

Getting Motivated and Tackling Resistance Transcript

This is a transcript of the seminar, edited slightly for easy reading.

You can find the video and audio versions at www.writershuddle.com/seminars/sept2013.

Hi, I'm Ali Luke, and this is the September 2013 seminar for Writers' Huddle, Getting Motivated and Tackling Resistance.

These are topics that come up a lot for writers, and the most important thing I want to say in this seminar is **please don't feel alone and don't feel that you're a bad writer or think that there's something wrong with your writing if you are struggling to be motivated or if you feel a lot of resistance to writing.**

This was one of the most popular topics requested in the last Huddle survey, so it's something that affects a lot of writers.

Really, every writer at some point in their writing career is going to either go through a spell where they're not motivated to write, or they're going to be keen to write but feel some resistance that they'll struggle to overcome.

That's not the case all the time in your writing, but you'll hit some patches in your writing life when that happens.

I don't think I've ever spoken to a writer who always finds writing completely effortless and easy and enjoyable.

Just occasionally, I've had people comment to that effect on my blog posts, when I write about these topics. My impression then has been that maybe they're quite new to writing, they're just enjoying playing around with it. They might not be too worried about publication, about whether they're going to sell their work, about whether they're even going to finish what they're working on.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with just writing for the sake of writing. It can be really good fun, and maybe that's why most of us get into it in the first place. But once you want to take it beyond that – once you want to write for public consumption or with an eye toward getting better and so on – then it's hard to find it just as effortless and as easy as that.

If You *Never* Feel Motivated to Write

Maybe one word of caution here, before we go too far in. If you're really finding writing a slog, if you're really not motivated, if you don't enjoy it, and if even producing something and having written something doesn't hold any inherent satisfaction, maybe writing isn't necessarily what you need to be doing.

It might be that you have to write as part of a project you're on, as part of a job or something. I think that's not the case for anyone in Writers' Huddle: I think everyone here is writing, at least in part, because they enjoy it.

If you really feel that writing is no longer enjoyable for you, if there's nothing in it except trying to reach a goal you've set, it might be time to take a step back, look at whether that goal's right for you. Are you working on a project that bores you?

Maybe, if this has been your experience of writing overall, consider whether writing is the best creative outlet for you. It might be that, actually, writing and you just aren't a perfect fit. Which is fine – not everyone has to be a writer.

I'm going to proceed, though, on the assumption that at least some of the time, you enjoy writing, and there's at least some satisfaction in having written something. Even if you're going through a difficult patch right now, hopefully you can remember times in the past when it was easier and you did enjoy it – and there are reasons why you want to keep writing.

What Motivation Looks Like

First we're going to take a look at motivation and we're going to look at four things in particular that can go wrong, which often cause a lack of motivation.

Hopefully you know what it does feel like when you're motivated to write. You're keen to get to it, you're looking forward to writing. Maybe you're thinking about your blog post or novel or whatever it might be when you're in bed, or in the shower, or commuting to work, or in a boring meeting ... or something like that.

The writing is taking up more and more of your internal world: it's really something that's on your mind and it's something you're keen to do.

When you're motivated, you sit down at the keyboard, or you sit down with pen and paper, and you write and it's exciting and it flows well, and maybe you lose track of time – some people forget to eat.

When you're really motivated to write, even if things are quite busy, you'll often find the time. Even if it's just little scraps of time, even if the dishes don't get done or something, you'll find the time to write.

That's obviously great, and it would be lovely if it was like that day in, day out, all year round for us. Of course it's not!

Four Things That Can Cause a Lack of Motivation

Let's take a look at some of the things that cause a lack of motivation or perpetuate a situation where you're not very motivated and it just gets worse.

#1: Being Busy and/or Stressed

The first one I want to look at is when you're just too busy or too stressed with other areas of life. There's not necessarily any problem in your writing, but there's a lot of stuff going on in your life: that's what's causing you to feel unmotivated or to struggle with motivation.

This often looks like a really busy day job. I had an email from a blog reader a couple of days ago who's working 60 – 80 hour weeks in her day job, which is a demanding, creative role that she really loves.

If you're working really long hours, or if you have a job that's very demanding, it can be incredibly tough to physically find the time to write but also to have the energy to write when you do get a bit of time.

If it's not a day job, it could be that you have small children. Certainly now I have a baby – who's six and a half months now – I know just how tough it must be for parents, particularly those with more than one kid.

If you've got a day job, or kids, or heaven forbid both, if you've got commitments – whether that's volunteering, caring for an older relative – or maybe it's just that that you're committed to making time to be with your boyfriend / girlfriend / partner / spouse life can get very very busy.

Sometimes, there are good reasons why you just need to take a break from writing, you need to go easy on yourself, you need to perhaps lower your targets for your writing.

Focusing on Smaller Projects

I'm not saying give up, by any means. Don't just give in to life and assume that things will never get any better and hey, there's no point even trying to write. Equally, don't beat yourself up if you're struggling to finish that mammoth novel you've started writing or something. It might be that you need to focus on smaller projects for a bit, or you just need to take your time.

When I started working in a day job, having got used to a fairly slack student lifestyle with plenty of time for writing, instead of leaping straight into another novel (I'd finished a novel at that point), I started doing short stories for a while.

It was a new discipline for me and the first few I wrote weren't particularly good, but it was quite satisfying to be able to complete a short story – even though I only had the occasional weekend or evening to actually be writing.

Changing Things in Your Non-Writing Life

If other things in life are really causing a lack of motivation, you might want to look at ways you can try to fix some of that or change some things. I know this is often much easier said than done. It may be that you don't have a choice – you have to work long hours, or take care of the baby, or look after an elderly relative, or whatever it is you're tied up in.

But, if it is possible for you to change things around, then do prioritise your writing. Don't see it as something that's just self-indulgent or something that's

unimportant, because it is important. It's who you are, and it's something that hopefully you really want to take seriously.

It may be that you can pay somebody to watch your kids for a couple of hours while you write. Maybe you can try to cut down at work or even move into a different job if the one you have isn't satisfying you.

Sometimes there aren't any easy solutions. You might be stuck with your work hours and you don't have the money to pay for childcare or whatever it might be that makes life easier elsewhere – but **be open to brainstorming and looking for some ways in which you can juggle things around a little bit in life, and perhaps carve out a bit of extra time for writing.**

#2: A Lack of Support

The second thing that often goes wrong or causes problems with motivation is when you don't have much support in your life.

(Sometimes all these things pile on top of one another, so it might be that not only are you busy and stressed, you also don't have any support for your writing.)

Life as a writer can be quite isolating at times. I'm really lucky that my mum writes and my husband certainly understands where I'm coming from as a writer: they're really supportive, and always have been, with my writing.

I hear from a lot of writers who don't have that – who maybe have a spouse who's quite dismissive of their work, or maybe it's not that people in their family are unsupportive, but they don't get why anyone would want to write.

If you're in a position like that, please make the most of Writers' Huddle, come to [the forums](#), get some support and chat about writing and enjoy being a writer there.

It really does help to have people around you who understand why writing's so important and understand what it means to you. Simply talking to other writers can be very motivating.

We did [the Summer Challenge](#) recently, and huge congratulations to everyone who took part – even if, for whatever reason, you weren't able to get through all six weeks of the challenge. I know I only managed four out of the six weeks.

If you can take part in something that's a group effort, that can be a real boost to motivation. It might be something like the Summer Challenge, a writing group locally, or NaNoWriMo (National Novel Writing Month) that's coming up in November.

It gives you some accountability and it gives you that really crucial support, that sense that we're all in it together – there are other writers also working to achieve something alongside you.

#3: Having a Long Break from Writing

The third thing that can be problematic and might go wrong is if you've taken a break from writing for a fairly extended period of time.

There's nothing wrong in taking breaks from writing. You don't have to write every day. You don't necessarily have to write every week.

There may be times in your life when for whatever reason, you just need to take a few months or even a year or two away from writing. That could just be because you're incredibly busy, or it could be because you're having a fallow period when you don't feel like creating lots but you're soaking in ideas and material just as you're living life – maybe you're reading more, and so on.

For whatever reason, let's say you've taken a break from writing and now you want to get back into it. That can be really tough. It's not that you're not keen to write ... but the resistance has often built up so that writing feels like a really big thing. (We'll come onto resistance in a bit.)

You maybe feel that you want to get back into it at the right time: you don't want to just start writing, but you want to wait until you're ready to write.

It may be that you actually feel like your desire to write has gone away during this break. That happened to me when I was working in my day job. I started doing some non-fiction writing, which I really enjoyed and got on well

with, because I was able to get some small paying jobs with some blogs. It was the start of my writing career as such – but I'd really lost the interest in and the desire to write fiction.

This was a bit of a problem, because I'd signed up for a Masters course in Creative Writing and Life Writing, which I was due to start a few months after this.

To my relief, once I started the course, I really got back into fiction, started enjoying it again, and quite quickly began writing a novel I'd been thinking about for several years – which I've now published, it's *Lycopolis*.

If you do feel that you've lost the inspiration or motivation to write, or to do a particular kind of writing, it's probably not gone for good. Don't panic – but do consider what steps you can take to get that enthusiasm back again.

As I said, I started a Masters course, which was quite an intense way of getting back into the world of writing fiction. If you've not got the time or money to do something like that, **try simply reading more about writing** – maybe subscribe to a writing magazine, sign up for email updates from a few writing-related blogs, that kind of thing can just get you back into the writing world and get you interested again.

It could mean that you take a class or a course or something that's a bit more structured, so that you have a framework around your writing that helps you get into it.

It could simply be that you talk to some other writers – you join a writers' group, you come by the Huddle forums, you immerse yourself back into that world of writing. That alone may be enough to restart the engine, to get you back into the frame of mind that you need to be in to write.

All of these things are ways of motivating yourself without beating yourself up, without forcing yourself to write – but just reminding yourself what you love about writing.

#4: Not Writing Consistently on One Project

The next thing is similar, but it's not necessarily that you've taken a whole year off from writing or something. It's when you're not writing consistently.

As I said, you don't have to be writing every day – but if you write a little bit once or twice a month, and you've been doing this for a decade, then it can be quite hard to keep up the motivation. It feels like you're making very slow progress.

It's fine to make slow progress, it's not a race – you don't have to churn out a novel every year. But if you've been working on the same project for ten years, say, it can be easy to lose motivation.

You might lose track of where you are and have to spend a lot of time re-writing or re-working things – perhaps because you've moved on or your ideas have moved on.

If it's one project that's dominated a period of your life, it can become very big and important in your mind, and that can really trigger the resistance that we're going to come to.

Working on Too Many Different Projects

Something else that can happen here is that you're writing on a more consistent basis, maybe you're writing once or twice a week rather than once or twice a month – but you're working on a bunch of different projects.

You start a novel and work on it for a couple of months, then some other idea grabs you and you start that and work on that. If you never see anything through to completion, that can also be a problem for motivation – you start telling yourself “I never finish things.”

I know that was something I felt a few years back, early on in my journey as a writer, when I'd been writing a few short stories, I'd had a go at a novel and so on. I felt like I quite often started projects with a lot of enthusiasm and they didn't always get very far.

I think that's still a problem I have, to an extent, and it's a problem that a lot of people have, particularly us creative types. It's very easy to get excited about an idea and to really launch into it.

While it's not worth pursuing a project that you've really lost enthusiasm for – don't keep struggling away at a novel or a blog or whatever it is if it's gone dead for you – it is a good idea to try to commit to one thing at a time.

Try to at least get to a complete stage, even if that means you do the first draft of a novel before you decide whether or not to abandon it – rather than having a bunch of novels that have all got through two chapters, or starting lots of different blogs on different topics, or something like that.

Try to be consistent in writing reasonably regularly, and in setting yourself some goals for where you want to get to with one project – and making that one project your priority.

I don't think there's a magic bullet trick to motivation or anything. It's tough and it can be elusive. Really, for me, the key has been to try to write on a regular basis – I'm definitely more motivated when I've written recently, when not too much time has passed between writing sessions. I try to write at least once a week on my fiction at the moment (and obviously I do a fair bit more than that on my non-fiction, which is the bulk of my paying work).

Get some support. Surround yourself with writing and with materials on writing, so you really feel part of that world. That can do a lot to keep you in a writing mindset.

If things are busy and stressful, don't push yourself to do loads – but do carve out a little bit of time for you and your writing, even if it's just ten minutes to do a really quick flash fiction piece once or twice a week, or something like that.

It's really worth finding that time, and ten minutes really is long enough to write. I don't like writing for short periods of time, I like having a few hours, but a few minutes is better than nothing at all.

Tackling Resistance

I want to come on, then, in the rest of this seminar, to look at the idea of resistance. This is quite tied into motivation, I think. It's not quite the same – it's not that resistance is the exact opposite of motivation – but if you've got a problem with motivation, then you're often also feeling resistance to writing.

My Experience of Resistance

Resistance is a concept that Steven Pressfield talks about in *The War of Art*. If you've heard of it, that's probably where you know it from, or probably whoever wrote about it is referring back to that. Pressfield writes about resistance as an “evil” that stops us sitting down and writing.

I came across the idea of resistance from a British author, Mark Forster, in a book on time management, when I was an undergraduate. It really resonated with me.

I wasn't bad at managing my time: I was an English student, our lectures were optional, and the bulk of our work was done on our own, in our rooms or in the library, reading books, writing essays, and so on. You had to be quite organised to survive, essentially, to get the grades you needed, to be prepared for exams.

I still felt like I could be doing better. **This idea of resistance really helped me, because what Mark Forster said in this book is that you should tackle your highest-resistance tasks first in the day, because once you've got those out the way, the rest of the day is downhill.**

For me, as a student, the highest resistance thing was generally writing my essay. Because I was at Cambridge, the way the system works there is that we wrote one and often two essays week. It was quite an intense process of studying. I was churning out a lot of essays, but it was easy to put off doing the essay and fiddle around with other things for half the day, and so on.

When I got into the habit of tackling the essay writing first, it made everything else much easier. It made my time management much better because I wasn't procrastinating on the essays by doing all the little other tasks that maybe needed doing but that weren't nearly so important.

What Resistance Feels Like

Resistance is the feeling that makes you put things off: *I don't want to write this essay, I'd much rather be doing something else*. Even if you know that once you get started, it won't be too bad, it's that initial reluctance.

I think a lot of people feel this with exercising: *I really don't want to go for a run, I don't want to go to the gym*. It's the last thing that you actually want to do. But once you get going, once you've been going for two minutes, it's fine and you're enjoying it.

So resistance is a weird thing. It's not necessarily that the task you have to undertake is a horrible one, or even a particularly difficult one. It's just that, for whatever reason, you're feeling that *ugh, I don't want to do that* when you think about doing it.

For me, essay writing was my prime example of something that I would feel resistance to. For you, it might be doing your taxes, it might be tidying your desk, it could be all sorts of things. Something like making a phone call can be quite a high-resistance task for people. If it's an important call, or even if it's just something you've been putting off for a while, it can be quite hard to psyche yourself up and actually do it.

This is a very universal, very human thing. Don't think that there's something wrong with you if you feel this way. Don't beat yourself up: *what's so hard about writing?*

We all feel this resistance. Some people have developed better techniques than others for minimising resistance and for overcoming it – but if you do feel a strong resistance to writing, please don't think that there's anything wrong with you or that there's necessarily something wrong with your writing.

Resistance as a Possible “Pause” Signal

Now, I just want to bring that in here, because sometimes, I've found, when I feel a resistance to working on my novel or working on a blog post or whatever it might be, sometimes it's because there's a problem within the work itself.

With my novel, I've been struggling a little bit recently with feeling resistance to doing it – partly because I know there's something not quite right in the plot and in the structure and I haven't fully pinned down what. I'm working my way to what needs to be changed, what needs to be added in and moved around a bit to make this work as a whole novel.

To some extent, the resistance I feel to writing is just a sign from my mind that something's not quite right here. I need to do a little bit more work rather than blindly writing lots of words without thinking about the bigger picture.

The same can happen with other areas of writing. Maybe you're going to work on a blog post and you feel resistance to starting it – and perhaps that's because the topic you chose sounded quite catchy but isn't really right for your blog and your voice, or something like that.

So don't just think of resistance as an evil, as Pressfield has it, but think of it perhaps, sometimes, as a sign to take a little step back and think *where's this coming from?*

Quite often, though, resistance is just part of being a writer. There's nothing wrong with your writing, there's nothing wrong with you: it's just something that you need to find ways to overcome.

I think the reason why writing, in particular, does generate this resistance is because it's such a high-energy activity. It really uses your mind. It's much harder than sitting down and watching TV, or even reading a book, or something like that. It's very tempting to just decide, *I'm tired, I don't feel like writing, I'll put it off for another day.*

Assuming then that you're pretty sure the resistance isn't caused by a problem in your work itself, then how can you overcome it?

#1: "Taste" Your Writing

The first thing you can do, and [this is a concept I got from Kyeli and Pace Smith](#), is to "taste" your writing.

Have a little taste of what it is you want to do. It's not that you don't like writing: probably, once you get going with writing, you enjoy it. Or maybe it's

quite hard work, it's a bit of a struggle, but once you've finished, you're pleased that you've accomplished something: you get that sense of accomplishment.

The concept of "tasting" it might mean that you write one of the scenes you're really looking forward to writing. I think Holly Lisle calls these "candy bar" scenes – they're the ones that excite you, they're the really fun ones. They're the ones that maybe you imagined when you were first planning out your novel, that kind of thing.

Maybe, instead of plodding along until you get to one of those scenes, you can just jump straight in and write a really good, enjoyable scene. In fact, you might then find that some of the duller scenes you weren't so interested in writing can be dispensed with anyway.

If you haven't got quite that far yet, it might be that "tasting it" means writing down a bunch of ideas for your blog, or doing some character notes, starting to picture and imagine and pull together some of those characters.

If you're a freelancer, it might be that you have a go at a piece of writing on spec: you just want to get into the writing itself and that's the bit of it that excites you. Or it might be that you look back at the last cheque you received for your writing, and that's something that really gives you that taste for it again.

This could even mean something like reading a novel or book that inspires you: re-reading something, going back to it, and that's a way to taste what you want to do with writing.

This isn't about forcing yourself to do anything: it's about trying to remind yourself what excited you about writing in the first place. If you can do that, the resistance often lessens very naturally – you find that it's just gone.

#2: Take the First (Tiny) Step

But if you struggle with that, or you can't see an easy way to get a taste for it – or even that idea is generating a lot of resistance – then there's a simple thing you can do: **work out the first step.**

The first step, for me, is to open the document. Literally that. I need to sit at the computer, which I'm quite often doing anyway, and I need to open up the document for my novel. This does sound a bit silly, but it often really works.

Sometimes, just taking that very small step of opening the document means, hey, your novel's there, chapters 1 – 5 or whatever are there, then you type "Chapter 6" which may be your second little step. Now, it doesn't seem like such a big thing to get into the writing: you tell yourself *I can do ten minutes* or *I can write an outline of this chapter* or *I'll just play around with it for a bit*.

Once you've taken that first step, it's often the case that the rest of the resistance has really diminished. Maybe you've experienced this in other areas of life. Say you wake up in the morning, your alarm's gone off, and you really don't feel like getting out of bed. Maybe you just stay in bed, which is what I sometimes do! But if you can take that first step – get out of bed and put your feet on the floor – then the resistance has already massively decreased.

You might lie straight back down in bed, but chances are, you're going to jump in the shower, get dressed, and then you're getting on with the day. You're into action, you're moving. If you can just do something, if you can start moving toward what you want to do, then the resistance will often magically diminish all by itself without you having to think about it too much.

#3: Deliberately Set Aside Time to Write

A third thing you can do, which really works for me, is set aside time to write. Put it on your calendar and look forward to it. Tell yourself *on Saturday afternoon, I get to do my writing. I'm really going to enjoy it, I'm going to make a mug of my favourite tea...*

It becomes something to anticipate and look forward to. If you do get to your writing session and the resistance is still there and it's hard to overcome and you're not feeling very motivated or excited, tell yourself *it's fine to just do fifteen minutes, if I do fifteen minutes and it's really not working for me, I'll just stop and do something else*.

Usually if you can get in, if you can do those fifteen minutes, it will become much easier and you'll be happy to carry on for the rest of your writing session.

Think of it as playing; tell yourself *I'm just going to play around this afternoon, I'm just going to have some fun with my writing. It doesn't matter if I don't keep this piece. I don't have to show it to anyone if it's bad. I'm just going to write something that I enjoy, just for the sheer fun of it.*

That can be a really good way to overcome resistance. You might well be surprised that what you write just for fun can become something that you look back at and think *that was really quite good, there's something good in there. It's not perfect, but there's some good stuff I can take and I can use.*

Don't be too attached to the outcome: maybe you won't get something good from it. But be open to that as a possibility.

#4: Take the Pressure Off

The fourth thing you can do is just take the pressure off yourself. This is in some ways related to that idea of playing around.

Don't tell yourself that your first novel has to win awards or even has to necessarily find a publisher, or find a massive audience if you're self-publishing. Maybe it's really great if you can finish that first novel, and if one stranger buys it, that's a real achievement, that's something to be really proud of.

You don't have to be constantly thinking, as you write, *is this good enough? Am I going to reach the goals that I've set?* Similarly, if you're doing something like a blog, it doesn't have to become one of the top best known blogs on its topic.

If you're a freelancer working for a client, your client isn't expecting your work to be prize winning prose – it doesn't have to be the very best thing they've ever seen. For many clients, it just has to be competent, it has to be clear, good English. They're not worried about it being the most amazing thing you've ever written.

Don't build up whatever you're writing to be some massive, important thing that you're pinning loads of hopes and ambitions onto. Take some of the

pressure off, give yourself a chance to relax and really enjoy what you're writing.

Summing Up

Hopefully, this has given you some ideas about what to do if you are struggling with a lack of motivation, or what to do if you're feeling a real sense of resistance to your writing.

As I said at the start, the key thing is to remember that this really is normal! There's nothing wrong with you. I'd love it if, as writers, we always found it easy and effortless and fun to write ... that would be great, but it's not the reality.

I think the reason that's not the case is because almost anything that's worthwhile doing is going to, at times, be tough. There are lots of areas in life when there might be something you really enjoy, and it's really important for you to do it – being a parent, your day job, volunteering, going to the gym – but it's hard work at times. It requires some energy and some dedication and you sometimes have to really make a conscious effort to be motivated to do it.

I think that's just a sign that these things are important. They can be draining, at times, but they can also be extremely rewarding. With your writing, there may be times when it's difficult, it's a struggle, maybe you have to sacrifice other things in order to make the time and energy and space for your writing ... but I hope that ultimately, **writing is something rewarding, and it's part of who you are, and you wouldn't want to live without it.**

If you're struggling at the moment with motivation, please do feel free to come by the [forums](#) and just let us know what you're working on, where you're stuck or struggling, how we can help you. Even if you just want to vent, to say *this is really tough at the moment, is anyone else going through this?* – it can be really reassuring to hear from other people, *yes, I've struggled with that* or *here's something I did that worked for me, maybe it will help you.*

Taking a Break

If you need to give yourself a break from writing, take a break. You don't have to write all the time. You don't have to force yourself to write when it's genuinely a struggle. Don't be afraid to take a break sometimes.

It's probably a good idea to tell yourself *okay, I'm going to take a break for two weeks* (or a month or whatever it might be) and *I'm going to start back on this particular day*. Otherwise, it becomes very easy to let the break drag on and on before you get back into writing, and as we said before, that can be a problem with motivation.

I really hope that you are enjoying your writing, that even if at times you're struggling to be motivated, that you will be able to use some of these ideas and these tips to help yourself get back into it and enjoy it again.

Do come by the forums, let me know if you have any questions that I didn't cover, or anything that I didn't explain clearly enough in the seminar. Do tell me how you're getting on with your writing – I'd love to hear that.

[The forum thread for this seminar is here.](#)

Good luck with your writing: I hope whatever you're working on is good fun, and that it does go well for you.