

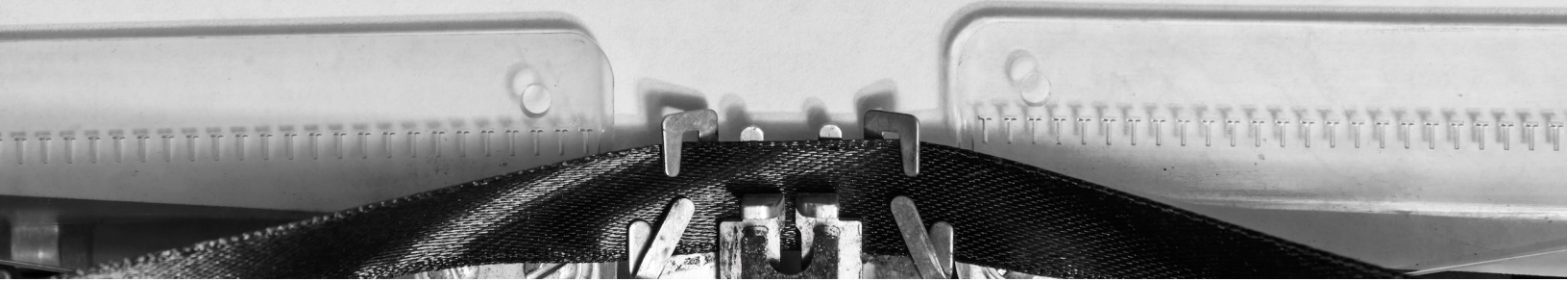
FIVE THOUGHTS ON CREATIVITY

ELAINE BENNETT

BENNETT*ink*

ALL CONTENT ©2024 BENNETT INK, LLC

The Secret of Writing



Allow me to offer a counterpoint to the folks who think writing is as onerous as brick-laying and as unappetizing as a plate of steamed cauliflower. Apologies to bricklayers—I respect your craft. And to cauliflower-lovers: if you'd grown up on my grandmother's overcooked vegetables, you might hate it as much as I do.

But I have a secret. And I'll say it as clearly as I can:

My name is Elaine and I enjoy writing.

That's why I do it every day, for at least 15 minutes. More if I feel like it—and you won't be surprised to hear I often feel like it.

This year, Thanksgiving arrived as I was in the middle of an important creative writing project for myself. I did as much writing as I could before the family came, but I itched to do more.

Out of respect for them—they'd traveled to see me—and, let's face it, I wanted to hang out and have fun too—I did as much tweaking as I could within my daily 15 minutes. And then I closed the computer and experienced a feeling I've never had before. I not only *wanted* to keep writing, I *needed* to keep writing. It almost felt like a compulsion.

So when the Monday after Thanksgiving dawned and I waved my family good-bye, I opened my laptop and dove right back in. I suspect this is the feeling that some people experience when summer vacation finally arrives and they can spill out of their cars and onto their favorite beach. Me, I'm not a beach person, but I *am* a writer.

Yes, sometimes it's harder to pry the words out of my head. Sometimes my writing feels as dull and lifeless as—well, I used to say the phone book, but who knows what that is anymore? Feel free to insert your own simile.

But sometimes—sometimes it's pure joy and I end a writing session proud of myself and what I've created out of nothing but my brain and a few million pixels.

What's my secret?

How do I get to that magical place where the right words flow like a crystal waterfall onto my keyboard?

By writing.

Yes, you read that correctly:

The secret to writing well is to write. Every day.

Even on the days when the only thing my words resemble is toxic sludge dripping out of an abandoned pipe.

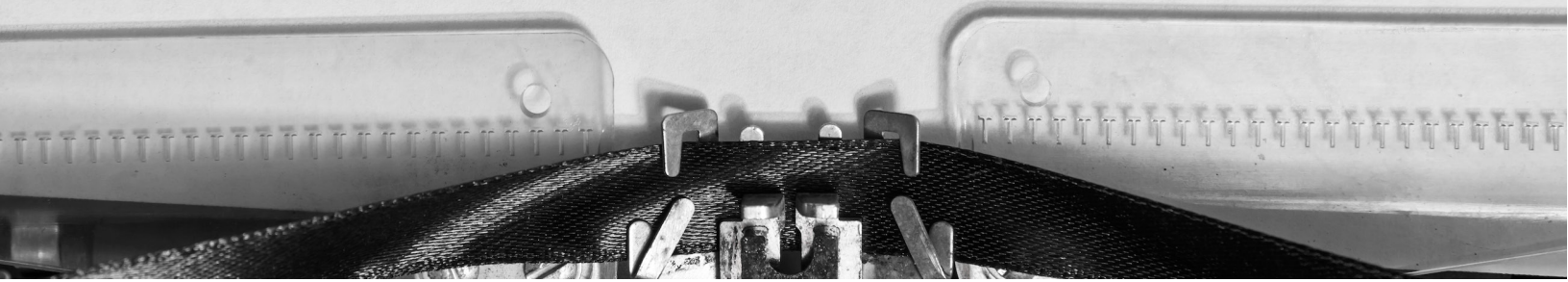
Even when those days far outnumber the beautiful waterfall ones.

So if, at the end of my 15 minutes, all I have is a document full of verbal toxic sludge—no harm, no foul. Because no one else will ever see it.

And at least I know I'm one day closer to a waterfall moment—if not a whole day, then a paragraph, a sentence.

Even a great word. That's what writing is about. So enjoy it: Write.

Excellence and Perfection



Can excellence exist without perfection?

The woman presenting a lecture on grit last night claimed that people who exhibit grit focus on the former rather than the latter. That sparked a lively discussion among some of her listeners. Some believe perfection must automatically be excellent. *Why wouldn't we strive for perfection?* they asked.

I thought about the writers I've worked with over the years. So many get stuck because if they cannot compose the perfect sentence—and, spoiler alert, no one can compose a perfect sentence, certainly not on a first try—they're afraid to write anything.

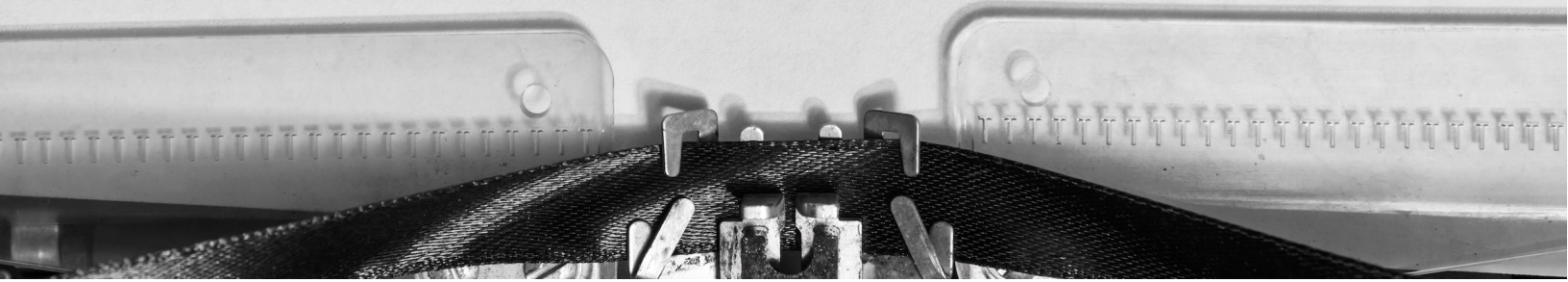
I thought about myself, when I'm learning a new skill. It's much easier to stop trying at all than to confront my mediocre attempts.

In those cases, striving for perfection doesn't produce excellence, it produces **nothing**.

As my friend (and not relative) [Sam Bennett](#) says: "Get a C." *Do something*. Try. And if you fall short of excellence, congratulate yourself on being human. If improvement is important to you, then try again. And again after that (for 10,000 hours, if you believe the statistic Malcolm Gladwell misquoted). That's grit.

Maybe at some point you'll stumble onto excellence; maybe not. But perfection—if that's your goal, you'll never get anything creative done.

Creativity Corner #2: Find Your Idea



In the [last installment](#), our Heroine found herself a writing class.

Being in a writing class boosted my self-confidence and gave me some self-imposed deadlines. And I met them: bringing in three or more pages of new writing for each class. I thought of these things as essays; they seemed too slight to be book chapters. I wasn't yet sure I had a central idea. But I remembered enough of what I tell the writers who work with me that I decided it didn't matter WHAT I wrote; it only mattered THAT I wrote.

So I plugged on, writing my essays. And then I got a nudge from a [playwright I'd worked with briefly in college](#). Maria Irene Fornés, a Cuban émigrée, made unique contributions to the Greenwich Village theatre scene in the 1960s. She passed away several years ago, but this summer the City Center Encores Off-Center program did a concert staging of the one musical she contributed to—a bizarre and jaw-droppingly absurd thing called *Promenade*.

Irene wrote the lyrics and book (the script) and she did it in what seemed to me a miraculous fashion. She wrote the character names on index cards, one name per card, and then wrote various plot points, again one per card. Then she shuffled the cards and drew them at random: the results became the “plot” of the show—quotation marks because I recognize that not everyone would call it that.

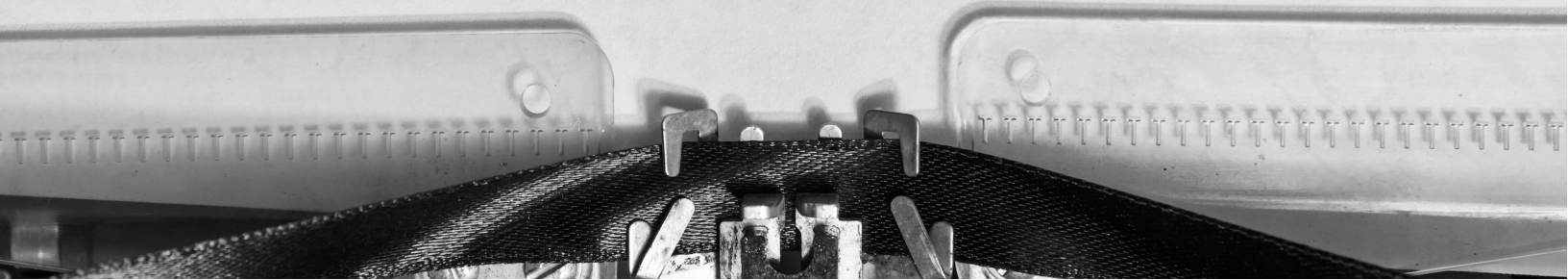
By the time I'd left the theatre—or at least by the time I'd gotten home—I realized that this book I'd had in my head for so long didn't have to be chronological. So what if it jumped around the decades like a rogue [Tardis](#). Irene gave me permission to tell my story in any way I wished. The next day, I sat down at my computer with a completely different attitude: my first pages after that may have been tentative, but it wasn't long before even I had to acknowledge I was writing a book.

Between that revelation in mid-July and the end of August, about six weeks later, my first draft had grown to over 60,000 words. I knew they wouldn't all survive the revision process, but I was and am proud of my work.

I kept going, day after day, carefully monitoring any doubt that surfaced. “It's not my job to judge this now,” I told my writing. “My job is just to write.”

And so by the beginning of September I was ready for the next stage.

"I write best when I'm inspired"



One of my friends is writing a book, but it's taking longer than she expected. Why? "I write best when I'm inspired," she says. So even though she's blocked off time to write on her calendar, she often doesn't fill it.

I pulled out the Somerset Maugham quotation:

"I write only when I'm inspired. Fortunately, inspiration arrives at 9:30 every morning."

We *all* write best when we're inspired; no surprise there. But inspiration is a lot like *Godot*—you never know when (or if) it will arrive.

Real writers—by which I mean the kind of writers who finish projects and ship them out into the world—write even when inspiration gets grounded by a tornado at O'Hare. Will it be our best work? Not bloody likely. But it will be something. And "something," we can always edit that to make it better.

Write best when you edit later

My friend took my advice to sit down and write, whether or not she felt like it. The next day, she confessed how hard it was to write without editing. She didn't like leaving her work "imperfect."

I guess she didn't get the memo: Nothing is *ever* perfect. And, anyway, how can you know what "perfect" looks like if you've only written a few paragraphs. You can't possibly know how those paragraphs will fit in the jigsaw puzzle of words you're assembling. Besides, you need to let the writing sit before you edit it. Otherwise you're like a car stuck in a muddy rut: you can spin your wheels but you won't make any forward progress.

Writing engages your creativity. Editing engages your critical faculties. Nothing shuts down creativity faster than a critic, [especially when the critic is in your own head](#).

So give yourself free rein to write when you write. And let the critic wait until you're done—yes, with the entire piece—before you edit. In fact, finish writing the entire project and then put it away for a day, a week, a month—the longer it took you to write, the longer you should wait. And then revise. It'll be worth it in the end, I promise.

Creativity Corner #5: Best Week Ever



I've just finished what feels like my best week ever as a writer. I wrote two very different pieces (I've been working on both for two weeks) and I actually felt that they were more than just good; they might, in fact, be great.

Now when I say "finished," I mean first drafts—not completed, ready to submit pieces, although I suspect they're pretty close. And the rush of adrenaline, endorphins, whatever—elation!—coursing through me when I stepped away from the keyboard...well, it felt like I'd just rappelled down a waterfall and into a raging river. Not that I've ever done that, but my friend Melissa just did and posted such realistic pictures that I found myself holding my breath while scrolling through them.

Don't get the idea that this two weeks of writing was all sunshine and buttercups. A lot of it was hard, especially the daily slog through the muck of my subconscious—[the Willits](#) have a swamp in my front yard. In fact, I think I only finished them this week because a writer friend stopped in for an overnight and seeing her working diligently at my dinner table made it impossible for me to pursue my usual goofing-off strategies. So I worked. And, to paraphrase a famous author, "She saw that it was Good."

It's funny, a couple of weeks ago, just before this writing spurt began, I had a free session with an energy coach. He works with people to unblock their stuff. About halfway through the call, he started talking about "the pain of writing."

"Hold up, mister," I said—or words to that effect. Writing is harder some times than others, but I don't see it as painful. He reframed his question a couple of times, but I didn't bite. And it wasn't resistance; it was my truth.

Writing is not always easy, but it's my choice to do it and I'm not in the habit of choosing pain. Work, yes; struggle, sometimes. Sometimes you spend more time playing Candy Crush than writing. But that's not pain; it's part of the process.

Have you ever felt that elation? Had a "Best Week Ever"? What's it like for you?



ELAINE BENNETT

MESSAGING & CREATIVITY CONSULTANT

Elaine Bennett’s name may sound familiar but she is an award-winning speechwriter and definitely not the lady from *Seinfeld*, whose last name was Benes.

This Elaine is a strategic messaging and creativity consultant, who has worked with CEOs of Fortune 50 companies, Executive Directors of nonprofits, and even people like you. And one early client who’s both a CEO and a regular person—Warren Buffett.

“You have a terrific ear and you turn straight thinking into straight writing.” — Warren Buffett

Or as another client put it, “Elaine is the Obi-Wan of speechwriting.”

In her TEDx Talk, Elaine examines how words can change the world, and she helps her clients to do just that. Melding the mind of a businessperson with the sensibility of a creative, Elaine delights in telling complex stories in a sophisticated but relatable way.

In the fall of 2024, Elaine entered the MFA Fiction Writing program at Sarah Lawrence College. While pursuing her graduate degree, she expects to have very limited time for client work and coaching. But if you want to check her availability, please [use the form at bennettink.com](https://www.bennettink.com) to tell her about your project.

BENNETT*ink*