful links to help address the root causes, as well as motivate you to start your next project.

HOW TO MAKE YOURSELF WORK WHEN YOU JUST DON'T WANT TO // HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW

“Somewhere along the way, we've all bought into the idea – without consciously realizing it – that to be motivated and effective we need to feel like we want to take action. We need to be eager to do so. I really don't know why we believe this, because it is 100% nonsense. Yes, on some level you need to be committed to what you are doing – you need to want to see the project finished, or get healthier, or get an earlier start to your day. But you don't need to feel like doing it.”

BLITZ WRITING: WRITING WHEN THERE IS NO TIME // PLOUGHSHARES

“My one goal in setting up the Blitz was to write something on my novel every day. That meant I had to look at my life and schedule in a realistic way. Some days I arrive home after 7 p.m. to kids, animals, and a spouse who deserve my attention.

A low word count means that I write something on even those days; some nights I sit, brushing my teeth with one hand while the other plugs in two hundred words exactly, my daily target. Two hundred words sounds like a pittance, right? Mathematically, though, that's seventy-three thousand words a year.”

**FEAR IS THE ROOT OF YOUR PROBLEMS //
ZEN HABITS**

“The fear is a part of us, and therefore we shouldn’t try to “destroy” it. It can’t be destroyed, because while we can dissipate one particular fear in one particular moment, we’ll still have fears after that. All our lives. It’s not something that can be eradicated — it’s a basic part of life.”

**REVERSE PROCRASTINATION //
JEFF GOINS**

“If you do the things you really don’t want to at the beginning of the day (actually giving them priority in your schedule), then you have the rest of the day to enjoy the things that you really want to do, as opposed to using them as mere distractions.”

**10 APPS TO HELP YOU STAY FOCUSED ON YOUR WRITING //
JANE FRIEDMAN**

“Many of us start with the best of intentions. We set our alarm clocks, awake with little eagerness, and harness ourselves to our computers. Ah, the computer. Now there’s another source for many of our digressions. If Facebook or Twitter easily diverts your attention when trying to write, don’t worry. These tools can help.”

*Until next time,
Nicole*

WHAT TO DO WHILE YOU WAIT

If you're anything like me, Sunday night brings a mild melancholy. Even if it's filled with a good meal, good friends, or a good walk, the setting sun reminds me that, come tomorrow, I need to shift gears before heading in to work on Monday.

In the spirit of doing something productive on Saturday, I finished reading *The In-Between* by Jeff Goins, a writer whose blog I follow and have recommended here on more than one occasion. The overall sentiment can be summed up in the following sentence I underlined.

“IN THE WAITING, WE BECOME.”

His thesis was a simple one: We spend most of our life waiting, so it's time we start living for those moments instead of the next big thing.

When you're restless, it's hard to turn off the noise in your head and heart that's ready for the next adventure, next job, next story, but life is full of waiting, actually. Think about a typical day. You wait for the coffee machine to warm up, wait at a traffic light, wait for a meeting that's five minutes late, wait in line at the grocery store, wait for an important email to come through.

Living in the moment doesn't mean the next big thing isn't around the corner. Graduations, marriages, births, publications, moving across country or across town, a big summer trip...these are milestone moments, and we're all bound to experience a few of them over our lifetime. It's just that a majority of life's moments are made up of the in-between. It might feel mundane, boring, or even unproductive, but once we start seeing the beauty and the power in life's smallest moments, we'll be ready when the big one's roll in.

So what do we do when we're waiting for the next milestone to arrive? What happens when we know something's coming, but we're forced to wait just a little bit longer? What then?

This is a question that can be posed to our creative process as well as our personal and professional lives. Creativity is mysterious, after all. We never know when it will strike, we wonder how to contain it, and often embrace projects in the midst of other obligations. If you're a writer, you might be constantly waiting to hear back from a journal you submitted a story to, an agent you submitted a query to, or even for comments to come in on your most recent blog posts. So it goes.

There are many times when projects end and it takes weeks or months for another to begin. Maybe you're living in that space right now, but I think there is some good here. Projects ebb and flow because we couldn't sustain a constant flow of creativity. Our soul needs a short break before moving on to the next project, so it's better to embrace these moments than push them away. You'll know when it's right to move forward.

Today, if you're waiting...for anything at all, here are five ways to pass the time.

WHAT DO DO IN THE IN-BETWEEN

- 1. Read.** Especially for writers, reading is one of the best ways to counteract the down time we have between projects. Reading engages your imagination, exposes you to new ideas, and will feel restorative.
- 2. Focus on your personal life.** Coordinate a dinner with friends or a weekend getaway with your spouse. Take your kids to a museum. Call your grandparents. Do things. Take your mind off what you're waiting for by focusing on what really matters.
- 3. Relax.** In the same way spending time with friends and family is restorative to your spirit, relaxing (in the form of spa treatments, yoga, or hikes) will help your body recharge, too.
- 4. Help someone else.** Focus your attention outward and reach out to others. Volunteer to help in your son's classroom, take a meal to an overwhelmed friend, or clean out your bookshelves and donate old books to your local library.
- 5. Trust the process.** Perhaps the hardest task of all, but deep down, you have to believe it will all work out. The end result might look differently than you had planned, but life will keep moving forward, that much is certain. Trust that the waiting, as hard as it is, will improve the outcome. Trust that you'll see the why when it's time.

*Until next time,
Nicole*

4

HOW MUSEUMS CAN MAKE YOU A BETTER WRITER

I once took a seminar on Impressionist art led by a visiting Monet scholar that turned out to be one of my favorite classes of the year. My professor was intensely passionate, and offered insight in every brush stroke. Impressionists were true observers, he said. The type of artists who could look in a puddle after it rained and find beauty in the mud and the worm that crawled to dry land. Impressionists were all about the details.

Consider the fruit in Cezanne's famous still life paintings. If you look closely, you'll see the tension. Thick, feathered brushstrokes create a cradle for the apples, without which they would roll to the floor. It's the idea that at any moment we could come unnerved, always hanging somewhere between hope and fear or love and sorrow. Now I can't look at a Cezanne without thinking of that tension, and the sheer emotion imbued in something as ordinary as fruit on a table.



I fondly remembered this lesson while I was in Chicago for a conference last week. During a free afternoon, I walked to the Art Institute, a museum that contains one of the largest collections of Impressionist art in the country. It's nice to marvel when we can. Just standing or sitting for a few minutes, letting the sculpture or the painting fill your body, can be restorative. Unfortunately, it's not something we have the opportunity to do often enough.

It's hard to imagine now, but there was a time in history when only a few subjects were considered worthy of art: history, portrait, and religion. Then the impressionists came along. In the 1870s and 1880s, they threw off convention and began painting scenes of middle-class Parisians eating in cafés or sitting by the river. Dancers waited in the wings at the ballet, workers lounged in a hay field, and prostitutes drank Absinthe alone at a table. This was the stuff of life, the everyday, the truth.

In a writing seminar the same year as my Impressionist class, we met in the local art museum instead of the classroom. Once a week, we walked through the galleries with one assignment: find something that moves you and write about it. Right there. Instead of looking at a picture in a book or online, we stood in front of it. It's a good exercise for writing, because it forces you out of your own head and your comfort zone. Given the chance, you might be inspired by a color, story, or an image that, without the intention of being open to the experience, you could have easily walked past without a second thought.

Sometimes I think creativity is more about our openness to the process than our desire to create. I believe this because creativity is everywhere. In puddles, paintings, outside the window of a cross-country plane ride, in the sunrise of our morning commute, or chopped onions glistening in a hot pan, surrendering to the oil. The beauty will go on. It will always be near us. What matters is whether or not we acknowledge it, capture it, and translate it in a way that brings that beauty into our own lives and the lives of those around us.

*Until next time,
Nicole*

10 WAYS TO LEAVE YOUR COMFORT ZONE

When I snuck away to Santa Barbara last fall, it did wonders for my creativity. Because it's my former home and one of my favorite places in the world, I was immediately comforted and felt refreshed when the sea came into view.

The sea, as it turns out, overwhelms my writing, and I can seem to write of nothing else while I'm there. When this happens, it's a very good thing when the sensation of pure inspiration can be captured. Even if you work in a creative field, work is work, and sometimes you need space to dream, imagine, and pursue our passions from another vantage point.

It helps to know what sparks creativity, too, because when we need to be refreshed, we know exactly where to go and what to do. When my projects are stalled, a trip to Santa Barbara usually gets me back in the rhythm of writing, as does a good walk. (I recently put together a Literary City Guide for this coastal paradise, too.)

But this journey also made me consider how valuable it is to try something new for the benefit of our creativity. Cooking, writing, or otherwise, we all have a comfort zone, but when we're feeling stalled it helps to shift just slightly (and temporarily), to allow a new perspective to thrive.

Because it's a new year, there's no better time to try something new and see where it leads you. If you're feeling stalled, here are some tips.

10 WAYS TO LEAVE YOUR COMFORT ZONE

- 1. Try a new cuisine.** Always eat out at Italian restaurants? Make a reservation for Cuban or Indian next time. Trying new flavors might spark a new blog post series or recipe for your next freelance project.
- 2. Read a book from another discipline.** If you're a photographer, snuggle up with a cookbook. If you're a writer, read a book about painting. Sometimes being exposed to other artistic disciplines can rejuvenate our own.
- 3. Cook a dish you've never tried before.** If you're really comfortable with Taco Tuesday, switch things up and try a new recipe.
- 4. Explore your town.** Think you've experienced everything your town has to offer? There's probably a new neighborhood, coffee shop, or attraction you haven't visited yet. Spend a weekend afternoon playing tourist in your backyard.
- 5. Escape.** If you can manage a weekend getaway, the thrill of exploring a new city for the first time is sure to inspire. You don't have to fly across country or to an exotic destination, either. See what cities are within a 2 hour drive and start planning.
- 6. Visit a museum.** Museums are full of potential when it comes to expanding your creativity, especially when new shows are always coming to town. Bring a notebook, sit in front of something that moves you, and listen.
- 7. Exercise differently.** If you always attend a spin class on Monday and Wednesday nights, try Zumba or yoga instead. Logging miles on the pavement? Pack a picnic and go for a hike. Especially when you get outdoors, the views alone can breathe new life into your projects.
- 8. Buy a new notebook.** This one works every time. There's something invigorating about brainstorming on a blank page where anything is possible.
- 9. Network.** Reach out to someone you recently met and would like to know better. This can be a colleague you met at a conference, fellow blogger, or friend of a friend. The more you talk to other creative people, the more your ideas will take shape, not to mention that it's invigorating to be around inspiring people.
- 10. Just start.** Taking the first step is sometimes the hardest part. If you can overcome your fear and start creating, the world will be better for it.

If you have any tips of your own, I'd love to hear them. Just hit reply and let me know where you search for inspiration.

*Until next time,
Nicole*