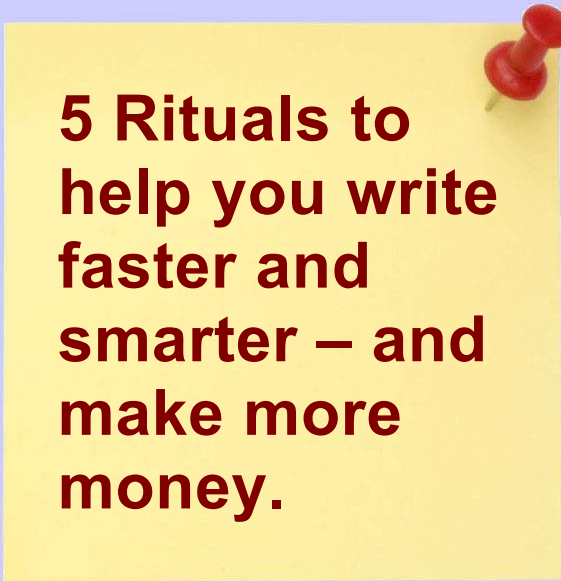


# Writing Rituals

**A productivity guide for commercial  
writers and copywriters.**



**5 Rituals to  
help you write  
faster and  
smarter – and  
make more  
money.**

**By Nick Usborne**

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## Introduction

I started thinking about this guide a while ago, out of necessity.

I have been a freelance copywriter for almost three decades now. And although I have always made a good living, my level of productivity has not always been consistent.

To be honest, there have been times when it has fluctuated wildly.

I remember good days when I would get more work done before 10:00AM in the morning than I had achieved during the entire day before.

I survived that way, but I didn't do as well as I could.

I also discovered something else. It wasn't just my levels of productivity that varied. The quality of my writing work varied as well. Although not true all of the time, I often found that assignments which were completed during a time of strong focus tended to be better than those I had written while feeling distracted.

### **What's happening here?**

As a commercial writer I'm certainly not alone in struggling with an inconsistent level of productivity.

I have corresponded with dozens of other writers and copywriters who have had the same problem. This applies both to writers who are employed, and freelancers.

**The biggest problem is that we are constantly losing FOCUS.**

We lose focus when it comes time to start writing on a particular assignment, we lose focus during the course of writing and we lose focus as we try to finish the task.

What is this mysterious force that drives us to lose our focus?

### **DISTRACTIONS.**

These may be real, physical distractions like people phoning us, meetings, or urgent emails to answer.

But as writers we are also prone to distractions that we create for ourselves.

**You are scheduled to start writing on a particular job at 9:00AM on Monday morning...**

But as 9:00AM approaches you find yourself suddenly drawn to other, unrelated tasks. You check out a web site or two. You decide to clean up your email inbox. You check your voicemail for messages.

And if you are a freelancer working from home, the potential distractions multiply like crazy.

You fill the dishwasher. You flip through the pages of a magazine. You suddenly feel compelled to spend a little time browsing through FaceBook, or even take the dog for a walk.

We know that it's time to get started on that job. But something is holding us back.

We KNOW we have to get started. But there is this little demon on our shoulders, tempting us with 101 other ways in which to spend our time.

And we LIKE that little demon. We actually INVITE distraction. If there isn't a genuine distraction available to us, we INVENT one.

### **So what the heck is going on here?**

We are falling victim to that range of work ailments that plagues anyone whose livelihood depends on their creativity.

Painters, screenwriters, musicians, sculptors, street artists, novelists and anyone else who makes money from their creativity all have the same struggles.

Novelists get writer's block. Painters procrastinate all the time.

This happens to everyone who depends on the right side of their brain for their income.

### **But we're commercial writers, right?**

Yes we are. We're not writing novels, we're writing ads, white papers, articles, web pages, sales letters and a host of other things.

But we still depend on our inner creativity to get the job done well.

We are still faced with a blank screen or a blank sheet of paper, just like any other writer.

We're not creating whole new worlds of fiction. But we are still having to use our creativity to bring life to our communications.

We are still creating, even if we are given an outline and structure to follow, and an outcome to achieve.

**We are creative, but working within the demands of a commercial environment.**

An editor may indulge a novelist who is falling behind. A gallery owner may support and encourage a painter who is struggling to get all his or her paintings completed in time for an exhibition.

But as commercial writers, we don't get that kind of treatment and flexibility.

We have to work fast, and deliver on time.

We work within a framework of tight schedules. The right side of our brain is having to perform within a left-brain environment.

And no client or manager is going to pat us on the shoulder and say, "No worries, I know there is a big component of creativity in your work. I understand that. So if you need to take a little extra time, that's no problem."

It might be nice to hear that kind of thing at times. But it very rarely happens.

**This loss of productivity impacts us beyond simply struggling to get our work completed on time.**

Losing focus can have a very negative impact on our lives.

Here's a scenario that plays out all too often.

1. You have struggled with your last two writing assignments. It felt like trying to sprint through treacle. Every line was a struggle. You constantly felt distracted and lost focus. It took you a lot longer to complete the job than it should have done.
2. You start to feel a slight loss in confidence. You begin to question yourself. The bottom line is that you're beginning to feel bad. Your loss of productivity is dragging you down.
3. You wake up each morning feeling depressed. You don't look forward to your writing tasks for the day, because you fear that today will be just like all those other days...a struggle.
4. The cycle perpetuates itself. Each bad day feeds the next.

If nothing like this has ever happened to you, you're lucky. This happens to a lot of commercial writers, particularly freelancers.

A while back I conducted a survey among commercial writers, asking whether they ever suffered from depression related to their work.

Over 50% of the respondents said they did.

**Here's how the 5 Writing Rituals can help you.**

I first started developing these rituals for myself. I needed and wanted a way to establish some consistency in how effectively I used my time.

I wanted each day to be as close as possible to being a "perfect productivity" day.

**How did I arrive at the 5 Rituals?**

First, I looked at how other professionals planned their days and their tasks.

There have been dozens of books and guides written for business people who are looking for ways to use their time more productively.

The popularity of these books really took off with the publication of Stephen Covey's book, "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People".

Another book published more recently, is David Allen's "Getting things Done".

These are both excellent books.

But I wanted to find something a little different. While books written for business people in general carry some excellent lessons, I wanted to create a structure and process that was customized for writers. I wanted to create a productivity guide that would suit a right brain working in a left-brain environment.

So I thought about my brother, who is a cabinet maker.

A cabinet maker?

Yes. And the nature of his work has some strong similarities with commercial writing.

- Like us, he works to a budget and a deadline.
- Like us, he is provided with a briefing and a description of the required outcome. ("Kitchen cabinets to fit in this exact space, please.")
- Like us, he follows the directions provided, but is also expected to contribute some of his own, creative input. ("What wood would you think is going to work best in this space?" Or "What can we do with the corner cabinet to make it easy to store my pots and pans?")
- Like us, when it comes time to get started, he's on his own. (We have our blank sheet of paper, he has a pile of lumber.)

However...

There are some HUGE differences in how we prepare and execute our respective assignments.

As writers, many of us simply "get started". We read the briefing materials, we do some research. Maybe we'll do a little brain storming with some colleagues, if we are employed.

But once we have absorbed the brief, we generally open a new file on our computers and start writing.

Is that how my brother works?

Absolutely not.

**He prepares. He plans. He visualizes.**

He draws up plans. He measures everything precisely. He works out how best to use his time and his materials. He pins the plans up on the wall in his workshop. Every last element is included and measured.

He never starts until everything is in place, until he can see the final product in his mind's eye.

In a sense, he has already created it. All that remains is to bring it to life with the lumber he has purchased.

When I look at his approach compared to my own, and that of many other commercial writers, I find myself appearing to be undisciplined and sloppy in my own approach to work.

**This is where the 5 Rituals came from...**

Watching my brother work gave me the inspiration to create these 5 Rituals for writers.

Like a cabinet maker, we can do more to prepare for each assignment. We can plan more thoroughly. We can schedule our writing time with more precision. We also can visualize our outcomes and see what it is we are going to create, before we face that blank page.

It is by applying a more disciplined approach that we can minimize those lapses in focus and productivity.

By planning our work more thoroughly, we can keep our eyes clearly on what needs to be done next. We can follow a clear process, step by step, whatever the writing task may be.

When we give ourselves this kind of structure, we become far less susceptible to distractions, whether they be external, or of our own invention.

### **Why "Rituals"?**

Why do I describe the steps and processes in this guide as rituals, and not habits?

The distinction is deliberate.

Habits are often random. Some are positive, while others are negative. We have good habits and bad habits.

A ritual is very different. A ritual is deliberate, not random. And a ritual has a deeper meaning.

Buying a coffee on the way to work is a habit. It's neither good nor bad. It's just a habit. Part of our morning routine.

Reading to your kids at bedtime is a ritual. It's deliberate. It has meaning. And your kids will always remember you reading to them, even when they are adults themselves.

Putting up a Christmas tree is a ritual for Christians. It has meaning. It defines a time. It carries the promise of gifts and celebration.

A habit is something that happens without thought.

A ritual is something we think about.

That's why I want this guide to be about rituals. I want each of the five steps in this process to be thoughtful and filled with meaning.

By applying the rituals, one after another, you will find that your work experienced is transformed.

You will no longer be plagued by distractions or lack of focus.

You will find yourself writing at a consistent pace, with clear targets to achieve, within a specific timeframe.

The entire writing experience will become "cleaner", better structured and more deliberate.

Finally, you will find yourself becoming a great deal more productive. You'll also find the quality of your work improving.

And, particularly if you are a freelancer, you will find yourself making more money.

And enjoying life more.

# The 5 Rituals

## Ritual #1

### Clear your mind.

If you have a new assignment to work on, you first need to clear your mind.

This may sound obvious. Or maybe it sounds a little "new age".

But it's an essential part of becoming more productive as a writer.

Again, let's think about my brother the cabinet maker.

When he starts on a new job, is his workshop a mess? Are there piles of sawdust and off-cuts from the last job littering the floor? Does he still have the plans for the last job pinned to his wall?

Of course not. His workshop is clean. He is prepared. He is ready. There are no visual distractions in his line of sight.

He'll never be working on the new job while, at the same time, thinking, "Hmm, I really should clean up that mess from the last job some time."

**He has no distractions, because he has devoted his workspace to the new job exclusively.**

You need to do the same.

Before you embark on the next job, clean up after the last.

This means identifying all the files and papers related to the previous job and dealing with them. Then means filing the papers that you'll need again and recycling the rest.

The same goes for your computer files. Do you have files hanging around on your computer desktop? Place them in their appropriate folders, or delete them.

How about your email? Whether you are using Outlook, Gmail or anything else, clean up.

You probably gathered up quite a mountain of emails during the course of your last assignment. Go through them. File them into folders or delete them.

Attachments? If attachments came with some of those emails, either save them to a folder on your hard drive, or delete them.

In other words. Tidy up.

For writers, our desk space and our computers are the tools of our trade.

Do you think a cabinet maker leaves his or her tools lying around after each job? Of course not. Each tool is cleaned and put back where it belongs. If blades need sharpening or replacing, the best time to do that is in between jobs.

### **So what's with this cleanliness thing?**

More than a few writers take a certain perverse pride in the mess that surrounds them. Piles of paper grow higher. Coffee mugs remain unwashed. Files and file folders litter the floor.

The justification for this mess? "It's creative."

If a little creative conceit is your thing, then go for it.

But I have no doubt that a messy work environment has an adverse effect on one's productivity.

Is this because I'm a "clean" freak? Not at all.

This isn't about cleanliness or tidiness.

It's about clearing your mind.

Remember...the purpose of these rituals is to help keep your mind focused and clear of distracting thoughts.

And when you have a mountain of paper and files relating to previous jobs still visible, you're going to become distracted.

While you are trying to work on your new assignment, part of your mind will be elsewhere.

It will be thinking things like:

"Oh, I think my tax bill is somewhere in that pile on the floor. I must check on that later."

"Hmmm...I wonder if I did file that article I used as reference on my last job. I'll probably need that again."

These aren't necessarily conscious thoughts. This is happening in the background. And even though you may not recognize or "hear" each separate thought, you will become aware that something is disturbing your focus on what you are working on right now.

To clean your mind, you need to clean up both physically and mentally.

You need to complete all actions related to the last job. You have done the job and you need to finish every action that is related to that job.

When you have a clean workshop with everything in its place, you'll then be able to devote your mind to the task in front of you right now.

**What about future jobs? Or other tasks I need to deal with today?**

The same principles apply.

Put everything in its place.

If you have another job coming up after this one, make sure that any emails or files or paperwork relating to that new job are in their proper places.

If you have reference materials and files related to the NEXT job on your desk while you are working on TODAY'S assignment, you can be sure that a small part of your mind will be aware of those papers and will be thinking, "Yeah, I'd better call Jack before I start on that job. And I need to do some more research before I call the client."

Again, you may not consciously say those words in your mind. But part of your brain will be at work on that job instead of focusing on the one you are tackling right now.

So put those files in their place. Know that you are going to deal with them at 10:0AM tomorrow.

Now your mind doesn't have to think about that. It's taken care of.

As for those other small tasks you need to take care of today...like a few emails, some phone calls, a quick edit on some work from last week...put aside a specific time during the day when you are going to deal with those.

If your mind knows that all the bits and pieces of the day will be taken care of between 2:30 and 3:15, then, once again, it can relax. Your mind can be clear.

In a way your mind is constantly trying to compensate for your own lack of organization.

If you haven't organized your work environment and your time, part of your brain will take on the task for you. It will try to make sense of the mess you have created. It will try to remind you of the things it thinks you may have forgotten.

And the more your mind compensates, the more it will need to interrupt you. "Hey, don't forget to call Mike before 4:00."

And the more your unconscious mind interrupts you, the more broken and sporadic your concentration will be on the task you are meant to be focusing on right now.

Then, at the end of the day you'll wonder why your day wasn't very productive. You'll wonder why your focus felt so fragmented. You'll

wonder why the experience of working on your current project felt choppy, and not smooth.

It's all because your mind wasn't clear.

**Reminder:**



## Ritual #2

### Visualize the Outcome.

With the first ritual, we cleared the decks.

Any kind of documentation from past or future jobs is filed and in its place.

Nothing remains to distract us from the task in front of us right now.

But the act of clearing the decks doesn't necessarily mean that you are in perfect shape to start work on this new project.

#### **What about just reading the brief and getting started?**

Maybe that could work for a very small task.

If someone asks you to write a ten-line email, then maybe you can just read the brief and get started. This is assuming you are already very familiar with the product, service or information about which you are being asked to write.

But most of the assignments we receive are a little more involved than that.

And projects of even a modest size demand preparation.

How come?

Because if you don't prepare in advance of writing, your unconscious voice will still be interrupting you as you try to write.

Remember, we want your mind to be clear, so it can focus exclusively on the job in hand.

If you just dive in and write, your unconscious voice will be asking you a ton of questions:

"Wait a minute, what exactly did the client mean when he said that part about the audience being mainly young people, but not to forget people who are little older and have more money?"

"Did the client say he was going to dig up some more information for me and send it today?"

"Does this make sense? When people read this text, is it the first time they have ever heard from this company?"

And so on. The same rules apply.

If you want a quiet, focused mind while you're writing, then you need to prepare thoroughly before you start writing.

Think about my brother the cabinet maker for a moment.

Do you think he's going to start cutting wood if he's not 100% sure whether the space between the stove and the wall is 36 inches or 37 inches?

Of course he isn't.

And let's stay in the cabinet maker's mind for a while longer as he prepares for the job. Before he starts cutting and drilling.

He's going to have everything ready before he starts:

- He's going to have his plans drawn out, complete with exact measurements.
- He is going to have spoken to the client with any last-minute questions.
- He's going to have purchased all the lumber he needs, and he'll have it all laid out in his workshop.
- He will have broken the project down into separate tasks, so he knows which parts of the project he needs to tackle first.

He's not going to do a thing until he is certain about every element.

Of course, he's going to be a little more obsessive about this than the average writer, because his raw materials are expensive. If he makes a cut in the wrong place, he's going to lose money.

Our raw materials, words, are free.

At least, they appear to be.

And perhaps it's because our raw materials cost us nothing that we are tempted to be lazy and undisciplined about how we prepare for each new job.

The trouble is, this isn't just about the cost of raw materials.

By preparing thoroughly for each job we are also maximizing the chances of doing our very best work.

### **How to visualize the outcome.**

You can be sure the cabinet maker is going to visualize the completed job before he gets started.

He'll see it in his mind's eye.

And you should do the same. However large or small the project may be.

And I really do mean "visualize" the completed job.

If, for instance, you are writing a report, picture how it will finally appear. Will it be bound? If so, how? What kind of cover will it have? Will it contain charts, tables and other graphics? How many pages is it likely to be? When you finally hold it in your hand, how heavy will it feel?

By this simple process of visualization you are collecting some valuable information in your mind. You are letting yourself know that you'll need to source the right charts and tables. Make a note to ensure you have the materials at hand for binding. Think about how you are going to design the front cover. Will you need to outsource the design work?

As you are doing this, take notes. Make sure you write everything down. Many of those notes will then be added to your task list for the project.

This process of visualizing also provides us with a goal. If we can see what it is we want to create, then we will be far more clearly focused on all the separate steps we need to take in order to get there.

It's the same old story - it's tough to make progress if you don't know where you're going.

So visualise the final outcome and use that as your destination point.

**Break every project down into a series of simple tasks.**

Writers often stumble and lose momentum because they feel overwhelmed by the scope and scale of what they have been asked to do.

The easiest way to overcome this feeling of being overwhelmed is to break every project down into bite-sized tasks.

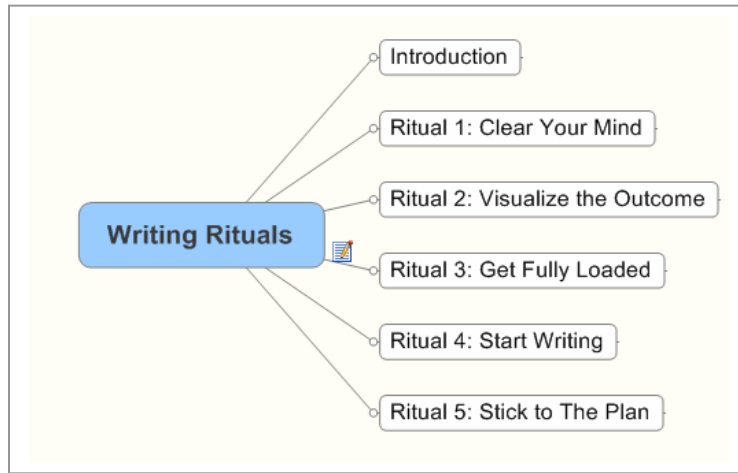
This is what the cabinet maker does, and so can you.

How do you do this?

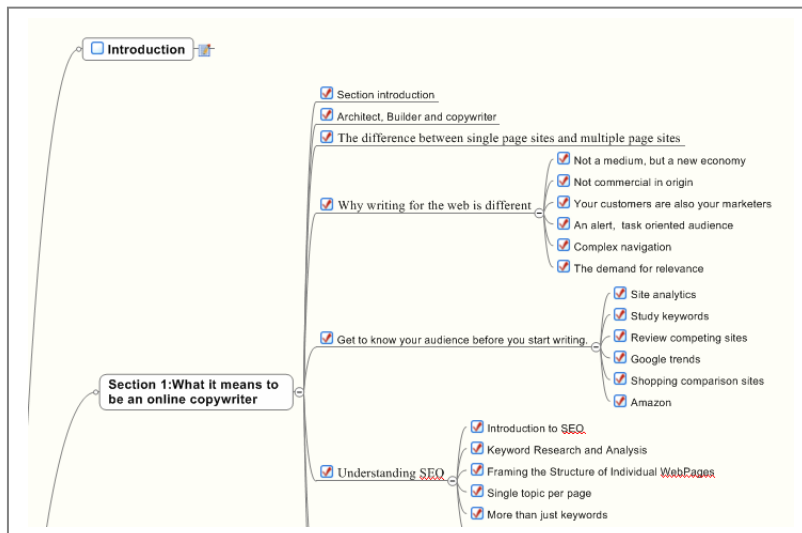
I have found that the best way is to use a visualization tool. I use a software tool called MindJet. But there are plenty of other "mind mapping" tools out there.

They all achieve the same thing. They enable you to collect and organize all the elements of a project in a visual form.

Before I started writing this guide, I created a mind map. Here is the very first outline, before I started adding the detail, notes and links.



And here is a small part of a more complex mind map I prepared before starting on a much larger project.



As you can see, mind mapping allows you to list all the various elements and tasks within a project.

This means you can see the whole project before you get started. You can add notes, make connections, identify where something is missing, or where two elements overlap.

Creating a mind map for your next writing project is the equivalent of the plan the cabinet maker pins to his wall.

You know what you are going to be doing before you get started.

And however large the total project may be, you no longer feel overwhelmed, because you can tackle it one task at a time.

Creating a detailed mind map also helps keep your mind quiet.

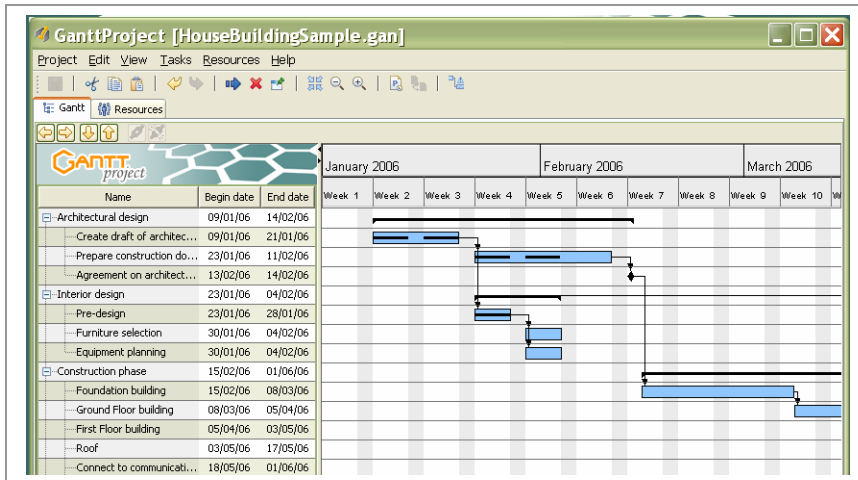
While you are writing the first part, your mind is not having to worry about or think about what might be coming next. There is no need, because the whole project is planned out from beginning to end.

This means both your conscious and unconscious mind can focus on what you're going to be writing today.

**Now create a schedule around your mind map.**

Some writing projects can be completed within a day or two. Others will go on for weeks or even months.

For complex jobs with multiple deliverables over a long period of time, you may want to consider a tool that uses Gant charts. Like this: (Just a sample screenshot.)



This will enable you to take your list of tasks and attach a timeline for each.

Personally, I rarely use Gant charts. Instead, I tag each element on my mind map with a delivery date.

Do whatever suits you best. It doesn't really matter which tools you use, so long as you DO use them.

And I do recommend that you use a system that allows you to SEE your project. The visual nature of mind mapping software and Gant charts helps one visualize not only the outcome of each project, but also every step we need to take along the way.

**You'll also need a good To-do list.**

When you start work each day you should be able to see at a glance what needs to be done.

Once again, having your "to-do" list completed for every day means your unconscious mind isn't having to worry about whether you have forgotten

something important. It doesn't nag you with random thoughts about stuff you might have forgotten to do.

**With all these rituals, the key is to allow your mind to remain quite and undisturbed, focusing ONLY on the writing task you are addressing right now.**

There are numerous To-Do list tools out there. The one I use is a web-based tool called GooToDo.

It is extremely simple and easy to use. I can add items that need to be done today, or for any day in the future.

I chose GooToDo because it has one feature I find invaluable, and which I have never come across anywhere else.

I can forward emails to my To-Do list for some day in the future.

For instance, if I receive an email today with some background information for a project I am going to start work on next Wednesday, I simply forward the email to my To-Do list for next Wednesday.

I remain in Outlook (or whatever the email software or service you use), and forward the email to [wednesday@gootodo.com](mailto:wednesday@gootodo.com). I can forward it to a specific date as well. Like [24february@gootodo.com](mailto:24february@gootodo.com).

How does this work? The GooToDo email server recognizes the "from" email address in my forwarded email, matches it to my account and then simply adds the email as a "to-do" item for the day I specified.

## Why do I like this email forwarding feature so much?

Email is one of the most distracting elements in our work day. Emails come in on a constant basis and do their best to demand our attention, regardless of how important it is that we remain focused on the job in hand.

The first thing I do with my email is to make sure there is no beeping sound when an email comes in. That's the last thing I need when I'm trying to get something written.

But email has a more pervasive effect on our day, simply by "being there".

Let's say you receive an email at 8:55 from a new client. You give it a 30-second glance. It's important and related to a job you need to get started on next week. But you don't need to deal with it right now, because you are scheduled to start writing on today's assignment at 9:00.

There are a couple of things you can do with this email. You can leave it where it is in the inbox, or you can drag and drop it to a folder you have created for that client or project.

Either way, that email is going to interfere with your concentration for the rest of the day.

How come? Because even if "you" are not thinking about it, your unconscious mind will be. If you left the email in your inbox, your mind will be thinking, "Geez, we'd better do something about that email before it slips down too far in the inbox, or we might forget about it altogether."

If you placed the email in a folder, your mind might be thinking, "OK, it's in the right place, but how am I going to remember to deal with it on Wednesday. Maybe I'll forget."

That's why I like being able to forward emails to future dates in my To-Do list.

The email is in a safe place, and I know I'll see it and deal with it at exactly the right time.

Once I have forwarded important emails to my To-Do list, I can get to work on my writing assignment with a clear and worry-free mind.

No distractions. Maximum focus.

**Reminder:**



## **Ritual #2**

### **Visualize the Outcome.**

(Use visual planning and scheduling tools to allow yourself to "see" both the outcome and steps along the way.)

## Ritual #3

### Get Fully Loaded.

Once again, follow the example of the cabinet maker.

Before he makes that first cut, he has everything prepared. He has studied the part of the project he will start working on and has all the materials necessary close at hand.

Do the same.

Gather together all the briefing materials you need. Print out the brief. Print out other files that have been given to you as background material. Print out emails related to the project.

I suggest that you print all these items so you can really "see" them and handle them.

You may also have done some of your own research online. If you found some useful information, print that out too.

Then lay all the pages side by side on a table or, if you have the space, on your desk.

Do you see what I'm doing here?

It's the same thing I'm suggesting within each of the rituals. I'm trying to achieve a clear mind.

I lay out all the related materials on a table before I start, so I KNOW that EVERYTHING is right there in front of me.

When I KNOW everything is there, my unconscious mind is not going to be thinking, "Hang on, didn't someone email us an attachment with some additional data for this project?" And so on.

Once you have everything in front of you, and have read through it, scribbled some notes and maybe highlighted some key information, you should be ready to get started.

**Now allocate a fixed period of time for each task.**

Few of us have the luxury of being able to devote an entire day to a single task.

Most of us have to deal with multiple tasks, whether they be writing for two or three separate projects, dealing with meetings or phone calls, or even leaving our desk for a dentist's appointment.

The key here is to allocate specific start and end times for each and every task for the day.

For example, right now as I am writing this page, I have 18 minutes remaining before I have to turn my attention to another task. I started writing today at 8:30AM and need to work on something else at 10:00AM.

And I will stop at precisely 10:00. (I'll be back writing this guide at 1:45.)

Once again, by allocating fixed time periods, and KNOWING in advance what you will be doing all day, you free your unconscious mind from having to worry about what you're doing and when.

Giving yourself limits on how much time you devote to a project has another benefit too. By setting targets you create a frame for each task and will often be surprised by how much you can get done within the time limit.

This was a lesson I was taught by my headmaster at high school. I went to an English boarding school and, while studying for my final exams (I was 17 years old), I used to hugely over-work myself. I would start studying at about 6 each morning, then go to classes all day and then revise for exams all evening through to about midnight.

Anyway...I worked myself to exhaustion.

The headmaster granted me a rare audience and gave me some excellent advice.

He told me to write down the various study tasks I needed to complete for the day, and then allocate a fixed timeframe to each.

For example, from 6:00PM to 7:30PM I would write the essay due for my English literature class.

But here's the part that matters most. What he taught me was to stop precisely at 7:30, whether I had finished the essay or not.

I wasn't sure about this advice. What if I hadn't finished by 7:30? Was I meant to hand in an incomplete essay?

Yes, I was. His point being that I had worked myself into exhaustion by never setting limits. As a result, I was tired all the time, feeling stressed and overwhelmed, and not working effectively on anything.

He was the guy who taught me to set limits on my time.

But he showed me something else, just as important.

Nine times out of ten I DID complete the task within the time slot allocated. In the same way that one does complete an examination within the time allotted.

That was an amazing discovery for me.

It showed me that I could be in control.

If I set no time limit for job "A", it might take me seven hours.

If I allow myself just three hours for the same job, I will almost always complete it on time.

I now apply the same kind of discipline to my writing work.

For instance, this guide I am writing now...I have it mapped out and scheduled. I know when I will finish it. I know when I will get the sales page online and live. I know when I will start promoting it.

Chances are, everything will unfold exactly as I have planned it.

Of course, stuff happens.

Maybe a huge job will unexpectedly land on my plate tomorrow morning. Maybe I'll need to switch priorities.

That happens. But the fact that life can be unpredictable isn't a reason not to plan and schedule your work.

Now you're ready...

Your brain is fully loaded with all the information you'll need for the project. And you have a time slot allocated for the first task.

**Reminder:**



## Ritual #4

### Start Writing

Once you have all the information you need, and some time allocated, it's time to start writing.

How hard can that be?

Well, it's very hard for a lot of writers. A significant percentage of writers just freeze when it comes time to put pen to paper.

And some don't freeze, but wobble. They are sitting on the edge of getting started, but something is holding them back. They can't achieve the sharp focus necessary.

Why?

I would guess that in the majority of cases the answer lies in not following rituals one, two and three.

People know they need to get started on a job, but simply aren't prepared.

Their minds are busy with the last job and the next job. They have a phone call to take in 30 minutes and three unanswered emails to deal with. They are not sure whether they have all the information they need. They may even have some unanswered questions remaining about the brief itself.

This state of mind is the complete opposite of "Clear Your Mind".

When people can't start writing, it's often the case that their problem is that their unconscious minds are bombarding them with a hundred different questions and concerns.

In short, their minds are not clear. They are busy. And that causes a lot of internal conflict, and interferes with their ability to devote their full attention to the task in front of them.

So my first advice is to start applying rituals one, two and three.

### **But what if you STILL have trouble starting?**

Even with the best preparation in the world, and a clear mind, it is still sometimes hard to get started.

Sometimes we still teeter on the edge, unable to take the plunge and start writing.

On those occasions, there are a few little tricks one can try.

And they are "tricks", because they somehow trick the mind into ignoring its hesitation and moving ahead anyway.

### **Trick #1 - Get started ahead of time.**

I use this trick a lot. I use it to bypass a weird state of "stage fright" my mind experiences when facing a blank sheet of paper and a fixed period of time to get the assignment completed.

Here's what I do.

If I have a new job scheduled for 10:00AM on Tuesday morning, I put aside twenty minutes at the end of the day on Monday.

I then create the new document, add the header information for the job, and then just throw down a few heading ideas and a sentence or two of text. I may even take it a little further, time permitting.

Then, on Tuesday at 10:00, my mind is no longer facing a blank sheet of paper. There is no stage fright, because the task is already started. I might build on what I write the day before, or I might start over.

Either way, getting SOMETHING down the day before seems to help my mind jump straight in with full focus, at the official task start time.

### **Trick #2 - Start anywhere but the beginning**

Writing the opening lines of any assignment puts us under a lot of pressure.

We feel compelled to do our very best with those opening lines.

We know that if the opening is weak, it won't matter how wonderful the rest of the piece may be.

Our clients, managers and our readers expect the first few lines to be perfect.

That makes it hard to jump in and get started.

We feel that pressure to perform at our very best, right out of the gate.

To relieve some of that pressure, simply start at some other point. Jump to the next paragraph or the next page or section.

Start writing a passage that has already been forming in your mind.

Then, once you are warmed up and your mind is feeling sharper and clearer, go back and start work on the opening.

Is this what I do? Sometimes. I generally try to start at the beginning. But if I find myself struggling, I start somewhere else and come back to the opening lines later.

### **Trick #3 - Cut and paste from the briefing materials**

When I am reading through the briefing materials for any new project, I highlight any phrases or sentences that I think really hit the spot.

When people write briefing documents they are not trying to write finished text. But sometimes you'll find a real gem among those pages.

When I find a strong phrase or sentence, I use it as a starting point. I might use it as the headline or heading on page one. Maybe I'll adapt it a little. Maybe I'll come back later and change it completely.

The point is, cutting and pasting that text breaks the ice.

We are no longer facing a blank page. The pressure is off.

## Trick #4 - Write carelessly

Write carelessly for the first few minutes. Don't worry about getting it right. You know you'll be coming back to make changes and sharpen things up.

This is just another way to overcome the stage fright we feel when facing a blank page.

Just start. Write as a stream of consciousness.

If your mind is fully loaded with all the facts you need, you just might find that this careless approach to writing will result in some great writing.

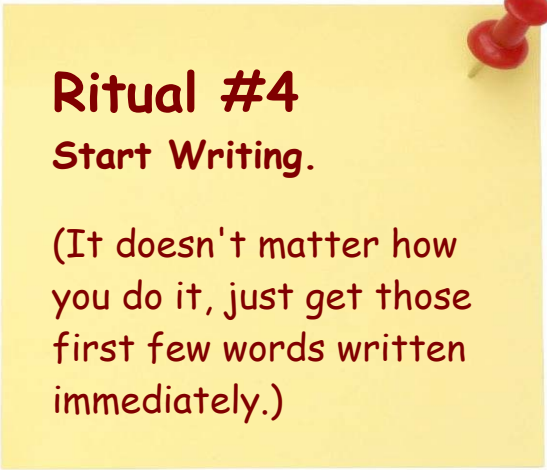
**Do these tips really constitute a "ritual"?**

Yes, they do.

The ritual is the act of starting. Whichever "trick" you use, you'll find that you start writing a lot more quickly.

And if you start writing more quickly, you'll find yourself becoming a great deal more productive, job after job.

Reminder



**Ritual #4**  
**Start Writing.**

(It doesn't matter how you do it, just get those first few words written immediately.)

## Ritual #5

### Stick to the Plan

Once you have gone through rituals one, two, three and four, you will have invested a lot of time and effort in doing things right.

So don't drop your guard once you have got started and things are going well.

The beauty of these rituals is that they enable you to write both faster and smarter from beginning to end.

As I write this guide, I am able to keep writing at a good pace, page after page.

Why?

Because I'm sticking to the plan.

I know the timeframe I am working within. I have my mind map and To-Do list printed out next to my computer, so I always know what's coming next. I never have to pause, scratch my head or dig through a pile of papers to think about what I should be writing about.

And my mind is fully loaded with all the information I need.

The project is broken down into tasks, and I'm just moving through, from one task to the next, without pause or hesitation.

This makes the act of writing incredibly productive and efficient.

You can do the same with every new project.

Just don't put all that preparation to one side once you have got started.

Keep your To-Do list and your mind map close at hand, and work directly from them every step of the way until you are finished.

Maintaining a consistent focus on each step will help keep your mind free from distractions.

**Does this mean you should NEVER step outside the boundaries of the plan?**

Not at all. For many writers the act of writing is a process of creation itself, with new and better ideas cropping up as they write.

When this happens, simply change or add to your mind map.

For instance, when I showed you a screenshot of my preliminary mind map for this guide, I cheated. Those weren't the original tiles I used for the five rituals. When I was first sketching this out, I had preliminary titles there as placeholders. The topics I would be addressing remained the same, but the actual names of the titles changed. The trouble is, I can't remember the titles I first wrote down!

And I take some unscheduled time away from my desk sometimes. When I get ahead of schedule I will occasionally reward myself with a break. I'll read a book, go for a walk, even take a snooze if I feel like it.

That's OK too. But I ONLY give myself unscheduled breaks as a reward when I am ahead of schedule. I NEVER take a break because I feel

distracted. To do that is simply to hand over control to a distracted state of mind.

Also, the idea of using the analogy of the cabinet maker didn't occur to me until I started writing. I think it's a good analogy. I think it works. But it didn't dawn on me until I first wrote it down in my first draft.

When you get into a good place with your writing, you'll often find yourself uncovering new and better ways to say things, to get your points across.

You should never stifle that.

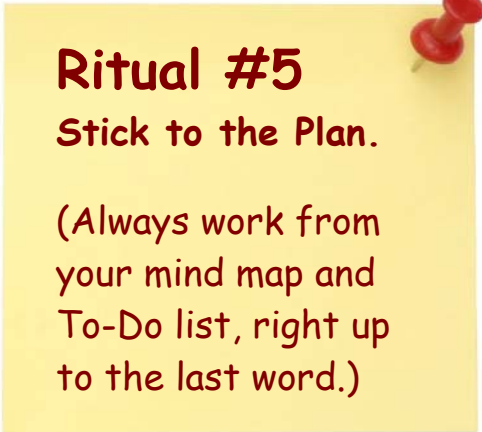
But you should make the necessary changes to your mind map.

Remember, the purpose of all these rituals is to allow you to write without interruption, distraction or disturbance.

You want and need a quiet mind.

So whether you are at the beginning of your assignment, in the middle, or writing the very last sentence - always stick to the plan, even if you have revised it a little along the way.

Reminder:



**Ritual #5**  
**Stick to the Plan.**

(Always work from your mind map and To-Do list, right up to the last word.)

## Summing up...

Before I sum up, let me show you the five rituals again, side by side.

### **Ritual #1**

**Clear your Mind.**

(Put past and future jobs in their place, out of sight and out of mind.)

### **Ritual #2**

**Visualize the Outcome.**

(Use visual planning and scheduling tools to allow yourself to "see" both the outcome and steps along the way.)

### **Ritual #3**

**Get Fully Loaded.**

(Print out and review all the information you need for the job, and allocate a block of time for the first task.)

### **Ritual #4**

**Start Writing.**

(It doesn't matter how you do it, just get those first few words written immediately.)

### **Ritual #5**

**Stick to the Plan.**

(Always work from your mind map and To-Do list, right up to the last word.)

If you follow these five rituals I have no doubt you will see an increase in your productivity and efficiency as a writer.

Some writers will read this and say something like, "Hey, I do just do my work without any rituals or processes. I just sit down and start writing."

Are these writers as productive as those who follow a clear, clean system? I find it hard to believe.

For myself, and many other writers, the biggest problem is the whispering distractions which prey on our concentration and divert us from focusing on the page in front of us.

These rituals are designed to silence those whispers and allow us to do our best work, quickly.

One other thing I will say is that these rituals will work best when you repeat them with every new project.

Rituals become part of your life and take on deep meaning only with constant repetition. The more you use them, and the better the results you achieve as a result, the more they will become an automatic and engrained part of how you work.

I wish you the best of luck with your writing.

Nick Usborne

February, 2008