

*Bitten* TO **WRITTEN**

A woman wearing a bright pink button-down shirt is sitting on a grey, textured surface, possibly a rug or blanket. She is holding a white spiral-bound notebook with her left hand and a gold pen with her right hand, writing on the page. She is wearing a pearl bracelet and a ring on her right hand. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

# 6 TRICKS

TO  
**BREAK  
THROUGH  
BLOCK**

**OVERPOWER  
OVERWHELM &  
KICK PROCRASTINATION  
TO THE CURB**

**BECAUSE THE WRITING BUG NEVER STOPS BITING**

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# Welcome Sassy Scribbler!



I could not be more excited that you've found your way here. Because the writing bug only bites those who can handle the itch. But sometimes that itch is a bitch.

Nothing to do but scratch it. Let's just be careful you don't hurt yourself!

The **six tricks** that follow are going to get you writing, get you out of your own way, get you finally feeling (for the first time, or again) -- like a real WRITER.

Let's do this thing,

*Lela*





READY TO BE A REAL

# WRITER?

The writing bug bit me hard and deep in the spring of 2002. I was fresh into my thirties, living in the alien landscape of Texas, and wrangling two pre-schoolers in a freshly post-9/11 world. The fear of losing myself--simply disappearing--felt completely logical, and at the same time, completely ridiculous.

Before being bitten, I used my voice to figure things out. Literally. I thought out loud and had been fortunate to find friends, who listened and helped me process. However, in finding myself in the new territory of motherhood and Middle America, I had fewer people in my life to listen, and more important lessons to learn. As soon as I started writing, the empty page became my new best friend. She was always available and a perpetually patient listener. The page held my messy thoughts, making sure no bits got lost so that I could rearrange and unscramble them over time.





Writing rocks, but can also feel like an incredibly frivolous and self-absorbed activity. My witty snippets aren't curing anyone's cancer or creating peace in the Middle East. So even though that first bite itched like hell, I didn't start writing regularly for almost a year. Some part of me needed permission to write. My Writing Angel showed me the light on a Tuesday morning at a sensory overloaded Chuck E. Cheese's. She was several steps ahead of me on the path and helped me find my way until I had the courage and experience to go off on my own path.

I'm hoping these tricks will be that encourager for you. Because I believe those of us, the bitten ones, were born writers. We were wired this way from birth. And though we may not figure out we're writers until we're 30, or 40, or 50, or whenever, once we do, those words need to flow!

What follows is the best of what I know to get started, start over, or just give your writing and *yourself* a jump start. Let's unleash the real WRITER within you!





# WRITE SHITTY

**Your first draft: The baddest, the badder, and the bad.**


When I first started writing, I did the thing one should never do. I told my spouse. He immediately developed all kinds of opinions about my writing and writers in general.


“Some people are just really talented,” he said. “They just sit down to write, and it all comes out just right.”

That's 100% bullshit, but my husband is not alone in his misguided assumption. Too many people believe that good writers are born not made. That belief is one of the most common excuses people deploy when they are afraid to hit the page.

In her classic *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott teaches us the first rule of first drafts: Write shitty ones. In my experience, that advice can also apply to second, third, and thirty-third drafts. Because only when we are unafraid to write shitty can we actually approach writing un-shitty.

Maybe there are mutants whose words come out fully formed, properly arranged, and ready for final proofing, but the rest of us require editing. Lots and lots of editing.





The good news is you don't have to produce work that's anywhere close to good with your first draft. In fact, good should never be the goal of any initial draft. The words will flow easier when your primary goal is quantity. Once you've busted out a bunch of shit, you'll have something to work with! Then, and only then, can you go back and figure out what it means, layer on a theme, play with structure, tinker with metaphor, and find the very best words to make your points shine.

Through that process, clarity emerges.


I cannot overstate the euphoria I feel the moment I realize that some piece of terrible writing turns a corner and suddenly becomes a piece that just might make sense in a few more edits. And then a few more edits after that, the words may actually convey the message I'm trying to communicate. If I'm lucky, with a few more edits, I can push the work to the point it carries some emotion. And if I'm especially The Muse's favorite, a few more edits transform the work into a message that inspires a change--of mind, spirit, or action.

It doesn't matter if you're writing a poem, a journal entry, or a chapter of a novel, once you've been bitten, nothing scratches that itch better than the satisfaction of clarity that comes throughout the editing process. But you can't bypass the shit. You have to walk through it to get to the good stuff on the other side.

You might think that writing shitty is easy.

It's not.





Writing shitty is one of the scariest things writers do. Why? Because writing is an intimate act of connection. When you write you are sharing your very personal thoughts in a “public” setting. Quotes (air or otherwise) are so annoying, but I’m using them.

Here's why: Even if you're only sharing your words with your laptop's screen, in a password protected document, putting your thoughts into words makes them concrete in the world. That's public, and the act can make you feel incredibly vulnerable. So naturally, you want anything you're making “public” to be the best it can be. For the slow catcher-on-ers, best is the opposite of shitty.

To be clear, I'm not suggesting you release your shit-ton (couldn't help myself) of shitty writing into the world. There are plenty of others doing that. What I am suggesting is that you get over your fear of bad writing, that you embrace the utter craptastic-ness of the first or thirty-third draft, so that you can get through to the good stuff.

Some writers are afraid to let the shitty come out in their drafts because they worry that they will not be able to transform the shit into something that shines.

I cannot lie, turning shitty first drafts into work you'd want to show a friend takes work. Writers who hope for early excellence are destined to abandon the craft before they've begun to reap the rewards. Any expectation that first attempts can emerge as rich, finished, and insightful work is a sure set up for failure.

That's why my husband is not a writer. And seriously, thank God because the stories he could tell on me. NO, thank you.

But your stories are needed in the world. So go on, now. Write shitty.





# RIP IT UP

## The Writer, the Artist, and the alphabet.

I vividly remember the day. I was sitting in one of those blue pleather airport seats, writing out my anger in thick, black Sharpie. How dare my husband do that *thing*. What was he thinking? Didn't he know how good he had it? I would show him. I didn't need him. In fact, just as soon as I got to the other end of that flight I would, what? What exactly was I going to do?

As I wrote out my impulsive plan to enact revenge for whatever slight my husband had dealt, rational thought returned. Once I wrote through the anger, I ripped up my verbal vent and tossed it in the nearest trash can, where it couldn't damage my husband or my marriage.


This kind of writing therapy is highly effective for working through emotions. That might make you a stronger human, but won't directly support getting words on the page. So let's talk about how ripping up your writing will help you get the right words on the page.

Approaching a project in pieces makes it easier to tackle. When you rip a big project down into manageable bits, words seem to flow magically onto the page. And when I can win one part at a time, I can win a big project.

Eventually.








The ideal tool to break Big Ideas into manageable chunks is a list. Don't dismiss its simplicity. As long as you don't get too focused on the result too soon, a list can be your Best Writing Friend Forever.


Who doesn't need another BWFF?

Your list can be based on anything as long as the items on the list help you get something on paper. For some subjects, natural markers like seasons, or decades, or geography make great lists to get started. Memoirs, travel stories, and novels across genres are often structured around natural markers. Lists of objects and quotes are also great launching points for fiction. The alphabet itself is one of my favorite lists to play with, especially in a memoir.

You will be amazed at the gold that surfaces when you sit down to write 500 words for each letter of the alphabet. I've written about my early childhood in this way, telling stories about the big Apple tree out back, the Band practice my parents held in the living room, and the Cows on the other side of the split rail fence my dad built to keep them out of our driveway. A single letter of the alphabet is the perfect constraint to mine a memory.

By the way, 26 letters is a month's worth of reminiscing just once a day. With practice, you can knock out 500 words in ten minutes. That pace of writing yields 52 pages of raw material. While it might be shitty to start, it's also yours to shape and develop as you choose, AKA ripping it up.





Some people are too worried about getting their words in the right order from the start. Say you want to write a novel. You know it's going to be a story about a woman whose elderly mother comes to live with her just as her teenage son is struggling with a bully at school. You know that at some point this woman loses her job and her husband is diagnosed with prostate cancer. You're also toying with the idea of a flood that wipes out the family's home because it's true, you must torture your characters.

No one wants to read about how great and easy someone else's life is.

You know a lot of things need to happen in this novel. So make a humble list of all the things you know right now, and start working through those scenes one-by-one, moment-by-moment. You can put them in order and rip them up later. That's called editing, and that's where the art is.

Prolific author of epic novels, James Michener said, "I'm not a very good writer, but I'm an excellent rewriter."

Good stories rely on two critical roles: the Writer and the Artist. The Writer must churn out words, shitty or shiny. Once she's done her job, the Artist must come along and rewrite. She must apply her craft to make the work readable and remarkable. This craft, this rewriting or editing, is nothing more than ripping up your writing and putting it back together. And it's the only way to make all that shitty writing into something lovely.

But why can't our stories come out right the first time?





So annoying right? Who has time for all this ripping, then writing, then rewriting? Sorry, bitten friend, you're doomed to this cycle. Here's why:

In our heads, the words, stories, and quirky details are all fully formed. They exist simultaneously, as a multi-dimensional experience our imagination pieces together. Vivid memories, sensory understanding, and a lifetime's worth of knowledge combine to create a rich, full world.

The page is different. On the page, stories emerge one word at a time. In trying to translate that whole world of nuance and detail inside our heads onto the page, things get lost, missed, and misplaced. Sometimes the thoughts show up are in precisely the order that we intended. Everything made sense before we made it real with words and punctuation. That's why the Artist always has to show up and shred.

Go forth, Sassy Scribbler. Get out there and RIP IT UP.







# INHABIT THE MOMENT

Your junk drawer of sensory detail and emotion.

When I learned how to inhabit the moment, my writing got better, stronger, and easier. Almost overnight. It takes practice to focus on a single moment, to really be in it and notice everything about it, but once you master this technique, you can write anything.

Singular focus makes the most compelling stories. We already talked about that whole world up there inside your head. Communicating it to someone else can take a lot of words. That's where the concept of time can trip us up. Moments are speeding by us all the time, and unless you're an uber-enlightened yogi sitting on a rock somewhere, you're not fully inhabiting each moment. Even if you were, not every moment is remarkable as it relates to whatever story you're trying to tell at any given time.





When you write a single moment, you want to isolate it in time, and then, expand time. Doing this allows you to fully express everything about that single instant. It's like the slow motion montage in a movie that helps you fully take in the significance of what's happening.


The moments we choose to illustrate our stories must be worthy. They must be incredible in some way. That's not to say they can't be very ordinary moments. I write about the mundane, everyday things that most people don't think twice about. But I'm using these moments in service to something larger, something I learned or noticed, or something that made me laugh. I once wrote a story about my kitchen junk drawer, and I've sold it two dozen times because I launched it off one mind-blowing moment when I realized my family wasn't so different from other families.

The story about my junk drawer centers on the moment in my childhood when I first learned that other people had junk drawers. I was at a friend's house when her mother opened up a kitchen drawer and there were the same matchbooks, padlocks, broken pencils, rubber bands, and dried up nail polishes that lived in my house, too.

That moment is all about how my ten-year-old self took in that revelation, realizing that our family wasn't so different after all, and how that made me feel better about our kitchen junk. Not to mention the rest of our junk. The essay then explores the territory of my perfectionism and the fact that the junk drawer remains a constant in my life. We've all got our messes, but we're all okay, in part because we're able to contain them. Sometimes in the drawer in the kitchen.

But that messy stuff is never too far away.






In that essay, I'm covering universal themes of connection and isolation. That moment with the junk drawer is just a concrete example to help me tell a larger story, and it only works because I single out that split-second in time where I see the innards of the drawer at my friend's house. The reader feels all the emotions with me and sees not just that drawer, but all the kitchen junk I've experienced to that point, and all it represents.

Of course, you don't inhabit every moment in your story. You dive into the ones that count-- you live there, tease every bit of sensory detail and emotion out of them, and then, race through the boring parts.

So practice writing one moment at a time. Infuse each one with every memory, emotion, and sensory detail that make the moment special. Don't believe me? Pick a moment. Make it shine. I dare you.





# TIME YOUR WRITING

**You can do anything for five minutes.**


What is this? Culinary school? What does a timer have to do with writing?

Here's the truth about writers: Every last one that I know does not so much enjoy writing as much as she enjoys having written. Words on the page are an accomplishment, evidence of the power of your will over the power of your procrastination. When your words make it to the page, the little angel on your shoulder knocks off the little devil on the other side.

Some of us need to produce more shitty words than others to get enough that will be any good after the ripping up, pruning, and rearranging. I need lots and lots of words, and I face a similar crisis just about any time I sit down to wiggle my words down from my brain and out through my fingertips.

They want to get stuck.






To get unstuck I have to apply effort. I can only do that for so long before I need a break. Which is why I use a timer almost every time I write a draft. Editing is easier for me. I can do that for hours, but unless I'm recording events as they occurred or as I've already rearranged them in my head, I need a timer to get initial draft onto the page.

A timer allows me to be fully invested in the moment. Just letting my thoughts and words flow for as long as that timer is on is the easiest way for me to get the closest to my talking voice. That's not exactly the way the final writing will come out, but it's where my best voice has the best chance to hit the page. For me, that kind of focus is hard, and having the light at the end of the writing tunnel is the trick my brain needs to stay on task.

I only have this 10 minutes, or 20 minutes, or 5 minutes. I've got to get as much as I can onto the page in that time. I've gotten some of my best material in five-minute writing sessions.

I always include very short, free writing sessions in my in-person workshops, and I like them so much I built an entire writing program out of the humble five-minute prompt. If you don't think it will work for you, I dare you to try it. And if you doubt that a five-minute writing session can yield anything of substance, send me what you wrote and I'll show you how to apply it to your larger project, or let it shine in all of its beautiful brevity.

So whip out your phone and set the timer. Don't judge, just scribble. And for just a little while, let your story have its way with you.







# EXTINGUISH YOUR EGO

**Don't let your inner voice of doom hold your words hostage.**

Ooooooh, this one is hard.


Sometimes the timer isn't enough to push your ego aside. The ego is the part of you that needs to control everything, preserve itself, and look good at all costs. But the better you get and getting your alter-self out of the way, the better artist you will become.

And let's talk about Artists for a minute.

I don't think of myself as an Artist despite the tens of thousands of words I've put together to express ideas, despite the thousands of people who've read them, and despite the handful of awards I received for their quality. That's weird. But my ego tells me Artist is a label for someone else.

Clearly, I've got to get that little ego asshole out of my head if I'm ever going to create anything.





I don't know about yours, but my ego likes things buttoned up, orderly, and ready for the world. That's not how creativity works. Creativity is a hot mess. It's mascara running down your face, doing the walk of shame with sandals in your hand, and eating a greasy cheeseburger for breakfast because damn, you had fun last night. Creativity can be ugly and scary and dirty. Creativity makes me feel so dumb sometimes because my ideas come out all misformed and drippy and bland.

So, how do you extinguish your ego?

Some have opted for drugs and alcohol, and I have to say I don't know how they do it. Two vodka tonics and all I want to do is talk to every person in the room, which ironically is the very opposite of getting words onto the page. Some like to use music, or the ambient noise of public places, to distract the ego. Writing in the third person can provide a distance that works wonders when writing a memoir.

The only way I'm able to push my ego out of the way long enough to get anything done is to go non-stop, fast and furious, crowding out my inner voice of doom.

When I get stuck, I have to remind myself that I don't have to use any of what I'm writing in that moment. I can kill all my darlings anytime I want. And I can go back and add context and connective tissue and meaning and themes and layers upon layers of detail if I want.

My ego wants all that stuff to come out perfect on the first pass. And I bet yours does too.

Crush it. Kill it. Extinguish it.





# REPEAT


No rinse required.

Malcolm Gladwell says you have to do something for 10,000 hours to get good at it. That's equivalent to five years working full-time at a job. At my writing rate, the quick and dirty rate, I could get out about 1,500 words in an hour.

According to Gladwell, I'd need to write 15,000,000 words to get to the good ones. I'm probably not quite there yet, but there's a freedom in having such a ridiculously lofty goal. I get closer every time I sit down at the keyboard. Writing takes practice. And just because my greatest work is ahead of me, that doesn't mean that what I'm doing along the way is total crap.

Writers repeat.

They repeat their writing and practice as often as works for them. And no, that doesn't mean you have to write every day to call yourself a writer. Write at the pace that feels good, but also write at a pace that is a bit of a challenge. Commit to knocking out those words because even the worst of them contribute to your 15 million.





Writers also repeat topics, themes, and cover the same territory over and over. Beginning writers sometimes feel if they've touched on a subject once that they're done. To the contrary. The things that come back to you over and over might be the things you need to dig into and explore deeply.


Finally, writers get to repeat their lives.

Anais Nin wrote, "We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospect."

Tasting life twice is one of the especially sweet gifts of writing.

Commit to repetition and call yourself a writer.





**WRITE SHITTY**  
**RIP IT UP**  
**INHABIT THE MOMENT**  
**TIME YOUR WRITING**  
**EXTINGUISH YOUR EGO**  
**REPEAT**

See what I did there? These six tricks are all it takes to be a real WRITER.

I hope these tricks have shown you a new way to look at writing. I hope they've inspired you to sit with the page for just a few minutes as often as you can. I hope they have encouraged you that writing isn't just for a select few.

Writing is for all of us, and we can all be successful storytellers.

Ready to write on a more regular basis? Join Write Clique. You'll discover how easy it is to carve out five minutes during your busy day to write, thanks to fresh and sassy prompts.

Ready to make a more significant commitment to expand your influence and authority through creating written assets? Have a larger writing project you need help developing or completing? Take a look at my Portfolio coaching experience ([leladavidson.com/Portfolio](http://leladavidson.com/Portfolio)) and let's chat.

Or you can always drop me a line at [lela@leladavidson](mailto:lela@leladavidson).





# ABOUT LELA

Lela Davidson is the award-winning author of *Blacklisted from the PTA*, *Who Peed on My Yoga Mat?*, and *Faking Balance: Adventures in Work and Life*. She created Portfolio to help women expand their influence and authority, and many of her coaching clients have non-fiction books in development. Lela has been a freelance journalist and commentator for NBC News/TODAY Moms, iVillage, and The Huffington Post. She speaks nationally on media, marketing, women in leadership, and faking work-life balance.

Her humorous, inspirational essays are featured in family and parenting magazines throughout North America and in *Chicken Soup for the Soul: New Moms*. Her book marketing advice is featured in *Writer's Digest*.

As seen in:



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