

**PERFORMANCE ANXIETY**  
**Part II: Taming Your Internal Critic**  
by Jenna Kernan

In *Part I: Meeting Your Internal Critic*, we learned just what fears plague writers and how the Ego, by protecting us from body blows to our psyche, also prevents us from taking the risks necessary to write anything worth reading. We discovered that other writers have struggled with the same insecurities that we grapple with and we explored the reasons the Ego uses roadblocks, such as avoidance and procrastination, in order to allow us to preserve our dreams while steering us away from the potentially dangerous steps necessary to achieve them.

Now let's look at ways to trick your Ego by making it unaware you are taking any risks in your writing while you are, in fact, dangling by your toes over a lava pit.

Remember how you used to sneak out of the house when you were a teenager? You didn't! Well play along and pretend you were as bad as the rest of us. You managed to go out and raise hell and mostly get back in the house without your protective parent even knowing you were even missing. But now you've got to slip past a much more vigilant watchdog, one that never sleeps....your Ego. This guy makes Cerberus, the three-headed hound who keeps the damned from escaping from hell, look like a toothless Pomeranian.

But fear not, I have a raw steak laced with barbiturates all ready for you, twenty, in fact. One or two of these babies is bound to get you past your Ego and then type like the wind for you never know when it will wake up and notice what you are up to!

## **20 WAYS TO TRICK YOUR INTERNAL CRITIC**

### 1. For Your Eyes Only

First, here's my technique—I tell myself to shut up and get the writing down, then if it is too embarrassing or over the top, then I can fix it later. These words or raw emotion are nearly always the scenes that I wish I could backspace through and they are inevitably the most moving

portions of the book. This technique of writing ‘for my eyes only’ gets me to put the words on the page instead of censoring them before they ever appear.

Friedman suggests evading, ignoring and pushing back your critic while you frantically try to get some writing done, before the critic springs out at you like a Jack-in-the-box.

## 2. Turn Down the Volume

Lamott uses an imaginary volume control, turning down the voices of doubt until they whine like gnats and then she puts an imaginary mason jar over them. Hey – what ever works!

Remember “**Daring is more riveting than skill.**”

## 3. Developing Attitude

Attitude is what caused you to begin such an impossibly huge job as writing a novel in the first place. It is the unshakable notion that out of all the millions of would-be writers you will make it. You want this and you will not give up.

You keep writing despite good judgment and rational objections because your book will blow the reader away.

## 4. Resiliency

Resiliency is the ability to bounce back from setbacks. This is the seemingly inexplicable buoyancy that allows one child of desperate poverty and abuse to rise to become a physician when his siblings fall into a statistically predictable outcome like drug abuse, gangs, prison or premature death. Scientists and educators studied this odd phenomenon and discovered that resilient people share common characteristics.

They exhibit strong egos, self-esteem, social skills, communication skills, emotional connections to others, adaptability, positive mental outlook, problem-solving skills, curiosity, compassion and a belief that they control their own fate. Resilient individuals have a goal to live for and the ability to attract and use support in their effort to reach their goal.

For a writer, the ability to bounce back is indispensable. Sure rejection hurts. It should hurt - a lot. But you want this enough to return to your word processor even after a major failure.

Many writers keep a CONSOLATION FILE full of news about other writer's rejections and struggles. It helps to know that **Rudyard Kipling** was once told, by an editor, that **he didn't "know how to use the English language."**

I like Fredrick Bucsh's comment. He said, **"I have never taken rejection as an obstacle to my writing. It has remained, at times, an obstacle to my publishing."**

#### 5. Totems/Rituals

Rituals and totems are suggested in Ralph Keyes book, The Courage to Write. I did not know I had totems until I heard them described.

**Totems** are tools that have great importance to the writer, like the athlete's lucky socks.

Keyes calls them 'weapons in the fight against fear.' Lucky things are not vulnerable to fear. My totems include a quartz crystal cluster, a variety of Herkimer diamonds and a small turquoise horse that marks my progress. I like to lift these objects and never tire of considering them as I consider my story.

**Rituals** include any behavior that eases anxiety. This can vary from lighting a candle, playing a certain CD (mine is La Boheme or Madame Butterfly), saying a prayer or any other activity that prepares you to write. (Crack and egg??-NINC)

#### 6. Quotas

Less mystical and glamorous are logs and production schedules. I have a writing log that I complete each day. It gives me a concrete visual of my progress.

#### 7. Set Goals

Write them down and put them where you will see them. Also keep a list of achievements. Just

a reminder, goals must be within your control, like writing a thousand words/day, entering a contest, submitting a query or a complete manuscript and not things outside your control like winning an award or gaining a publishing contract.

Ernest Hemmingway

Mark Twain

Irwin Shaw

All counted the word/day

#### 8. Capitalize on Productive Writing Times

My productive time is the morning. You might prefer late evening hours when the children are asleep. Try writing at different times of the day to learn what time you find most productive and schedule your workday accordingly. I recognize that not everyone can pick the time they write. But do what you can.

#### 9. Exploit Fear by Turning Uncertainty into Daring Prose

I've already hit on this one, so let me only say that fear of exposing too much of your naked self is common. You must choose how much of yourself and your loved ones to reveal in your work and achieve a balance between the need to keep interpersonal relationships private and the need to pursue your art. This balance is different for everyone.

But I urge you not to edit and censor before you actually get that scary, daring idea down on the page. Once it is there then you are free to use your conscious mind to determine what to keep.

#### 10. Bribes, Rewards & Punishment

These three are used when modifying behavior in children. They work on adults too. An example of a **bribe** is giving yourself a bowl of ice cream, but only if you write five pages. If you write six you also get chocolate sauce.

**Rewards** include anything you might desire when you do something on your goal list. For example I can't check my email until after I make my writing quota. Also when I mail a manuscript to the publisher, I take my husband out to dinner to celebrate.

**Punishment** is not as fun, but I have used this to keep me on track. I hate housework. So the deal is, I get my work done and if I get out of the chair before I finish, I have to do housework. So if I get up to get a drink, I put in a load of laundry. Amazing how this keeps me in the chair.

#### 11. Revenge - the drive to show “Them”

I collect all my rejections—especially the tragic comments or reviews. It toughens me. It is a rite of passage. Writers write for many reasons and some of those reasons are not particularly attractive, including: envy, ego, anger, fury, revenge, making money, avoiding having a ‘real job’, make themselves more interesting, overcome a troubled childhood, and/or show their teachers they aren’t a failure. Most people won’t admit them, but I have been motivated by all of those at one time or another.

Rejection forces us to re-write, forces us to do our best, forces us to grow. That is difficult, but remember fury mixed with perseverance can bring forth a fountain of material.

Jonathan Winters knew something about perseverance in the face of defeat when he said, **“I couldn’t wait for success ... so I went ahead without it.”**

You can too.

Use revenge in your own writing life. When someone tells you NO, YOU CAN’T, you set your jaw like a two year old and say, “Oh yes I can!” If this work isn’t good enough, you’ll write another and another until it is good enough. Nothing is as satisfying as succeeding against the odds and nothing is more useful to bring out your best than resistance. Athletes know this. Without a worthy opponent there is no upset victory.

Or as John Neal so eloquently put it, **“A certain amount of opposition is a great help to a man. Kites rise against, not with the wind.”**

12. Self-discipline – or - How bad do you want it?

**“The father of every good work is discontent, and its mother is diligence.”**

~Lajos Kassak~

Ultimately a writer must sit and write. But don't wait until the mood strikes. Get to work everyday. I like Jack London's philosophy. He said, **“You can't wait for inspiration. You have to go after it with a club.”**

13. Guard your Writing Time

**“Leave the dishes unwashed and the demands on your time unanswered. Be ruthless and refuse to do what people ask of you.”** Lynn Sharon Schwartz

This next observation comes from Kenneth Atchity.

**“Every human being has exactly the same amount of time, and yet consider the output of Robert Louis Stevenson, John Peabody Harrington, ... Ray Bradbury...Joyce Carol Oates, Agatha Christie, and John Gardner. How did they accomplish what they have? They weren't deflected from their priorities by activities of lesser importance. The work continues, even though everything else may have to give. They know that their greatest resource is themselves. Wasting time is wasting themselves. When people ask them, “Where do you find the time?” they wonder, “Where did you lose it?”**

14. Spot & Crush Avoidance Behavior

I have discussed procrastination, excuses, avoidance and other time wasters. Spot these and crush them as you would a cockroach in your kitchen. Do not allow them to rob you of opportunities.

15. Celebrate Successes, then Get Back to Work

Buy yourself a small gift, get a manicure, take a sky diving lesson, go to a movie. Whatever you like, but don't rest for long. Regular writing is essential to get better at this your chosen profession.

#### 16. Attend *Some* Conferences and Workshops

Conferences are places that offer hope and validation and offer a wealth of information and a multitude of opportunities to network. But don't become a workshop junkie. Ultimately you get better at writing by writing. Not thinking about it, reading about it, not hearing about it, not studying it – but by DOING IT. Just as you can't lose weight by reading a book on exercise, neither can you improve your writing without practice.

#### 17. Make and Meet Deadlines

Contracts have deadlines. If you don't have a contract you should still have deadlines. Treat yourself like a professional and create formalized dates for completion of projects. If you don't, what are you going to say when an editor gives you a two-book contract and wants to know when you can have the second book done?

#### 18. Lose Control – Follow Intuitive Hunches

Lose control by take a vacation from what is expected in your writing and try something crazy – daring – unexpected. Set your Internal Critic on hold and stretch out of your comfort zone. And follow hunches by listening to that voice suggests you explore aspect of your story or deviates from your plan. Your subconscious is working so hard to help you, if you will only listen.

#### 19. Perfectionism – the voice of the oppressor.

Projects that fizzle, great beginnings that crash and burn, sagging middles, rewriting to fix all the problems before going on. Give yourself a break and allow yourself to write something imperfect all the way through. Realize that perfectionism will kill any project before it is finished and recognize that no finished book is ever as perfect as the author hoped.

And finally...

#### 20. Mental Warfare

It is estimated we have 10,000 thoughts a day, 50% of them negative. How much of your day do you spend telling yourself you can't do it? Stop that little voice in your head from cutting you down. Turn down the radio station playing defeatist talk-radio in your brain and be your own

advocate for a change.

There is an entire school of thought that believes you can change your own reality by creative visualization (also called guided imagery & mental rehearsal). This is used routinely by patients with medical condition and also by many athletes to prepare for competition. The theory is that imagining performing an activity fires the same neurotransmitters as actually doing it. The brain has no connection to reality. It can't distinguish between reality and imagination.

So imagine you are published. This is different from wishing it while you surround yourself with mental images of what it is to be unpublished.

I treated myself like a published author long before I got the call. I considered that I was already sitting at the table instead of standing outside with my nose pressed to the glass. Treat yourself in accordance with the professional you strive to be or as Cary Grant said **I pretends to be the kind of person I would like to be.**

There is a very interesting website by author *Patricia F. Hare*, <http://www.learntovisualize.com/> She has many interesting articles there including one entitled: Ten Things You Can Do To Make Your Creative Visualization More Powerful. The first part of step six reads as follows:

### **Act As If**

When you've gotten clear about what you want, it's important to begin to act as if you already have it. You may want to do a little journaling, exploring questions such as, *When I get it, how will I feel? How will I act or respond in various situations? How might I talk differently? What else might be different? How will my relationships change?* Make a list of ways in which you and your life will change... (Partial excerpt from Patricia F. Hare: { [HYPERLINK "http://www.learntovisualize.com" }](http://www.learntovisualize.com/) }

To become something in the future, you must take on that role in your mind—now. The spiritual teacher, Lazaris, said, **“The steps to getting there are the qualities of being there.”** So act as if you are there.

This is a fascinating topic and would fill an hour seminar many times over. I highly recommend you explore this one further.

## **IN SUMMARY**

Maybe our ego is like the wizard, in the Wizard of Oz. She is a great fiery fierce defender, who leaps to protect us, even from ourselves. Behind the mask is a trembling naked thing that is the root of all our fears.

Don't try to lose your fears – learn to use them. They are there for a reason - there to point to that which makes bold and daring prose, if only we have the courage to try.

I close with the words of Bonnie Friedman.

**“There are a thousand reasons not to write what you most want to...Write it anyway.”**

## **Sources & Suggested Readings:**

Dare to be a Great Writer: 329 Key to Powerful Fiction. Leonard Bishop, Writer's Digest Books, 1988.

ISBN# 0-89879-464-1

DO IT! Let's Get Off Our Buts. Peter McWilliams, Mary Books/Prelude Press, 1994.

ISBN# 978-0-931580-79-6

Writing Down to the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within. Natalie Goldberg, Shambhala, 1986.

ISBN # 0-87773-37-9

The Courage to Write: How Writers Transcend Fear. Ralph Keyes, Henry Holt & Co, 1995

ISBN# 0-8050-3189-8

The Portable Writers' Conference: Your Guide to Getting Started and Staying Published.

Stephen Blake Mettee, editor. Quill Driver Books, 1997. Workshop Speech 'The Mother of all Attitudes' by James N. Frey. ISBN # 1-884956-23-8

Bird by Bird. Anne Lamott, Anchor, 1995.

ISBN# 978-0385480017

Writing Past Dark. Bonnie Friedman, Harper Paperbacks, 1994.  
ISBN# 978-0060922009

Internet Articles on Resiliency

{ HYPERLINK "http://www.extension.iastate.edu/families/Resiliency/qa.html" }

Cultivating Resiliency in Youth. CARL C. BELL, M.D.  
<http://www.giftfromwithin.org/html/cultivat.html>

The Resilient Writer Catherine Wald.  
ISBN# 0-89-255307-3

Patricia Hare's website on Visualization: { HYPERLINK "<http://www.learntovisualize.com>" }