

# Writing and the Creative Life: The Joy of Running... Creatively Speaking

[Scott Myers](#)

“Does some creative block have you feeling stuck? Go for a run. Are you deliberating between one of two potentially life-altering decisions? Go for a run. Are you feeling mildly mad, sad, or even just vaguely *meh*? Go for a run, go for a run, go for a run, go for a run.”



In 1978, a medical doctor Thaddeus Kostrubala put out a book called “The Joy of Running”. Here is some background on Kostrubala:

*Thaddeus Kostrubala was born in Chicago, Ill. in 1930. He achieved his BS in Anthropology at Northwestern University. He was a 2nd Lt. in the Marine Corps on active duty from 1952 to 1954. He received his MD from the University of Virginia School of Medicine in 1958 and was elected to Alpha Omega Alpha, the physician Honor Society. He taught in medical schools and related departments of Northwestern University, Tufts University, San Diego State University, and University of California, San Diego. He was Director of Mental Health for the city of Chicago. He started the first Suicide Prevention Center of Chicago named, "Call for Help" and also established the first Clinic for Working Women there. Dr. Kostrubala is a veteran of 40 marathons and a 50 miler.*

His book, along with "The Complete Book of Running" by Jim Fixx, contributed significantly to the embrace of running by millions of people over the last 5 decades.

I started running 36 years ago and while my times are way slower than when I somehow managed to start and finish a 25k in Death Valley, and while I have to switch days between running and biking out of respect for my knees, I simply have to get my exercise in. And running is my favorite type of workout.

I do it for my health, both physical and mental. However, I *also* run for my creativity. Story problems, new ideas, new spins on old ideas, just clearing my mind, nothing works

better for me than going out for a run.

Thus when the New York magazine came out with this article in April — “How Neuroscientists Explain the Mind-Clearing Magic of Running” — I flagged it to read. Last night, I did. And I learned some interesting things.

*It is something of a cliché among runners, how the activity never fails to clear your head. Does some creative block have you feeling stuck? Go for a run. Are you deliberating between one of two potentially life-altering decisions? Go for a run. Are you feeling mildly mad, sad, or even just vaguely meh? Go for a run, go for a run, go for a run.*

Great. But why?

*About three decades of research in neuroscience have identified a robust link between aerobic exercise and subsequent cognitive clarity, and to many in this field the most exciting recent finding in this area is that of neurogenesis. Not so many years ago, the brightest minds in neuroscience [thought](#) that our brains got a set amount of neurons, and that by adulthood, no new neurons would be birthed. But this turned out not to be true. Studies in animal models have shown that new neurons are produced in the brain throughout the lifespan, and, so far, only one activity is known to trigger the birth of those new neurons: vigorous aerobic exercise, said Karen Postal, president of the*

*American Academy of Clinical Neuropsychology.*

*"That's it," she said. "That's the only trigger that we know about."*

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*Other post-run changes have been recorded in the brain's frontal lobe, with increased activity [seen](#) in this region after people adopt a long-term habit of physical activity. This area of the brain — sometimes called the frontal executive network system — is located, obviously enough, at the very front: It's right behind your forehead. After about 30 to 40 minutes of a vigorous aerobic workout — enough to make you sweat — studies have recorded increased blood flow to this region, which, incidentally, is associated with many of the attributes we associate with "clear thinking": planning ahead, focus and concentration, goal-setting, time management.*

So there's that. But here's what I want to know: Why is it when I run, I get into a kind of mental void. I'm there... but I'm not there. Minutes pass and my mind just... is. And that's oftentimes when a solution to a story problem pops up. A new idea emerges. A different perspective appears.





But there's another big mental benefit to gain from running, one that scientists haven't quite yet managed to pin down to poke at and study: the wonderful way your mind drifts here and there as the miles go by. Mindfulness, or being *here now*, is a wonderful thing, and there is a seemingly ever-growing stack of scientific evidence showing the good it can bring to your life. And yet mind/lessness — daydreaming, or getting lost in your own weird thoughts — is important, too. Consider, for example, this argument, taken from [a 2013 article](#) by a trio of psychologists [NOTE: co-written by my wife Rebecca McMillan] in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology*:

*We mind wander, by choice or by accident, because it produces tangible reward when measured against goals and aspirations that are personally meaningful.*

*Having to reread a line of text three times because our attention has drifted away matters very little if that attention shift has allowed us to access a key insight, a precious memory or make sense of a troubling event. Pausing to reflect in the middle of telling a story is inconsequential if that pause allows us to retrieve a distant memory that makes the story more evocative and compelling. Losing a couple of minutes because we drove past our off ramp is a minor inconvenience if the attention lapse allowed us to finally understand why the boss was so upset by something we said in last week's meeting. Arriving home from the store without the eggs that necessitated the trip is a mere annoyance when weighed against coming to a decision to ask for a raise, leave a job, or go back to school.*

Sometimes the best way to approach creativity is not to attack it head on, but rather to go at it indirectly. Like going for a run!

*A [handful of recent studies have tried](#) to answer what every runner, whether pro or hobbyist, has no doubt been asked by friends and family: What on earth do you think about while you're out there for so many miles? This, as the writer Haruki Murakami noted in his [What I Talk About When I Talk About Running](#), is almost beside the point. Sometimes he thinks while on the run; sometimes, he doesn't. It doesn't really matter. "I just run. I run in void," he writes. "Or maybe I should put it the other way: I run in order to acquire a void."*

*I run in order to acquire a void.* And out of that void springs forth... creativity.

How about you? Any runners out there who get a creative jolt?

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