

# How Writers Write Fiction 2014

CLASS ONE • Video Transcript

Welcome to our introductory videos for How Writers Write Fiction. We have two videos here for you today on how to create and sustain a writing life. The first author you're going to hear from today is Michelle Huneven, author of "Round Rock" and "Off Course", Senior Editor at the LA Review Books. The second writer is an alumnus of the International Writing Program, a fiction writer from Pakistan, Shandana Minhas, who is the author of "Tunnel Vision" and "Survival Tips for Lunatics." Enjoy.

Hello, I'm Michelle Huneven. I'm the author of four novels, and I'm here today to give you tips. A few years ago, I realized I was getting older. It came as a shock, and I decided that I needed some guidance so I went to a therapist, but when she sat down, she just looked at me. She wanted me to start talking and to do all the talking. I was like, "No! I'm getting older here, and I don't want to be analyzed. I want to figure out how to deal with this enormous life transition." And she said to me, even sarcastically, "So what is it you want, Michelle? Tips?" And I was like, "Yes! Tips! Tips would be nice." Tips were exactly what I wanted, and tips are something that I thought I would give you here today. Craft tips, craft writing tips, tips that I feel can and will improve your writing life.

The first one is a little psychological in nature, and it comes from the late, great radical feminist, Mary Daley. She was trying to write--she was trying to write a book, and she just never could quite get around to it. She'd have to buy groceries, she'd have to take the dog to the vet, she had to clean the house. Everything distracted her, and she realized at some point, she was really going to have to change her priorities, and put her creative life in the forefront, and the rest of her life in the background. And the mantra she came up with for this was, "I have to turn my soul around." So that's my first tip: you have to turn your soul around, and you have to make writing the priority in your life, and then everything will fall into place--I promise.

My second tip is more practical. This is the timer tip: get yourself a good timer. You actually probably have one on your phone. So when you're feeling blocked or rushed or simply resistant to writing and you don't want to, just decide how long you can stand it, and set the timer for twelve minutes, seven minutes, and then just get to work. Or set the timer to write an hour, or three hours--you'd be surprised what that little timer can drag out of you. Whole stories, whole scenes, whole chapters. It's also good for cleaning the kitchen. I can stand to clean the kitchen for seven minutes. It's amazing how much you can do in seven minutes.

My third tip is join a writing group; it just helps. You know, if your writing group meets on Thursday and it's Tuesday, you just think, "God, if I could push this into sentences, I'll have another chapter to give to the writing group." Again, you'll be surprised at how finished that chapter will actually be.

My fourth tip is find a writer whom you deeply admire, who's maybe a little better than you are, and talk them into swapping work on a regular basis. You can save yourself a lot of time this way--it's a little hard to get you used to seeing each other's work in a really ugly stage. You may think, "God, that writer's not very good after all." But if you show stuff to someone else at an early stage,

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manner explained on [distancelearningiwp.org](http://distancelearningiwp.org).



sometimes they can save you a lot of heartache. They can keep you from falling into a lot of rabbit holes. Also, the other thing about having, you know, someone who is essentially a writing partner is that it makes writing a whole lot less lonely.

Okay, tip number five. I'm sorry, you hear this is every other aspect of your life, but here it is again: get plenty of exercise. This is really important. You don't want a flabby mind, you don't want a flabby body, and they're connected--especially when you're trying to figure out a fictional problem. There really is nothing like walking. Walking and narrative are really deeply linked. They both take you from place to place. The unconscious is the hidden engine and partner in your writing life, and you have to give it time to work out the problems that only you can solve.

My sixth tip is do something else creative. Cook, garden, play music, throw pots, paint--do something that is not word-based. Again, it gives the subconscious, the psyche, the imagination--whatever you want to call that thing--it gives it time to range about, it gives it fuel, and it will sort things out for you that you couldn't ever sort out from a direct assault.

Number seven: also, the subconscious needs something to work on, so it's always a good idea to bang out a really rough draft of a story, a chapter, a scene, an article you have to write, whatever. This gives that part of the mind that structures and patterns something to dig into, something to organize. I spent many, many years as a restaurant critic, and I learned over time that--I always wrote my restaurant reviews Tuesday, but I learned if I sat down sometime on Monday night, before I went to bed especially, and I banged out a really crappy first draft, that half my work was done for me overnight as I slept. Sometimes, I wouldn't even look at the draft again. It was just something to get those organizing cogs moving.

Tip number eight: if you are a novelist, write something short once in a while. An essay, a short story, a little article. This is essential because you might forget how to finish something if you're working on a novel for a really long time. So this reminds you of the pleasure of finishing something. It keeps you in practice for finishing something. A novel is a really long act of faith, and it's just nice to know you can dispatch a few smaller things in the meantime.

My ninth and last tip is remember that writing is a form of play. You have to be able to get into flow. You can struggle and work hard and get stuck, and you will--you will get stuck, but you can't force things. Solving difficult problems is the job of writing--how to bring this character to life, how to structure this scene so that it makes sense, how to get this transition to work--it's infinite. But you have to remember to give yourself a little room. You have to work your way into flow. Flow never comes cheaply, but you can't force your way into flow. If you're too stuck or going at it too hard or trying to control too much, just back off. Take a walk. Cook a meal. Turn on some loud music. If you have been working on a story for a year, or a novel for ten years, and it's not working, step back. Try something else. There's only so much you can do to make it happen. And while you're busy forcing one issue, your unconscious is probably ranging about and trying to work on something else. What is that something else? Don't you want to find out?

So here they are, my tips: turn your soul around; use a timer; join a writing group; find a good writing partner to swap pages with; get plenty of exercise and take lots of walks, do something else creative that is un verbal; write a super rough, rough draft to give the unconscious something to work

with; write something short and easy that you can finish quickly every so often; remember that writing is a form of play and know when not to force it.

My name is Shandana Minhas. I am a writer from Pakistan. My first novel was published in 2007; my second will be published next year, and hopefully my third will be published the year after that. Apart from novels, I also write columns for Pakistani newspapers, I have written plays, I have written screen plays. I have scripted documentaries about human rights and development issues, and I hope to offer you what I've learned from all of those experiences. Somebody asked me a little while ago, "Have you been writing while you're here?" I think that's a good place to start because, technically, no, I have not. I think I have written two sentences.

But what is writing? For me, writing is a process which involves extended periods of experience, hopefully intense experience, experiences I haven't had before, followed by a period of observation, which doesn't simultaneously happen with experience. To explain what I mean--you could be having a great evening, but not realize until the next day that you were having a great evening. Things happen in stages. That is followed by a period of stillness, which is what I hope to have as I leave Iowa City, which is where I am right now, and go home to Karachi. I think I am going to spend about a month staring at a wall, and then I will write.

But writing has been happening all along. That is my first bit of advice about the process. Understand your process, and realize that it has nothing to do with how many sentences you churn out or how much time you actually spend at a desk necessarily. I also now want to offer you other things that I suspect are true--now I say suspect, because there are no absolutes. So I could tell you you have to do it this way, and it might be completely bullshit. So I'm not going to do that.

The first thing that I suspect is true is that to be a writer, you have to be a reader. And to be a reader, you must read from cultures other than your own. I grew up in a country where we speak many languages. I write in English. This happened because I went to a school run by the Church of England. So from a very young age, I was exposed to literature from both Europe and America, and it's kind of tragic, but I wasn't really exposed to literature from my own country until I was older. But ultimately, all of that helped me as a writer, because I was exposed to different cultures simply through reading without actually ever having been there. I would urge you as a writer to do yourself a favor and try to do the same for yourself. This is particularly important because often, these days we hear the line, "write what you know." And if what you know is that, for example, a middle class white person from a small town with a frisbee collection, then that is possibly what you will write your first novel about. Fascinating as that sounds, it might not be for other people. So, read.

The second thing is research. If, for example, you do not want to write that novel about a frisbee collection, despite having one, that doesn't mean you still have to write as a man if you are a man, as a woman if you are a woman, and this seems very basic, but based on what I have been reading in the bookstores and in the libraries here, it actually still seems to be stuck in that rut. The reason it is called fiction is because you're making things up, and the easy way to make things up is, if you can't experience it, is to research. Read a newspaper, read a magazine--immerse yourself into the environment of any character or any storyline that you wish to access, For example, when my first

novel, it's about a woman who goes into a coma and remains in a coma. I've never been in a coma. What I did was go to a hospital in Karachi and made friends with a neurosurgeon, and he gave me several guided tours through the hospital, and he pointed me in the right direction in terms of what I should read and what I should not read, what I should not take seriously, how to stay up-to-date with what was happening in neuroscience, because if you are writing about a slightly technical aspect, you need to stay updated, otherwise when your book comes out, because it takes several years, you look like a complete idiot. But don't get overexcited, because I got all the technical stuff right, but I made a very basic mistake. My protagonist was driving a car when she had an accident, and in the book she goes through the windshield and hits her head and goes into a coma, which as one reviewer pointed out, is against the law of Newtonian physics, because there was the steering wheel and the seat belt and she would not have gone through the windshield. But I got everything else right.

This brings me to something else I suspect is true: don't disown your mistakes. Writing is a lifetime commitment, and when you are young, you will write many things, some of which will be published, some of which will be remembered, that in later years will embarrass you profusely and profoundly. Welcome those things. They are a shortcut to learning. Don't disown what you write.

On a related note, I will advise you never to use your pen and your keyboard to settle scores, to get your own back, or to create propaganda, because that's basically what it all is. Just don't do that. Writing is a calling, and with any calling comes a certain element of purity. You are a vessel. Don't pollute the vessel because you too will be drinking from it. So keep it together. Be nice about that woman or that man. They don't matter at the end of the day.

What else? Exercise. I know this is random, it's coming out of no where, but we tend to be moody bastards more often than not, and a really good way to work around that is to go for a walk, go for a swim. Haruki Murakami wrote a great book--what was it called? Something about running? I'm not a runner, so I didn't read it, but I have had many other writers telling me that it really helped them. I swim. It's wonderful for me. It's wonderful to be in water because water is the element of emotion, and when I write a novel, I often need to be able to immerse myself in emotion in a way that doesn't involve my hurting other people or myself.

Don't show your work to your friends. Again, I don't know if they teach you this in creative writing class, and you probably workshop a lot. Where I come from, because we do not have creative writing programs, we often just show it to our friends in the early years of our career, or we'll find ourselves in a workshop environment with other writers who are feeling precisely the same lack of mentorship or guidance in their lives. Your friends are not writers, so they don't know what you're talking about and they also feel compelled to offer you completely useless advice, which has nothing to do with craft and they'll judge you and some of them might not want to talk to you afterwards. So just don't do it. Keep your work to yourself until you have access to a mentor or a teacher or an agent or a publisher.

Workshop. Now, again, this a bit of cultural difference. Where I come from, there are very few writers in different languages. So in a market like that where there is intense competition for a very small pie--I don't know if that's what brings out the negative aspect of human behavior, but you do have to be wary of the feedback that you will receive from your peers because it might not

necessarily always be ego-free. Keep those things in mind when you decide to open yourself to criticism of your work. I don't know how it works in a classroom context, having never went to any sort of creative writing class. I dropped out of college, which is something else that I feel you should consider: you don't need to go to a creative writing program, or any kind of university, or even high school to be a writer. As I understand it, you need to write. It seems quite simple. Don't let anyone tell you have to spend several hundred thousand dollars, or maybe fifty thousand dollars to get a piece of paper that says, "you are a writer," unless you want to teach, in which case, yes, you should pay. Because others will pay, eventually, with their time.

Let's see. This is something I've experienced--how do I define myself? Because, as I mentioned earlier, I write novels and screenplays. I have written poetry and plays and columns. So when somebody asks me, "What are you?" they're asking me, "Are you a poet? Are you a playwright? Are you a novelist?" etcetera etcetera. And I just say I'm a writer. This is a great way around it because it will also tell them, one, that you don't take yourself too seriously, thus saving you from countless hours of pointless conversation about literary theory--which is great, but really, I mean you could be doing other things with your time.

Another thing I wanted to mention is the question that you will be asked, if hopefully you can continue to publish--if this is a life that you lead: what do you write about? Some of you will attempt to answer this seriously, because you will be under the impression that the people asking that question will actually care. They don't. "What do you write about?" is one of those general questions that should lead into something else. A great way to avoid it, regardless of what you actually write about, is to say, "Love." Just say, "I write about love." This has worked for me. Hopefully it will continue to work for me.

That's really all I have to offer you in terms of things I suspect to be true. I think that a good way to reflect on these bits of non-wisdom is to make your own list of things you suspect to be true. Make it now, and then a few years later, go back to it, and see if they turn out to be true or not, or make another one--add to it. This will also save you money, because if you go to a book store, you will see many books like, "10 Rules for Writing" or "How to be a This" or "How to be a That"--the best way to learn is experience. Again, so please don't buy books about creativity or how to be a writer. That just meant that the person writing them couldn't actually write a story, so thought they would just make a long list. Common sense. Experience.

And pleasure--I forgot all about pleasure. Pleasure is crucial. I've met many writers who, recently, are very focused. And what struck me about them is that they're almost corporate in their approach to craft. I don't necessarily see the increasing corporatization of writing as a good thing because there has been no discernable increase in the value of the literature being produced. The best work that we see around us these days, in 2013, is still by the greats--you know, the elderly, the established, and they're in their sixties, seventies, in some cases, their eighties or older. So yes, corporatization is a demon. Do not invite it in. Don't wear a tie, and go for jargon. It's not healthy. That's about it. Good luck, and bye bye.

So much of becoming a writer means trying to figure out how you do it, and we hope that you found those videos from Shandana and Michelle to be inspirational. Give you ideas about how writers conduct their lives.

Now what we'd like you to do is to introduce yourself in the forum so your fellow writers will have some idea about where you're coming from and what your concerns are. We want you to get in the habit of going to the more central page, where you'll find the instructions in English, French, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, and Russian. We also want you to add yourself to the course map, so that we can get a good picture of the spread of writers that we have around the world.

Every week, there will be a class video. You will then have the opportunity to participate in a discussion. There will be three workshops from exercises that you have completed. Those workshops will be led, of course, by moderators, and there will be an ongoing conversation that our moderators will facilitate.

One of the things we're thinking about is the sheer volume of exercises that come in make it impossible for us to provide individual feedback on every single piece of writing. What we hope is that in these workshops and discussions, you begin to develop the critical reading skills--ways to think about a work so that you will be providing that kind of feedback to one another. Writing, in so many ways, the principles apply across the board, and we imagine that if this works for this piece of writing, you can internalize that and you can use it in your own work at some later date.

And the wisdom of these writers is that writing is about developing the right habits and making a lifestyle of what you do as a writer.

Which means you write everyday. You read everyday. When things don't work out, then just start again.

Talk a walk, play guitar, and then come back and write some more.

I love the line of Richard Bausch who once said that the only thing that matters at the end of the writing day is to ask yourself, Did I write today? If you can answer yes, then it's a good day.