



TEN WAYS TO BEAT BACK THE HAIRY BEAST OF WRITER'S DOUBT

by Myrna Mackenzie - November 2, 2001

Okay, you're having one of those BAD days (bad weeks, bad months), the ones all writers know and dread. Your characters are starting to whine, your plot absolutely refuses to thicken, and you're actually beginning to wonder why you ever thought that you could be a writer. Maybe you've even started using...you know...the Q word. "I'm quitting, quitting, quitting," you tell your friends, the mirror, your dog (cat, gerbil, goldfish). "I really am. Maybe I'll get an easy job, something like sword swallowing, or wild bull wrestling or bungee jumping. The thrill is gone, the bloom is off the rose, the lights are beginning to dim. I'm speaking in cliché," you gasp. "That's it. It's definitely curtains for me."

What's a desperate writer to do?

Well, I'm no career counselor, but I am a writer, and I've been there, too. Who hasn't? Sometimes writing is a joy, and sometimes it's a big, hairy beast of doubt that makes me want to crawl under my computer desk and console myself with large amounts of chocolate. I don't, of course (at least not often). That's because I've come to realize that the hairy beast isn't a permanent guest or even all that scary. His presence just means that I need to make a change. Or sometimes I need a confidence booster, a touch of optimism. There are ways to push the hairy beast out the door. All you have to do is experiment a little, figure out which tricks or techniques are the ones that will get you back on the right path, the writing path. Then, the next time that ugly beast shows up at your door, you'll be ready and waiting. He won't stay long.

So if you feel like your get up and go just caught the last flight to Pluto, try some of the suggestions listed below. Some of them have worked for me, some have come from other people, some just seem silly or weird enough that they might work. And anything that might lead you back to the joy of writing is worth it, no matter how silly.

1. Talk to someone (or something). Actually any object that can't escape is a prime target at a desperate moment like this. However, if your audience is less than human, please remember to first close all your windows and doors. While talking to mirrors, pets, walls, flower pots or pencil sharpeners is perfectly normal behavior for writers (and extremely therapeutic), most "ordinary human beings" don't recognize this. And if the writing isn't going well, chances are good that you're feeling vulnerable. Utter humiliation is not what you need right now. Lock up first. Then let it all out. Complain. Whine. Compliment yourself. You are a writer, after all. Be proud and be loud.
2. Sit down with a stack of books you've already read. Some of them may be your favorites. Some may be books you didn't even particularly enjoy. At any rate, all of those books were chosen by an editor. Try to decide what it was that made that book

- sell. What was it that made that book special in some way? Then, try determining what it is about your own writing that will make an editor want to buy it. If you can't think of anything, then back up and begin to figure out what it is that you would want to be known for. Then crawl back to the keyboard to implement your plan.
3. In a pinch, remind yourself of some of the quirky unsung benefits of writing: being able to name hundreds of people without having to endure pregnancy, labor, or your spouse's veto power; shuffling into work dressed in a ripped T-shirt, your husband's boxer shorts and purple Barney slippers; never having to explain to your coworkers why there's a box of Oreos next to the paper clips in your top desk drawer.
 4. Getting back to reading, try something new and different (something informative or at least outside your genre). While we are writers and need time to write, we also need to allow time to refresh ourselves now and then, to open our minds. We must remember (as others have reminded us before) to feed our imaginations.
 5. Get together with a writer friend or friends (or simply sit down on your own) and brainstorm new ideas for plots. Ask yourself what makes each idea workable. At the end of the day you'll feel revved up and excited about all the other projects you have waiting when the current one is done. You'll know that you have plenty of ideas to pitch when the big call finally does come.
 6. Pamper yourself for a day. Right now you're stressed out, so do something nice for yourself. Lie in the sun, go to a museum, listen to all the music you haven't had time for lately, test drive a Mercedes, take a long walk, study the intricate patterns of your belly button. Indulge for a short time, then hit the keyboard running.
 7. Try changing your writing habits temporarily. If you're used to writing in the morning, try writing at night. Switch from a keyboard to paper for a day, or talk into a recorder. Move your desk so that you're facing a different direction. Put on pantyhose (ugh!) and a dress instead of the usual sweatpants. The idea is to test new and different things, to give yourself a jolt, to make a change, and do whatever it takes to get yourself out of the rut.
 8. Keep reminding yourself how very good writing is for you. It expands your vocabulary, and regular writing fosters creativity, nourishes the imagination, heightens the ability to use the senses. We don't see green, we see cactus green. We don't see a man bagging groceries, we see a man who might have an underlying fiery spirit, a weekend Hells angel, a volunteer fireman responsible for saving lives. These tendencies to inspect perfect strangers may win us some odd looks, but they enhance our writing. More importantly, they enhance our quality of living, and that's certainly nothing to sneer at. It makes me remember that every time I go out in public I'm

constantly seeing things, envisioning things, hearing things (okay, all writers listen in on other people's conversations, don't they?) that other people don't even dream of, and that alone makes me feel powerful. It makes me want to rush back to my computer and scribble down everything my writer's antennae managed to pick up while I was out on the street.

9. If you're beginning to doubt your abilities as a writer, try picking up something you wrote two years ago, or even just one year ago. And be prepared to do a few backflips around the room (or at least a limp version of the chicken dance for those of us who are less than athletic). Seeing how far you've come, how much your writing has progressed, is an instant ego inflator, and that's what you need right now.

10. And, of course, there's this tried and true, though less than popular suggestion. If all else fails, just keep putting one word in front of the other. Every day doesn't produce pearls. You already know that, but if you keep writing and reading and trying each day, a few pearls will slip in. Pick them up and arrange them in a way that appeals to you. Then smile. You've made it through...again.