

# Writing Begins With Forgiveness: Why One of the Most Common Pieces of Writing Advice Is Wrong

by daniel José older



Writing advice blogs say it. Your favorite writers say it. **MFA** programs say it.

Write every single day.

It's one of the most common pieces of writing advice and it's wildly off base. I get it: The idea is to stay on your grind no matter what, don't get discouraged, don't slow down even when the muse isn't cooperating and non-writing life tugs at your sleeve. In this convoluted, simplified version of the truly complex nature of creativity, missing a day is tantamount to giving up, the gateway drug to joining the masses of non-writing slouches.

Nonsense.

Here's what stops more people from writing than anything else: shame. That creeping, nagging sense of 'should be,' 'should have been,' and 'if only I had...' Shame lives in the body, it clenches our muscles when we sit at the keyboard, takes up valuable mental space with useless, repetitive conversations. Shame, and the resulting paralysis, are what happen when the whole world drills into you that you should be writing every day and you're not.

Every writer has their rhythm. It seems basic, but clearly it must be said: There is no one way. Finding our path through the complex landscape of craft, process, and different versions of success is a deeply personal, often painful journey. It is a very real example of making the road by walking. Mentors and fellow travelers can point you towards new possibilities, challenge you and expand your imagination, but no one can tell you how to manage your writing process. I've been writing steadily since 2009 and I'm still figuring mine out. I probably will be for the rest of my life. It's a growing, organic, frustrating, inspiring, messy adventure, and it's all mine.

Two years ago, while I was finishing *Half-Resurrection Blues* and *Shadowshaper*, I was also in grad school, editing Long Hidden, working full time on a 911 ambulance, and teaching a group of teenage girls. And those are the things that go easily on paper. I was also being a boyfriend, son, friend, god brother, mentor, and living, breathing, loving, healing human being. None of which can be simply given up because I'd taken on the responsibility of writing.

You can be damn sure I wasn't writing every day.

I got it all done because I found my flow and I trusted it. Back when I first started writing *Half-Resurrection Blues* and I wasn't doing so many other things, I would write on the stretcher in the back of the bus, literally between heart attack patients and gunshot victims. My life changed, my flow changed with it. When I was on the ambulance full time, I didn't even consider writing anything that didn't fit in 140 character spurts on days I worked. Writing was simply off the table.

On my off days, I'd get up as early as I did when I had to be clock in somewhere. I'd get my ass into the chair by nine or ten and try to knock out my first thousand words by lunch. Some days, I didn't. Other days, I'd get all two thousand done by eleven AM.

And on other days, I didn't write a single word. Yes, it's true. Why? Sometimes, it's because I was busy being alive. Other times, it's because the story I was working on simply wasn't ready to be written yet. As writer((also: my wife)) Nastassian Brandon puts it: "if you're writing for the sake of writing and not listening to the moments when your mind and body call out for you to take a break, walk away and then return to the drawing board with new eyes, you're doing yourself a disservice." And that's it exactly. I've spent many anxious, fidgety hours in front of the blank screen, doing nothing but being mad at myself. Finally I figured out that brainstorming is part of writing too, and it doesn't thrive when the brain and body are constricted. So I take walks, and in walking, the story flows, the ideas stop cowering in the corners of my mind, shoved to the side by the shame of not writing.

Tied up in this mandate to write every day is the question of who is and isn't a writer. The same institutions and writing gurus that demand you adhere to a schedule that isn't yours will insist on delineating what makes a real writer. At my MFA graduation, the speaker informed us that we were all writers now and I just shook my head. We'd been writers, all of us, long before we set foot in those hallowed halls. We're writers because we write. No MFA, no book contract, no blurb or byline changes that.

So if writing every day is how you keep your rhythm tight, by all means, rock on. If it's not, then please don't fall prey to the chorus of "should bes" and "If onlys." Particularly for writers who aren't straight, cis, able-bodied, white men, shame and the sense that we don't belong, don't deserve to sit at this table, have our voices heard, can permeate the process. Nothing will hinder a writer more than this. Anaïs Nin called shame the lie someone told you about yourself. Don't let a lie jack up your flow.

We read a lot about different writers' eccentric processes – but what about those crucial moments before we put pen to paper? For me, writing always begins with self-forgiveness. I don't sit down and rush headlong into the blank page. I make coffee. I put on a song I like. I drink the coffee, listen to the song. I don't write. Beginning with forgiveness revolutionizes the writing process, returns it being to a journey of creativity rather than an exercise in self-agellation. I forgive myself for not sitting down to write sooner, for taking yesterday off, for living my life. That shame? I release it. My body unclenches; a new lightness takes over once that burden has floated off. There is room, now, for story, idea, life.

I put my hands on the keyboard and begin.

## **Published by Daniel José Older**

Daniel José Older is the New York Times bestselling author of the Bone Street Rumba urban fantasy series from Penguin's Roc Books and the Young Adult novel Shadowshaper (Scholastic's Arthur A. Levine Books, 2015), which was nominated for the Kirkus Prize in Young Readers' Literature, the Norton Award and the Locus Award. He co-edited the Locus and World Fantasy nominated anthology Long Hidden: Speculative Fiction from the Margins of History. His short stories and essays have appeared in the Guardian, NPR, Tor.com, Salon, BuzzFeed, Fireside Fiction, the New Haven Review, PANK, Apex and Strange Horizons and the anthologies The Fire This Time and Mothership: Tales Of Afrofuturism And Beyond. Daniel has been a teaching artist for more than ten years. You can find his thoughts on writing, read dispatches from his decade-long career as an NYC paramedic and hear his music at [danieljoseolder.net](http://danieljoseolder.net), on YouTube and @djolder on Twitter.

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