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SUPPORT FOR SUMMER WRITERS

Support for Summer Writers

Meet Your Bodyguard

June 21, 2010

By [Kerry Ann Rockquemore](#)

This summer, I'm dedicated to walking alongside all of you who are tackling big writing projects, trying to establish new writing routines, and needing to experience explosive productivity. If you've been following this column so far, you have a clear [summer plan](#) that you've discussed with your mentors and you have created some form of [writing support and accountability](#). By now, you're very likely facing a new challenge: the intense difficulty of *actually writing every day*. Unlike the academic year, when we can attribute any lack of daily progress to teaching and service, summer lays bare the reality that daily writing brings up all of our *stuff*. This week, I want to describe what happens to many people when they engage in daily writing and give that "stuff" a name and a face.

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Identify Your Resistance

It's an odd situation, isn't it? You've been waiting all year for the summer so you can have the time, space and energy for your writing. You've been fantasizing and yearning for three months of quiet and solitude so you can finally finish your Big Unfinished Project. You planned to write every day and maybe even imagined losing track of time while immersed in your writing projects. And yet, when you actually sit down to write, all of a sudden you experience an unquenchable desire to _____ (fold your laundry, check your e-mail, organize your pens), or you suddenly realize you need to read one more _____ (book, article, report) *before* you can start writing, or _____ (insert seemingly urgent crisis) appears and distracts you, or maybe you find yourself gazing out the window and realize that life is too _____ (short, painful, unpredictable) to spend a sunny day inside writing. In short, procrastination, avoidance, and denial arise to distract and derail you.

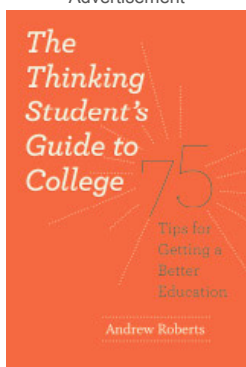
Why is it that we so often find ourselves *wanting* to write, but then end up *not writing at all*? Most academic writers I know genuinely want to share their ideas and findings, and also need to complete writing projects in order to finish their degree, get a job, and/or obtain tenure. And yet, whenever we put our butt in a chair to write, along comes our resistance! Barbara Sher describes resistance (when you want to do something, but you just can't seem to do it) as an innately human defense mechanism that is uniquely designed to protect us from doing anything dangerous. In other words, our resistance is like an internal bodyguard that rises up to keep us from any risky situation.

Having an internal bodyguard is mostly a good thing! On one hand, it keeps us from engaging in potentially harmful activities. On the other hand, our inner-bodyguard can't tell the difference between *physical* danger and *emotional* danger so he gets activated whether we are standing at the edge of a cliff or sitting down to write a book. Both *feel* dangerous and raise anxiety. In response, our bodyguard leaps into action to stop us from engaging in this activity in the form of procrastination, avoidance, and/or denial. He will do whatever it takes to stop us from jumping off that cliff, or engaging in what feels (for many of us) like an equally dangerous act: the production of knowledge.

Fear Drives Resistance

Wherever there's resistance, there's fear underneath it. So it might be helpful to ask yourself: *When I sit in front of the computer to write, what fears emerge?* It may be fear of success, fear of failure, fear of being publicly judged, fear of not being good enough, fear of being revealed as

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an impostor, fear of speaking truth to power, or fear that writing about other people's pain will trigger your own. There's no need to analyze or judge these fears, just to identify them, because knowing what you're afraid of will help you to design strategies to maneuver around them.

Over the next few weeks, I'm going to go into greater depth about the different types of resistance that are common among academic writers for the purpose of suggesting a broad array of tips, tricks, and strategies you can use whenever your bodyguard shows up for duty. If you keep in mind that he can't quite tell the difference between real and perceived danger and that he genuinely wants to do his job of protecting you, then you will quickly realize that the trick to sneaking around your resistance is to keep your inner bodyguard in a nice, comfortable, and relaxed state. For this week, it's enough to imagine your resistance as a big bodyguard that's always ready to protect you, identify when he's present and what he's up to, and then look him in the eye, shake hands, and get acquainted.

Personally, I love the idea that my resistance is really my very own built-in bodyguard at work! First of all, it brings me a sense of compassion and understanding towards the procrastination, avoidance, and denial I experience when I sit down to write every morning. Each time I feel an irresistible urge to check Facebook, a sense I can't write until I color-code my sock drawer, or suddenly imagine my current writing would be better if I read someone else's book first, I can recognize that resistance as my bodyguard at work. Secondly, it frees me from the debilitating idea that if I could just fix one of my many personal flaws, then I would be free of any resistance to writing. There's no sense in believing that *if only* I were more disciplined, more motivated, and more focused, writing would be quick, easy and enjoyable. That's just not how it works. And finally, it's helpful to me to understand that my resistance is ALWAYS going to be with me, because it's part of my human packaging.

Weekly Challenge

This week I challenge you to:

- Write every day (Monday through Friday) for 30-60 minutes.
- Notice what happens when you sit down to write.
- Consider what it would be like to understand your procrastination, avoidance and denial as protective impulses.
- If you can't seem to start writing, gently ask yourself: *What am I afraid of?*
- Identify all the ways your resistance manifests this week without judgment, shame or self-recrimination.

I hope this week brings you the willingness to identify your resistance as it occurs, a spirit of openness toward new ways of understanding your procrastination and avoidance behaviors, and a sense of compassion toward yourself in the process.

Peace and Productivity,

Kerry Ann Rockquemore

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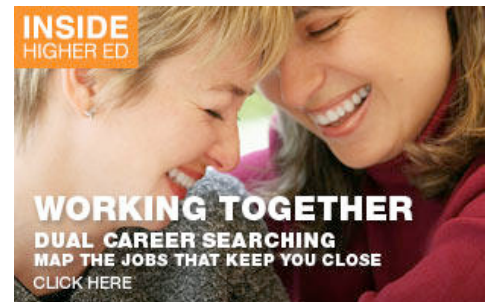
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Comments on Meet Your Bodyguard

Glass Ceilings

Posted by [Thomas Lawrence Long](#), Assoc Professor in Residence/School of Nursing at

University of Connecticut on June 21, 2010 at 10:00am EDT

As I remind the faculty and graduate students for whom I serve as a writing coach, we install glass ceilings in our careers when it comes to scholarly writing and publishing. Anxiety to the point of panic and phobic avoidance are not unusual. When I've invited faculty and grad students to relate a writing vignette that characterizes their experience of writing, one-third to one-half offer some form of a trauma narrative.

I recommend "breaking the glass ceiling" with "low hanging fruit" (if you'll pardon a seemingly mixed metaphor) by undertaking writing that is relatively low risk and low threat.

Posted by Lee at Art Institute of Atlanta on June 21, 2010 at 10:45am EDT

Very insightful -- this is a problem I've been wrestling with for a while on a long term project. Too long. So long that I can hardly remember the honeymoon. I've invested too much time (and it is too valuable a project) to ditch it, but God, how I want this to end. Anyway, I'm looking forward to your tips about sneaking around the bodyguard.

fear indeed

Posted by junior faculty on June 21, 2010 at 2:00pm EDT

Thanks for another good column. I hadn't thought of it as fear (at least, not since I finished my dissertation), but that's what it is.

Panicky Bodyguard

Posted by Grateful Grad on June 21, 2010 at 9:45pm EDT

THANK YOU. This series has been invaluable already, and I look forward to the coming installments. I have a hard time picturing the bodyguard as burly and helpful. Instead, I picture a quivering Ferdinand the Bull. Ferdinand provides temporary peace (after the panic and fear) but leaves behind long-term health and career problems. I anticipate giving Ferdinand the boot -- or at least some tools that enable a better long-term prognosis.

My bodyguard brought me to this article

Posted by Mind the Gap at MSU on June 22, 2010 at 9:00am EDT

While trying to protect me from my real work, my bodyguard brought me to your article as a distraction/procrastination. The joke is on her since, because now I've learned what her game is.

So that's who that is....

Posted by Lena , Grad student at MSU on July 18, 2010 at 10:15pm EDT

I agree with my fellow Spartan, MindtheGap. I didn't know who the bodyguard was until I read this column, and she has kept me safely "tucked away" (and unproductive) in my writing project. Now I know her identity, and yes, the joke IS on her.

procrastination

Posted by mSamuelle , undergrad/Education Dept. at University of Nevada Las Vegas on July 26, 2010 at 10:00am EDT

Whoah! I am not alone as to this so-called resistance or BodyGuard. I am thankful I could learn from you Spartans ... This summer seems to be the longest ever. I believe I've accomplished some tasks. At least, I've moved some furnitures around in my flat; to kind of making things orderly, and towards a conducive learning environment. I still have to File my manuscripts of 6 yrs. laying on a heap on the floor. It's been laying there still undone, all this time this summer.



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