



Kicking in the Wall 5-Minute Exercises: A Key to Overcoming Writer's Block

Barbara Abercrombie

UCLA Extension Writer's Program Distinguished Instructor Barbara Abercrombie describes how to use short prompts, from a word to a road sign, to break through assumed limitations on creative expression when inspiration is not forthcoming.

Early in her career, Patti Smith got writer's block: "I would go as far as I could and hit a wall, my own imagined limitations," she writes in her memoir *Just Kids*. And then her friend Sam Shepard gave her some good advice, "When you hit a wall, just kick it in."

Most writers have at one time or another faced a wall, a case of writer's block built of our own doubts and fears. I love the idea of kicking in your own wall, taking action, not becoming the long suffering artist wringing your hands and waiting for a visit from the muse. No, you *kick* in that wall, break it down, smash it to smithereens – and write.

One of the biggest misconceptions that new writers have is that you need to be inspired in order to write. Inspiration is a wonderful and necessary thing of course, but it has a way of arriving when you're already at work. To get my students working I give them five minute writing exercises. These can be prompts of one word (for example, *turtle*), or lines from a poem ("*The world begins at a kitchen table...*"), or a line from the newspaper ("*Coyote Found in Central Park*"). I also collect road signs and use them for exercises (*Bear alert!*), and overheard conversations, ("*She never got over it.....*" Give your character something she never got over.)

When I'm writing fiction and get stuck I'll take a one line idea for a scene or a character's name and write for five minutes without thinking. Sometimes I start out with how stuck I am and

woe is me, but this becomes boring after about forty seconds and I get out of my own way and write something that surprises me, something I didn't know about the character or my story. And this is why five minute exercises work; you get out of your own way, you don't think, you forget about perfection.

The exercises can be both warm-ups and also side doors into what you want to write about. They start you writing, whether you're in the mood or not. Try timing yourself for five minutes. Maybe you pick up your pen to write and panic suddenly seizes you, your mind goes blank, there's not one thought in your head. That's fine. Just write about how panic feels, how the clock is ticking, how awful it is when you don't have an idea.

Or say for instance, you're given the word *turtle* to write about – and maybe you once actually had one of those tiny turtles that live in a bowl and you start writing about it but immediately the critic on your shoulder says, *Who cares? Really, who cares about this dumb turtle?* Well, the fact is that it's not important if anyone cares about your turtle story, you're just writing it. Maybe you'll get to the part about the weird dank smell of turtles and the little scratchy sounds they make in the bowl, or maybe not. Maybe you'll write a truly boring five minute account of this turtle you had as a kid. But who cares if it's boring or not? It's just an exercise, and lo and behold you're writing something. Writing something, *anything*, leads to writing what you really want and need to write about.

Five minute exercises can work for either fiction or memoir and essays. You can write the truth, your own experiences, or you can make up stuff for your characters. Give the turtle to one of them, have one tell you about her kitchen table, or have one react to a bear alert sign as he drives down a country road. You don't need to know what you're going to write to write it. Let yourself be surprised. Trust that you have a deep well of feeling and thought and experience within you to draw from.

What interests me as a teacher is how writing can be practiced by doing exercises. My long term writing students are rarely stuck when given a prompt and since many of them are

writing memoirs or novels, they find a way to use the prompt for their work in progress. I once taught a workshop for people whose lives were affected by cancer; they were writing as therapy with no interest in becoming writers. They'd do rounds of five minute exercises on topics they were all dealing with, and then read them aloud. A number of the workshop participants stayed on for years and in spite of themselves became writers – they could take a subject and write about it clearly with emotion and detail, and very often what they wrote would make the rest of us cry or laugh out loud.

With five minutes you don't have time to plan or figure it out, or try to make it perfect, all you can do is write. You can write a very short scene in five minutes, or you can wander away from the prompt into a subject or memory that surprises you. A lot can happen in five minutes, or sometimes you just come up with ranting and whining. That's okay. It's a small investment of your time. It's just an exercise; anything you can use from it is all gravy. And the rest is just the literary equivalent of doing push-ups, making you a stronger writer.

Barbara Abercrombie teaches in the Writers' Program at UCLA Extension where she was voted the outstanding teacher of the year in 1994, and in 2010 won the Distinguished Instructor of UCLA Extension award for the Writers' Program. She has published novels (two optioned for films, and both translated into five languages), award winning books for children, and memoirs. Her essays, poems and articles have appeared in national publications and anthologies. Her most recent books on writing include *Writing Out the Storm*, *Cherished: 21 Writers on Animals They've Loved & Lost* and *A Year of Writing Dangerously*, which was published by New World Library in 2012 and chosen by *Poets & Writers Magazine* as one of the best books for writers. <http://www.pw.org/best-books-for-writers>. In May 2013 NWL will published her fifteenth book, *Kicking In The Wall*. Six years ago she began a blog, [Writing Time](http://writingtime.typepad.com), publishing short essays about living the writer's life, with writing tips and exercises, that has a large readership from all over the world. Barbara is an original board member and supporter of WriteGirl, an organization that mentors teenage girls with professional writers, and has taught writing workshops for the Wellness Cancer Support Community for the past thirteen years. She is also a board member of the Adams Family Foundation that contributes to organizations that help abused children. To learn more, visit: <http://www.barbaraabercrombie.com/> and <http://writingtime.typepad.com>.

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