

# Encyclopedia of Writing a Book

(with apologies to Amy Krouse Rosenthal for shamelessly pilfering her genius book format.)

## Asshole Things to Say to Writers

"I can't believe there is anything new to say about *that*."

"Why bother writing? No one reads anymore."

"That happened a long time ago. Shouldn't you be over it by now?"

"Haven't you already done this book-writing thing before? Why is it taking so long?"

## Cereal

First drafts reek, zap my will, and drive me to eat handfuls of Quaker Oatmeal Squares while scowling at my notebook. My Corgi waits, ears up, for the ones I'll drop.

## Daydreaming While Walking the Dogs Around the Neighborhood

1. I will finish the book and it will arrive, glossy cover and all, with my name spelled correctly, before I am a grandmother.
2. I will be invited on *Way Too Early* with Willie Geist to talk about the enormous contribution to the Book Love Foundation that the entire cast of *Morning Joe* will make in order to support literacy in public middle and high schools. Wes Moore will cohost that day. I will get up and dance when they tell me and will not look like a wildly flailing monkey woman.
3. A misplaced entire season of *The Wire* will surface and I will have an excuse for watching the other five again. They'll ask me to co-star on the comeback tour.

## Fear

No one will read my book.

*Worse:* those who read it will tweet pithy reviews on its awfulness that I will copy into my notebook.

*Worse-er:* Prim Fox News anchor in patent-leather pumps I envy will read excerpts in sweet, sarcastic voice and snidely observe that Penny Kittle is the exact reason we need to protect our children from misguided "teachers" through performance-based pay.

*Worst:* I'll be kicked out of English Teacherland for suggesting that *The Odyssey* is a colossal bore to any ninth grade boy I would have dated in high school.

## Friends Who Write

Every writer needs a Tom Romano. Emails contain recipes I try that night, channeling his Italian accent and lip-smacking, sauce-tasting braggadocio, plus expert advice, sympathy,

jokes, one-pagers written by Supersmart Miami University students, and a classic sign-off that makes me feel strong and capable: *You take care, good woman.*

## **Ghosts**

Don Murray and Don Graves, the men who invited me into a writing life, nurtured my writing in kindness and deliberate teaching. I always write beside them.

## **Guitar**

I listened to sentences as I played a bad Indigo-Girls-ish pattern of notes and chords one afternoon. I was desperate to do anything except continue to read and reread my writing before sending it off to Tom Newkirk (OMG! What was I thinking when I asked for him as editor?!) I suddenly tuned the sound of my writing to the pace I played. I couldn't believe the difference. Maybe I was just channeling my inner Joan Jett who never gave a fuck about her bad reputation, but guitar-accompanied writing led me to courage I needed.

## **Lists I Make to Waste Time**

The six reasons a boy who dumped me was out of his fucking mind kept me fueled with power for hours. (see **Rage**)

## **Marathons**

I had 10-hour stretches of writing where I did nothing but work (see **Cereal**), beyond what I thought was wise or possible, yet I still managed to miss deadlines. This is likely Rebel Residue from high school.

## **Music**

Music playlists either get me writing or annoy the hell out of me. (Note: an annoying playlist is a perfect excuse for tossing cereal at the dog and keeping score of his catches in my notebook.)

## **Office**

This is a ridiculously excessive space where most of the magic happens for me. I have books shelved by color; framed art; fashionable, quirky furniture; and a turret so I can pretend to be Jane Austen. The space is a product of ratio of time I spend seeking distractions from particularly bad writing with something I'm good at, decorating. Do you know how long it took me to find sheer floor-to-ceiling drapes in the exact color of ecru with brown, circular draper rod holes that match the circles in the chocolate brown, round carpet? You think these things don't matter, but only because you don't know

how much time I spend staring at these details while willing sentences to stop clanging together.

## **Rereading**

Every time I have nothing to say and can't get started writing, rereading my notebook is all I need. (see **Risk**)

## **Rage**

Do you think telling me my draft title is *stupid HELPS*? Really, hon?  
Fuck me if I have to read the entire manuscript again. I'm so tired of my voice and this topic and the horde of people smarter than me (Donalyn, Kelly, Tom and Tom and Don and Don, Kylene, Lucy—I hate you all) who have written better about it already.

## **Risk**

Writing is *always* a risk. Always. Words on the Page is my answer to Writer's Block, with students and with myself. In the words of Yoda, "Do or do not, there is no try."

## **Talk**

Talk is a foundation for writing. I've tried out my thinking on so many teachers in conferences. They were most kind for pretending to listen.

## **Travel**

It does not help my writing process to travel so much. I love conferences and speaking to teachers, but I rarely write on the road. Other Superhuman people manage to do it (Kelly, Jim) but not me.

Travel Nightmares, both real and imagined, make good quick writes when I have to turn off electronic devices during take off and landing, but they leave me sleepless. To the two men who broke into my hotel room in Hudsonville, MI at 11:15 p.m., may the Lord taunt you and torment you, may the Lord make his wrath rain down upon you, may the Lord look down upon you and give you no peace, for at least the next decade. (My apologies to all I've offended now.)

## **Wonder**

My teaching life has been built around children, teenagers, and books: those I read and those I write. Despite the political motivations that lead our schools toward mediocrity,

we teachers are, as Dan Beaty would say, “still here, still alive, still teaching, with the power to change this world one little boy and girl at a time.” Live in wonder.