



EVERYDAY WRITING

Tips and prompts
to fit your regularly
scheduled life



MIDGE RAYMOND

Everyday Writing

*Tips and prompts to fit your
regularly scheduled life*

Midge Raymond



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When life gets in the way of your writing...

I wrote this book for people like me. For those who have a passion for writing but never quite enough time. For writers who want to make progress on their stories and novels while continuing to make ends meet. For people who want to live the writer's life but can only spare a few minutes a day.

You don't need to quit your day job in order to be a writer; you don't need to put off having children or wait until retirement to start your novel. You need to become an *Everyday Writer*, which means seeing the world as a writer does even when you may not have the time to get the words on the page.

Whether you're a writer with a day job, a stay-at-home-parent, or a freelancer, finding time for creative work is always a challenge. The paid work comes first, not to mention the family, the bills, the pets, the home repairs, and everything else that

needs doing. And then, when you finally do carve out time to write, suddenly even the most tedious of chores can seem so much more inviting than the blank page. (At least, this is what happens to me.)

It feels like sacrilege to say that I don't write every single day, but it's true. And that doesn't mean I'm not still a writer; as you'll see in the following chapters, being a writer involves far more than sitting down somewhere and typing.

While I'm the first to agree that a daily writing practice can be invaluable, I don't subscribe to the notion that if we don't sit down to write every day, we'll never accomplish anything—and yet writers are often told just that, in various ways. Being an Everyday Writer is not about putting daily words on a page but about seeing the world as a writer and recognizing the myriad ways in which your everyday life informs your work. And this, in turn, *will* put words on the page.

Let's face it—we can't all be full-time creative writers, with quiet rooms of our own overlooking the ocean or the mountains. But we *can* find room to write in our everyday lives, from paying more attention to our surroundings to carving out writing weekends to going on an annual retreat. We need to find different ways to create both mental and physical space for our work.

What is everyday writing?

Every writer has his or her own ideal routine; you simply need to discover yours. You don't need to give up the day job to be a writer—in fact, I highly recommend embracing it. For one, there's a lot of fantastic material there; two, it provides a sense of structure that many of us feel a little lost without. I find that the more time I have, the more time I waste, so being busy actually helps motivate me to fit in writing time. Over the years, I've known many writers, myself included, who have left their jobs to write, only to watch the year (or years) go by without writing much at all.

Meanwhile, we can keep in mind that even the most famous and successful writers started out with day jobs, squeezing in their writing whenever and wherever they could. Toni Morrison worked in publishing. Stephen King worked in a laundry and taught English. Raymond Carver was a farm worker, delivery boy, and night janitor. William Carlos Williams was a pediatrician. Scott Turow

was (and still is) an attorney.

Everyday writing is about getting it done, no matter how it happens and no matter how long it takes. If you're motivated, you can and will fit in your writing. The when and where isn't what's important. What matters is that you think like a writer—which in turn makes it impossible not to write.

So you'll need to create a schedule that works for you, whether it's getting up two hours before the kids, stopping at the library for an hour after work, or spending weekend mornings on your writing. It doesn't have to be every single day, and, like an exercise regimen, it can be good to do something a little different each time. But do build some writing time into your life until it becomes a habit that feels both necessary and good. And, more important, you'll need to adopt the identity of Writer, which this book aims to help you achieve—and again, once you're there, you'll find that you're unable *not* to make the time to write.

In all my years of teaching, one of the questions that comes up most often is what to do about writer's block. The scenario: You've set aside time to write; you've got one hour until the kids get up; you're sitting there, and absolutely nothing is happening. This is where the prompts come in.

How to be an everyday writer (without writing every day)

This book is divided into two parts. The first offers tips for helping you step into the role of Writer and to maintain that identity from here forward, no matter what other hats you may also wear in your life. The second offers more than 150 writing exercises, from five-minute prompts you can do on your busiest days to longer prompts you can do on a writing retreat—and everything in between.

The prompts in this book are for all writers, whether you're a novelist, memoirist, or poet, and they can be written from your own personal experience, from the point of view of one of your fictional characters, or even from the POV of a real character from your own life (a family member, a friend, a pet, etc.). For the most part, I use the *you* voice here, but always feel free to take an exercise in any direction you'd like—there are absolutely no rules. The longer prompts tend to be more generative in nature, but

they are all geared toward jump-starting your work, whether by prompting new memories, developing a new character, or resolving an issue in a scene or story.

Keep in mind that you can come back to these prompts again and again—if you get bogged down in a story, take a prompt and apply it to a key character in that scene; if you need a break from your novel, try one of these prompts as an exercise in personal writing. Writing exercises can help our writing in ways we don't know until we do them. They can, for instance, allow our minds to retreat from the puzzle of a current project and wander a bit, perhaps leading us back to the puzzle from a different angle and getting us closer to a solution. Writing prompts can help us discover new material for an old piece, or new material for a new piece—or they can help inform whatever it is we're working on. Or, sometimes best of all, they can take us places we never knew existed, and lead us right into the next poem or story or novel.

Once, in response to one of my e-newsletter's writing prompts (*Describe what's on your bedside table. And why.*), a writer told me she didn't actually do the exercise, but she did clean up her bedside table. I loved that—it's progress of a different sort, but who's to

say that having a clean bedside table can't lead to clearer thoughts and better dreams? And, perhaps by extension, more vivid writing.

Life and Writing need not be mutually exclusive—at least not all the time. Almost everything you do, and every place you go, can lead to a story idea or a poem. The prompts in this book will offer you exercises to build upon, whether you're in your writing space looking for inspiration or in line at the post office looking for distraction. This book is designed to help you develop these skills—the skills of an everyday writer—in which you'll see the world in a way less ordinary, and you'll be creating far more, and more often, than you imagined.

Part 1:
Becoming an
everyday writer

Tips for creating a writing life

Whether you're just beginning or have been writing for years, it's always helpful to think about your life, your writing space, your routines—and to assess how well they're working for you.

If all is going well and you feel like a happy, productive writer, you're all set.

If not, take this opportunity to shake things up.

I'm always in the process of shaking things up. Thanks to a busy work schedule, I still don't have a set time of day to write, even when I'm in the middle of a project. In a way, this is a good thing: When I'm really into something, I never want to limit my writing to some predetermined amount of time. But when I'm in a more challenging phase—say, that horrible first-draft stage—I have to work harder to stay inspired.

So what I do to keep a project going is set goals

rather than dates and times. This way, I can be flexible about when and where I write but still get the work done. Some days, I'm able to devote four hours to writing; other days, I'm lucky to write for half an hour. When I find myself blocked, I'll do writing prompts or even a little research, which may not result in words on the page but nevertheless keeps the project moving forward. If I find that I simply can't stare at the computer any longer, I'll take a notebook somewhere—and the change in perspective is almost always illuminating.

Here are a few tips for creating—and maintaining—your own writing life.

Outline your goals.

As someone who has to grab snippets of time where she can, I find it helpful to look at my goals in terms of long-term, short-term, and immediate. If, for example, you want to write a novel, that's definitely a long-term goal—so how will you break it up into manageable pieces? This is where short-term and immediate goals come in—and unless you've been doing this for a while and know your writing self well, you may have to experiment. So, for example, you might create a short-term goal of writing a chapter a month, and an immediate goal of writing

500 words a day, three days a week. Figure out what works best with your schedule, and take baby steps toward your larger goal. Always remain open to revising your schedule, which will allow you to keep going rather than get overwhelmed and give up.

Know that you can write anywhere.

I wrote my first published short story in a tiny corner of a railroad flat in New York City. When I moved to an even smaller apartment after that (which I didn't think was possible), I wrote at university libraries. Recently I've been writing in a sun-drenched studio with a marvelous view. And you know what? The space doesn't matter one bit; the struggles are the same, and the work either gets done or it doesn't. All you need to do is find a corner of the world to call your writing space. Even if you don't have enough room at home (and you'd be surprised by how little you need), you can find it somewhere.

Be observant.

As a fiction writer with a journalism background, I've always thought of myself as a keen observer. (Don't we all?) Then one evening my illusion was shattered. I was sitting with several people in a park

near a duck pond. We were all watching the ducks, as well as the two little kids standing near the edge—then we looked up to see three young men passing by. The men were walking off the designated path, which is probably what got our attention—and moments later, my husband said, “I wonder what he was doing with that gun?”

And I said, “What gun?”

My husband, who will insist we’re out of peanut butter while staring into a pantry with three jars of it right in front of him, was very pleased to have caught something I’d missed (this rarely happens). And for once, his eyes weren’t deceiving him; someone else had seen exactly what he had: One of the young men who’d passed by was carrying a large handgun on a holster, right out in the open.

And all I remembered was that one of the guys wore a green T-shirt.

Realizing I’m not nearly as observant as I think I am was a huge wake-up call, and it has inspired me to keep my eyes and ears open just a bit more than I think I need to. I still probably miss quite a lot, though I hope not nearly as much as I missed that day in the park. Always remind yourself that some of the best material—whether for a new story idea

or a finely wrought description—comes to us when we’re paying attention.

Make your writing space a special one.

Wherever your writing space is, make it a place you want to be—and one you want to keep returning to. If you’re writing in the tiniest corner of your kitchen table, for example, you might surround yourself with books to block the view of the blender. If you’re in a cubby at the library, bring headphones to tune out noise, or leave the laptop at home and write by hand, which can be very freeing. Do what you can in order to view your writing time as a treat rather than a chore.

Set your own rules and ask others to respect them.

I still remember the first time I phoned my friend Judy Reeves and got her voice mail, which told me, “If you’re calling before 1:00 p.m., this is my writing time. I’ll get back to you after 1:00.” This was a revelation to me at the time, and I’ve since done my best to follow her wonderful example. Ask the people in your life to take your writing time as seriously as you do. Remember that you don’t have

to be published to be a legitimate writer; you don't have to explain or prove yourself in any way. Just ask that your writing time is respected, and be firm about it.

Be flexible.

Whether you've set aside time in the early hours of the morning or the late hours of the night, eventually you're likely to be struck with some form of writer's block. You can use this time to get some extra sleep (the subconscious can do wonders), or simply to do something else that's related, even tangentially, to your work. Research. Read. Watch a film set in the era in which your novel takes place. Listen to the type of music your character listens to. Even these little things can help create a mood that will inspire you and help get you back into the work (see the section **How to write when you're not really writing** for more on this).

Be patient.

Be ready to take the long view toward your work. While we'd all love to have our writing flow smoothly into perfectly polished drafts—not to mention to have a project snapped up by the first editor

who reads it—this rarely happens. The process of producing good writing is laborious (and sometimes tedious), and there are no shortcuts. Embrace the fact that you're not likely to churn out a perfect story or poem on the first try—and you'll enjoy it that much more simply by not fighting it. This doesn't mean giving yourself permission to procrastinate or to leave work unfinished; it simply means respecting the process. Same goes for publication, which also takes time; see below.

Be persistent.

From Margaret Mitchell (whose best-selling, Pulitzer Prize-winning *Gone with the Wind* was rejected by more than three dozen publishers) to J. K. Rowling (who went through a year of submissions and a dozen rejections before Harry Potter eventually made her the world's first billionaire writer), published authors know that success doesn't come easily or quickly. If you're trying to get a short story published, you'll discover that the top-tier literary magazines publish less than 1 percent of the submissions they receive. It's tough out there, and dedication and persistence may be among the most important traits a writer can have. Try to embrace rejection, and even celebrate it, as a necessary (and temporary) obstacle on the road to becoming a published author. I've had stories

accepted after more than fifty rejections (yes, fifty—that wasn't a typo), and I had one story rejected by more than forty magazines before it was accepted, published, and nominated for a Pushcart Prize. The lesson is, always, don't give up. Ever. (See **Accepting rejection** for more on this lovely topic.)

Carry a notebook.

You probably already do—but if not, start now. My favorite ideas have come to me in random places, and if I hadn't written them down, they'd have been lost forever. And carrying a notebook is also a great reminder that no matter where you are, you're a writer.

About the author



Midge Raymond has been a writer, editor, and teacher for more than twenty years and has been a creativity coach for more than a decade. She has created writing prompts for classes and workshops in settings from university classrooms to homeless shelters. Midge has taught at Boston University, Grub Street Writers, San Diego Writers, and Richard Hugo House, among others.

Midge's short story collection, *Forgetting English*, received the Spokane Prize for Short Fiction. Originally published by Eastern Washington University Press, the book has been reissued in an expanded edition by Press 53. Her stories

have appeared in numerous literary journals and magazines—among them *TriQuarterly*, *American Literary Review*, *Bellingham Review*, *Indiana Review*, *North American Review*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, the *Los Angeles Times* magazine, and many others—and have received several Pushcart Prize nominations.

Midge writes about the writing life for such publications as *The Writer* as well as on her blog, **Remembering English** (www.midgeraymond.com/blog), which features a new writing prompt every week. For more information, visit Midge online at www.MidgeRaymond.com.

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