

Productive procrastination

Instead of staring at a blank screen, get distracted.



Every writer has experienced it: a day when you've made the time to write but the words just aren't flowing. Whether you've lost your writing rhythm or never found it, part of finishing a manuscript is to suffer through and keep pushing ahead – with a “reminder to self” that it's OK for the draft to be terrible. After all, you will revise it in the end. But forcing your focus isn't the only path to productivity. Sometimes the best way to write your novel is to do something else instead.

I'm not advocating that you succumb to social media, Internet headlines and other temptations that would remove you from the headspace of your manuscript. The following “distractions” will allow your mind to wander while staying deep within the world you're creating.

The next time you're stuck on a plot

point, not in the mood, distracted by life or focusing hard but still missing the right words, get your brain unstuck and your creativity flowing again with one of these forms of productive procrastination. You'll get to know your characters and their world even better – and perhaps inspire yourself to write.

Picture this.

Step away from the words and focus on the visuals. Use Google image search, Pinterest, Instagram or stock photography sites to gather images to create a photographic mood board or visual outline. Juxtapose pictures of important or incidental details from your story – the red ribbon from the missing girl's hair, the anti-anxiety medication the detective downs with his whiskey – with atmospheric photos evocative of the moods and emotions

your characters experience. Approaching your story visually – with details and broader strokes – may help you picture what's needed next.

Consult the stars.

Check your characters' horoscopes to see what the zodiac has in store for them, and read up on common traits of their astrological signs. Whether you consider astrology fiction or fact, looking up your characters' star signs and considering the ways they do or don't fit the type can be an entertaining and useful way to delve deeper into their instincts, attributes, weaknesses, strengths, tendencies and dispositions.

Mark your calendar.

Take out a blank calendar from the year(s) when your story takes place – regardless of whether those dates are explicit in the text – and chart the timing of minor and major events. What

are your characters' weekly routines, including work, school and family obligations? When does the plot follow or deviate from those? Do major holidays, birthdays and other yearly disruptions fall within the timeframe of your novel? How do those events affect the plot? Do the details in your manuscript – from the weather and tides to the timing of sunrises and sunsets, phases of the moon and which flowers are in bloom – fit accurately into the calendar? Even if your manuscript makes no mention of the dates, the timeline will strengthen the novel's structure and internal logic, including making time pass on the page in a realistic way.

Map what matters.

Draw maps of the places your characters inhabit. Sketch the floor plans and diagram the logistics of the spaces where they sleep, work, argue

or play. Learn the layout of the rooms in your protagonist's apartment, where her office is situated in relationship to her boss (and to the elevators, bathrooms and coffee pot), how the buttons are patterned on her rocket ship's control board and what path she follows through the woods to Grandmother's house. The more you know about the physical world in which your story is set, the more real it will feel to your readers.

Tell a different story.

Free-write about an event in a character's past or future that falls outside the scope of the novel: an embarrassing moment in the elementary school cafeteria, a revelatory conversation with an aunt about a parent, a first date with an insignificant ex, a first encounter with an illegal substance, a white lie all too easily gotten away with, a sleepless

night over a concern later forgotten. Exploring who your character is or was outside the events of the book may help you better understand who they are within it.

Sound it out.

Use online audio clips, your personal music collection and the recording app on your smartphone to create a soundscape of a scene in progress. This sensory outline is less a soundtrack, more a sound collage of the aural and emotional beats within the scene – from crickets, snoring, traffic and waves to sadness, confusion, elation and lust. Layer and link the sounds together for a musical map of where your chapter might be going.

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