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Part 1

Your Writing Wings: Surveying the Book-Writing Terrain



Chapter 1

Rose to Ash

IMAGINE YOU WANT A PERFECT ROSE MORE THAN ANYTHING in the world.

You get your rose.

There will never be another rose this perfect.

You want to keep this fresh perfect rose forever. It's almost too perfect to look at now. You want to save it so you can look at it later, always.

You don't want to do anything to lose this rose.

So you put it in a safe. Lock it up.

A year later, you decide it's time to look at your perfect rose.

You open the safe.

You look inside.

Ash.

The rose has turned to ash.

You are devastated. You didn't spend much time looking at it when it was fresh because you were saving it, saving it for now. And it's gone.

Ideas in writing work the same way.

One writer I know, Brandon, is dying to write what he calls his magnum opus, a fantasy novel that brings all of his ideas together in one stunning story. But he feels stuck as a writer, completely blocked, and he has trouble starting even small pieces. Many of his friends have told him he needs to write his magnificent book and risk failure in order to

save it. The longer he sits on his project, the more blocked Brandon will become.

But he won't start writing.

Brandon works at a flower shop during the day. He lives with his parents—he has the time and the money to write. He says he wants to hone his technique on smaller pieces, shorter fantasy stories. He keeps a journal. He jots down his ideas. He *thinks* about his book.

No good.

When most writers try to write down their *ideas* for stories, they usually only capture a tiny bit of the work from a faraway, not creative place in their minds. They keep the story itself locked away in a safe. Fresh and perfect. *Idealized* for all eternity.

Do not save up ideas. Do not write about the work from a distance. Instead of writing notes about an idea like *story about babysitter*, write: *Dana said, "You didn't pay me last time, either, Heather." And she smacked that gum which seemed to be a weird striped gum, green and purple, both.*

Write down what you hear. Write down what you see. These are the tiny squares of fabric that become the quilt that is the piece.

Transition out of ideas and into *images*.

You will be amazed at the results you get when you start doing this, working like a real writer.

Writers work in terms of images. That means: writing it down, working it up. You can't put images and story ideas and creative notions away for later. They will not be there. Don't keep your *horse novel idea* in the safe. When you sit down to write your novel's first sentence, nothing will come.

Nothing will be there.

The idea will have turned to ash.

Never again say, "I have an idea for a book." Don't be like the man I met in a hotel hot tub in Florida when I was speaking at a writing conference. He said, "I have ideas for five books. Do you know what software I should get?"

He was not a writer attending the conference. He was with his girlfriend. He had her. And a real estate license. And he had ideas.

"Software?" I said.

"Yeah. You know. The software makes out the structure and you fill it in. They have programs. Do you know a good one?"

You're the program, baby, I did not say.

It's comfortable, satisfying, and fear reducing, like a baby pacifier, to have ideas for books. Book ideas are reassuring and interesting, like imaginary friends.

The idea stage. It's a stage that writers who want to sustain writing lives must pass through very quickly, very firmly, with confidence. Many writers get stuck in ideas, sucked in.

Not you.

It's time to cultivate real relationships with other working writers and with your own working manuscript.

The best way to purge yourself of the comforting fantasy of the idea stage is to do one very important thing: Write.

Got an idea?

WRITE.

Don't think. Don't harbor. Don't daydream.

Just write it down.

That's the difference between writers and wannabes,

between writers and regular citizens. Writers make the effort, they take the plunge.

Writers write things down.

There's a productive alchemy with words on paper: Ideas in head = rose to ash. Words on paper = book germinating, piece developing.

Words on paper are real.

Reverse your field. If you spend 90 percent of your creative energy dreaming of a book and dreaming of the writing life, and only 10 percent of your time actually writing, you need to flip it around.

Give 90 percent of your energy to the words on the page.

Writing a book is accomplished by writing, chapter after chapter after chapter.

ON YOUR PAGE: *Exercise 1*

Pretend you've just been abducted by aliens. They will return you to Earth and your family (if you want to be returned), but first they insist you write a book. They're giving you ten minutes, and if you do not comply, they will blow up the planet. All of mankind depends on you writing the book. Set your timer.

Don't write *about* the book.

Write the book.

Type fast. Write the part that comes to you first—it doesn't matter if it is not the beginning.

If it is your horse novel, just do the part where the horse is leaping with the poor tuberculosis girl, over the stream, racing through the woods. Just write that part.

Go! Go! Go!

Now.

Whew! You got a piece of your book out of your head where you were killing it and into the light where it may have a chance to survive.

Repeat.

Hit on another part of the same book, or do a whole new one.

Ten minutes.

In this way, you make a bouquet of (imperfect) roses. You no longer put a rose in a safe. You know what to do with these fresh flowers: Give them water. Feed them.

Pick one.

Write your book every day.