

# Writing and the Creative Life: "Why You Should Write Three Pages of Garbage Every Morning"

[Scott Myers](#)

"Freewriting forces you to keep moving forward, keep creating, without a thought given to quality."



I have been a screenwriter for over thirty years and a teacher for nearly two decades, and along the way, I have talked with, interviewed, and worked with quite literally thousands of writers. If there's one concern which keeps cropping up in those interactions, it's this: **The tendency to get hung up in the writing.**

Frankly, I'm confronting this issue right now as I am writing a book commissioned by Palgrave Macmillan: *The Protagonist's Journey: Character Driven Screenwriting and Storytelling*. This is the first time I have written an academic book, so the pages are coming more slowly than, say, when I am writing a screenplay, a narrative format with which I am more familiar.

In response, I have gone back to a practice I had many years ago: Free-writing. Before my page-writing sessions, I open a Word document and just type. Ten minutes. Whatever emerges from my fingers on keyboard.

I was reminded of this approach by an article I had stashed in my files from a few years back: *Why You Should Write Three Pages of Garbage Every Morning*. Here are two benefits as cited in the article:

**1. You get to see what's going on in your brain.** *This is a cousin of mindfulness meditation, but where at least traditional mindfulness [meditation](#) is about practicing focus — on your breath, an object, or a mantra, for example — while you notice your thoughts bubbling up and let them pass, morning pages emphasizes the noticing-your-thoughts part. Three pages is long enough that you'll get through the things you knew were on your mind and still have more to go. Seeing what comes up can be surprisingly informative. And as you capture your flitting thoughts, all that flitting starts to settle down.*

**2. You practice putting words down without stopping to evaluate them.** *There is nothing more crippling to a creative impulse than worrying about whether its result will be good. Whether that creative act is an essay, a painting, or a PowerPoint presentation for your boss, it's all the same — evaluation is the enemy of creation. And freewriting forces you to keep moving forward, keep creating, without a thought given to quality. Quality has nothing to do with morning pages — no one's going to read this, probably not even your future self. You just keep writing. It'll be surprisingly hard to turn off your inner critic. But it's vital and valuable practice.*

There is a significant side benefit as well. Check out this excerpt from a [May 2017 interview](#) I did with screenwriter-director [Robin Swicord](#):

*Sometimes I think I don't write very good dialogue. I get in my own way sometimes. I get task-oriented. I have to stop myself from doing that.*

*I think that all of this dialogue comes out of the characters themselves. What happens...there's a kind of mystical transference that happens when you've done this very deep thinking and feeling about your character. You begin to embody your character. I literally feel like a character enters me sometimes. I don't worry about writing the dialogue. I just sit at my desk and feel their presence, and then they speak and*

*I write down what they say. Then later I'll come back to the page, and I'll go, "But I don't like this scene." Or "I don't feel like we need this scene." Or "I think this goes on too long." The writer in the room starts adjusting things, so what's on the page is not just mental run-on sentences of dialogue.*

*Often if I've thrown out a scene I'm very happy to see it go, even though I heard all those voices that felt so right at the time. I don't worry, because if I re-imagine it and put myself in that same place, I'm going to get a whole new tranche of dialogue. It's going to be given to me by the characters.*

*Actually the I just turned in this week, that I've been writing for the past eight weeks, and thinking about for two years... I tried something there in terms of technical craft was really useful to me. Which is: There's always a part at the beginning of a scene, where you set up the scene with prose. You have to be concise and choose your words well, so that you're not using more than you need to create a vivid film image that sets the scene for the reader.*

*I spend more time on that task than I want to sometimes, because I don't want there to be big blocks of clunky description. I want the reader to seamlessly fly through the screenplay, and feel that they're watching a movie.*

*On this new script, I hit on a technique of not writing the set-up, first. I typed "Interior" or "Exterior" and the place. And then just let myself be in the character's presence. I didn't even type the character's name above dialogue. I left the format in Final Draft's "Dialogue" mode, and just wrote down the transcript of what my characters were saying, as one long block of unparagraphed dialogue. I had already deeply imagined the scene during outlining, so I was in free-fall. After I'd come to the end of their dialogue, I inserted the character names, and clarified things with actions. Then I went to the top of the scene, and did the simple technical part of setting up the scene. For me, it was like writing in a backward order.*

*The result was: I wrote so much faster. I had felt I needed from 12 to 14 weeks to do a first draft — it was to be a long draft, the producers and I more or less intended this first draft to come in at about 140 pages, with the intention to edit it to something shorter on Draft 2. But with this experiment with technique, I was able to finish in 8 weeks.*

*Task-oriented. We have two creative minds. An executive mind, a planning, strategic, putting-my-ducks-in-a-row mind. But that's a different kind of writing than the receptive writing of hearing your characters and embodying them. We need both. One mind where you sit and craft*

*sentences that draw the reader into the scene.*  
*Another that allows your characters to come alive.*

As Robin suggests, we can extend this practice of free-writing to our page-writing as well. In the first draft, just *feel* your way into and through each scene. Connect with the characters and let them guide you through the pages. That's *receptive writing*. You know going in, you will come back and use your *executive mind* to refine, revise, and tighten up your pages.

I'm doing the same thing with my book — even without any characters! — and the pages are flowing more freely.

The author of the article suggests using a pen or pencil to write on actual paper. I prefer using a keyboard. Whatever works best for you, try free-writing and see if it benefits your page-writing process.

For the rest of the article, go [here](#).

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