

# THE 3 DAY WRITING DETOX

BY RENEE EMERSON

*Have you just finished a writing project? Are you getting ready to embark on a new writing program, retreat, or class? Or are you simply in a rut, suffering from writer's block and needing a writing refresh? Then this 3 Day Writing Detox is for you!*

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## Introduction

### WHAT IS A WRITING DETOX?

Perhaps when you think of “detox” you think throwing out all your plastic Tupperware and drinking smoothies for a week. Perhaps you think of strange cabbage soups and green teas. But have you ever considered the idea of detoxing your writing?

### TO DETOX IS TO PURIFY

The idea of the “detox” is to get out what is bad – the poisons, toxins, allergens—and give you a clean slate for what is good.

This guide will apply that concept to your writing practice through several days of dedicated brainstorming, organizing, and reflection. We will begin with your writing past—accomplishments, failures, works completed and incomplete—continue into your writing present, and look toward your writing future.

### RESULTS

I can't promise you will lose 10 pounds in 3 days (if this guide causes you to lose 10 pounds in 3 days, I don't think you were using it right), but I can promise that at the end of this detox, you will feel ready to tackle a new writing project with fresh energy and confidence.



## How to use this guide

While this guide could be completed in one frantic afternoon, the point of the detox is to give yourself time to reflect and absorb the new information as you assess your writing practice.

I suggest taking about an hour every day to tackle the exercises and projects. You can of course spend as much or as little time as you want on this, depending on your needs.

I have designed this guide to be useful to writers of any genre—poetry, novels, essays, etc.—so I will refer to your written works as “the writing” rather than “the poem” or “the essay” or etc. I write from the perspective of a poet, so if you do not feel like an exercise is relevant to your genre, feel free to skip it.

Once you have completed this guide, I recommend going through this detox once or twice a year, or as needed, to keep your writing practice running smoothly.

## DAY 1

### CLEANSING YOUR WRITING PAST

Today we are going to spend some time assessing your writing past with several exercises in organization and cleansing.

#### 1. ORGANIZATION IS THE BLANK PAGE OF THE MIND


“And by the way, everything in life is writable about if you have the outgoing guts to do it, and the imagination to improvise. The worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt.”

— Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*

First, take a look at everything you’ve written. By this, I mean pull out the files—whether you keep them on the laptop or printed out in hard copy. (This can take a while if you have been at it for years, not so much if you are just getting started.)

Separate them into categories you find useful—for me this would be *published*, *unpublished*, and *discarded*. I also organized other categories related to writing—a file for my book proposals, for prose, interviews, author bios, all promotional writing.

After you have separated your writing, look at your organizational system. What do you need to be able to access most quickly? Perhaps that would be work that is currently being submitted or work that is currently being revised and edited. What can you file in less readily accessible places? Perhaps work that has been long published.



For me, I keep my poems in a file on my jump drive, organizing it by poems that are being submitted, poems that are trashed, and poems that belong to various books (published and unpublished).

You may find another system works best for you. Take some time this afternoon to reorganize your files, aiming for simplicity.

## 2. WORKING WITH WHAT YOU'VE GOT

“Don't bend; don't water it down; don't try to make it logical; don't edit your own soul according to the fashion. Rather, follow your most intense obsessions mercilessly.”


— Franz Kafka

Now that you have your categories and have organized your files, we are going to focus primarily on preparing for tomorrow.

First look at all of your **published** writing, if you have been published. What is going on with those books / poems / essays? Could you share these on your website or a link to them on social media? Could some of these essays or poems be organized into a collection? Consider how the writing of the past could be better promoted and shared, no matter how old it is.

Now let's look at your **discarded** writing – drafts that were never finished, poems that never seemed to completely hit home, novels that remained in unedited limbo. Are there pieces in here that could be reworked and revived? Parts of poems that could be used for new poems? Novels that could become short stories? Scavenge! See what you can reuse here.

If there are pieces that are truly not worth the digital paper they are written on, delete them. It is ok to delete. IT IS OK TO DELETE. The point of that



piece of writing may have been to move to you another piece that was more successful. Appreciate that, and move on.

Finally you'll look at what you are currently writing, the **unpublished**, the works in progress. What are you excited about here? If you are doing this detox because you are stuck, what about this piece is causing you to feel stuck?

### 3. NEW DAY NEW YOU

**“There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed.”**

**— Ernest Hemingway**


You've already done a lot of work today. Take a rest. Do something nice for yourself, like have a hot cup of tea or go for a walk outside.

The last part of today's challenge is for the emotional and spiritual component of writing. I want you to think about old ideas you have about your writing and yourself as a writer.

Do you think of yourself as a poet, and only a poet? “I could just never write a novel,” you think, “I am only a poet.” Why do you think that? Was it what you were told in Intro to Creative Writing a decade ago? *A Decade Ago*.

Do you think you are just never going to get published? Or even if published, never read? What negative thoughts are weighing down your writing process?

Take all those thoughts and ideas and labels you have for yourself and your writing, and jot them down on a blank page of paper. Don't leave anything



out, include even the ugliest, darkest thoughts about your writing and writing self.

When you are finished, try out saying something like “This is not the truth about me or my writing.” Then destroy the paper however you see fit.

I am partial to burning.

Congratulations on completing Day 1 of the Detox! On to Day 2,  
***Rejuvenating Your Writing Present***



## DAY 2

### Rejuvenating Your Writing Present

Your current writing is probably what drew you to trying out the Writing Detox. Today as we examine your current writing practice, we will engage in several exercises that examine the physical aspects of where writing occurs, then moves on to looking at your current works in progress.

#### 1. YOU ARE WHERE YOU WRITE

“Mad Hatter: “Why is a raven like a writing-desk?”

“Have you guessed the riddle yet?” the Hatter said, turning to Alice again.

“No, I give it up,” Alice replied: “What’s the answer?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” said the Hatter”

— Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland


Today we are going to start by looking at where you write. Maybe this is a desk in your bedroom, an office in a school, outside under a tree, a coffee shop. This may be several different places, but start with the primary one, the place you go when you really want to get some writing done.

How can you make this area better?

Does it need more light?

Pens and pencils on hand?

In my case, I share a desk with my husband, and I needed to get some of his paperwork off of my writing desk because I like a completely barren surface in which to do my writing.



If you have more than one place, look at those other places and see what they need. My secondary place is on the floor of my bedroom, behind my bed, often by a large pile of laundry. I think that is pretty much fine as it is.

*Disclaimer: please do not rearrange your favorite coffee shop, if that is where you write.*

After examining places you have typically written, brainstorm ideas of places that you would like to try out writing. Make a list of a dozen places, some around the house, some outside, some away from the house.

My list looks like this:

1. The library
2. The basement play room
3. The backyard
4. The local coffee shop
5. The park
6. The car
7. My closet
8. The storage room

Try to think outside of the box, but also keep into account what is actually doable. For example, I would love to write in a local universities library, but it would be a huge hassle for me to actually get there, if I could be allowed there at all.

When your detox is complete, I challenge you to choose 3 of those new places from your list, and attempt an hour of writing in each one.

## 2. YOU ARE WHAT YOU WRITE WITH AND ON

“She drinks pints of coffee and writes little observations and ideas for stories with her best fountain pen on the linen-white pages of expensive notebooks. Sometimes, when it's going badly, she wonders if what she believes to be a love of the written word is really just a fetish for stationery.”

— David Nicholls, One Day

Some of this will be limited by genre, but hear me out—today we are going to try switching up how you physically get the words on to the paper (or computer). Do you typically write on your phone’s note app? Do you write with pencil on legal pads? The laptop? Today make a list of how you primarily write your drafts.

My list, as a poet, is like this:

1. Notes and rough drafts go in my writing notebook (with pen)
2. “Finished” drafts are typed up on the computer

If you typically start off on the computer, next week, when you begin writing again, try starting off on paper. If you typically write with a pen, try a pencil. If you use a phone app, try the computer. The point is to try something different and see how it feels. You may hate it and go right back to what you are doing—or you may find a new way to write that invigorates your writing practice.

### 3. READ

“The first draft is just you telling yourself the story.”

— Terry Pratchett

The last activity for today is to read through all of your works in progress. Don't worry about editing or adding to the word count, just read them. If you need to, imagine you are an editor and these pieces all showed up on your submittable account. Spend some time thinking about your current work.

You've already done a lot of brainstorming and list-making, but I'm going to ask you to do one more today. Make a list of what you love about your current pieces. That's it. Not a list of what you want to revise or what needs work or what you are unsure about. Just write a list of what you find exciting, new, and beautiful.

You are almost finished with your writing detox! Tomorrow we will ***Focus Your Writing Future.***

## DAY 3

### FOCUSING YOUR WRITING FUTURE

For the final day of the Writing Detox, you will be looking at your reading habits (where you draw inspiration and learn craft), your Big Impossible Dream, and your daily practice of writing. These are what will move you forward as you re-enter your writing practice after the detox.

#### 1. READING BEGETS WRITING


**“If you don't have time to read, you don't have the time (or the tools) to write. Simple as that.”**

**— Stephen King**

Most writers are readers. Or if they aren't, they should be if they want to be good writers. When you read, you are absorbing style, craft, pacing, even subconsciously. Reading voraciously shows up in your writing. Today I encourage you to look at the last ten books you read and who wrote them. Especially pay attention to the books in the genre you also write.

Note: if you are not reading any books in your own genre, start now!

Who are the authors? Are you in a rut, reading the same style of writing again and again? Sometimes breaking out of your old reading list can help inspire you in new ways.



This week, I encourage you to go to the library and check out five books in the genre you write in, by an author you have never read (better yet—an author you have never heard of!). If you aren't sure what to choose, ask the nearest librarian for help, or pick based on which books have the best covers.

## 2. LOOK IN THE DIRECTION YOU'D LIKE TO GO

“It is my ambition to say in ten sentences what others say in a whole book.”


— Friedrich Nietzsche

This final day, after having spent time with your past work and current work, we will look toward your future work.

Briefly write down where you would like to see yourself ultimately as a writer. Don't be afraid to dream big (Poet Laureate! NYT bestseller!). Maybe it is just to publish one poem in one specific magazine. To finish the book just for your friends and family to read. **Your dream is your dream, and doesn't have to look fancy to be important.**

Then work backwards from there. In order to get to Your Big Impossible Dream, what is the step right before that? The step before that? Follow it down to where you are now.

If you outline novels in your head but write nary a word, do you think your Big Impossible Dream of being the next Stephen King is going to happen?



If you dream of publishing a poem in *The Southern Review*, but never submit there, do you think you will publish a poem there?

Write down 10 actionable steps you can take toward your Big Impossible Dream this week. Maybe this looks like making a list of literary magazines you would love to be published in—and sending your work to five of them this week. Or maybe it has to do with your writing—finally revising the novel you half-wrote this past summer, and thinking of a few publishers that may be interested in it.

The point behind this exercise is that you look at what you hope and dream for your writing, and you create actionable steps to move toward those dreams.


### 3. TYING IT ALL TOGETHER AND MOVING FORWARD!

**“A small daily task, if it be really daily, will beat the labours of a spasmodic Hercules.”**

**— Anthony Trollope**

This last exercise before you engage with your writing practice once again is to look at your daily/weekly/monthly writing habits.

You’ve already done the work of examining your current works-in-progress on Day 2, and today you spent time with your writing dreams and ambitions.



Now take a moment to think about how much time you spend on writing each day/week/month. You may write daily, a little here and there, or you may devote an entire day to writing once a month. **Is your daily writing habit helping you reach your ultimate writing goals?**

If you aren't sure, pull out a calculator and do some rough math—for example, if you want to write a complete poetry manuscript in a year and you are starting from scratch, then you need to write 5 (very good) poems a month to hit the roughly 60 pages needed for a full-length manuscript. Good! So that gives you a goal—you can see how far away you are from where you want to be, then devote yourself to writing X amount of poems each month. If you are a novelist, look up the approximate word count for your genre, and calculate how many words you need to write a day/week/month to hit your goal by a certain date.

Goal-setting is not meant to burden you, but to propel you forward in your writing—as you meet your goals, you draw one step closer to your Big Impossible Dream.



## CONCLUSION: A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Congratulations on completing the 3 Day Writing Detox!

I hope you have found this brief guide useful and feel refreshed as you enter into another writing endeavor. Though the last several days did not forward your word count, you have done valuable work on your writing practice that will no doubt yield positive results in time.

If you have read and enjoyed this pamphlet, I would love to hear from you via my website [www.reneememerson.com](http://www.reneememerson.com) or Twitter @thisquiethour.

Best wishes,

Renee Emerson