

# GETTING STARTED WITH YOUR WRITING PRACTICE

Welcome to 'Getting Started with your Writing Practice'.

Makers are increasingly expected to communicate their ideas and the narratives surrounding their practice through engaging and evocative writing. This is a fantastic opportunity to share your motivations and passion for your work, but it can be daunting and difficult to know how to start.

In this e-book I'm going to share with you tips for establishing a writing routine, exercises you can do at any time to help you investigate your making practice and to craft words that reflect your work.

Reflecting on your making practice, and writing about it regularly, will help you feel more confident about the work you do, including the writing.



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# WHY EVERY MAKER NEEDS A WRITING PRACTICE



I'm a big believer that writing should be part of a maker's practice, alongside the making and the hundred other tasks that need to be done to run a creative business. I see words as another raw material, ready to be transformed into something special. But, as with any raw material, things don't spontaneously transform; that's where an element of skill comes into it, where the benefits of practising can be seen.

I think it's not a stretch to say that many makers do not consider themselves wordsmiths. They are not as confident translating the ideas behind their making into text for their audience to engage with. Something happens when faced with a deadline, we sit at the computer expecting to be able to pull the perfect words out of somewhere, without any warm-up or planning. It's no wonder that we find it so frustrating when things don't come out right.

The trick is to develop a routine of talking to yourself, through writing, about what you are doing. Of examining and articulating your making practice on the page. By starting a writing routine, you will find your natural voice, your own way of describing what you do, and it will start to get easier. By building up a bank of text, little and often, you will already have to hand a lot of the material you need when that big application arrives, or you need to re-work your website or send off some text for a show.

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# SETTING UP YOUR WRITING ROUTINE

Effective communication about your practice comes from really understanding what I call ‘the why behind the work’. It’s all about self-awareness and self-questioning. If you know why you make, then it’s easier to explain how. But how often do you really give yourself time to consider these things?

Chances are you make time when you really have to: when there is an application to fill out, or a gallery or show needs some text about your work. And in that situation, do you really spend much time asking yourself why you do it, or do you find yourself writing the same sentences, explaining things in familiar ways, or the easiest of all – sending out something you wrote a while ago?

When we are busy, running creative businesses on our own, we find ourselves without the creative practice support that most of us took for granted while we were studying. A community of interested, creative people who would regularly ask us ‘Why?’, who would listen and give helpful feedback. When you are on your own, you need to become that injection of inquiry, and it’s difficult to do that for yourself. Which is where the writing routine can help.

Spending time, each day, reflecting on what you have done (whether it’s making, designing, marketing, exhibiting) and writing a little bit about it creates opportunities. It allows you to gather all your thoughts into one place, not leaving them swirling around in your head where things might get forgotten. It allows you to gradually find the right words for your work and to craft your own voice. But most importantly, it becomes a bank of ideas, and descriptions, which you can use later when people need you to communicate about what you do. Regularly re-assessing and enquiring about your own practice will give you the answers you need, whenever you need them.

Let’s get started:

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## BUILDING YOUR ROUTINE

### Set yourself up for success

Starting a new routine or habit takes time to establish. It’s often easier not to do something (like giving up chocolate for a month) than to start to do something. In his [TED talk](#), Matt Cutts describes how he has opened up the possibility in his life by trying something new for 30 days. 30 days seems do-able for something new, as long as the change you make is small.

*small changes = sustainable*

I am not suggesting that you start a writing routine with the aim of writing a novel in a month. What is more realistic is that you make time to write a few sentences or a list of words about your practice each day.

### Make it fun

I realise that this writing routine could quickly become another 'have to' on your list, and feel like something you are doing because it's good for you rather than because it's enjoyable. So, make it awesome. What will encourage you to actually do it? Are you a stationery junkie – will getting a really gorgeous notebook and pen do the trick? Or would writing on post-its that you pop onto your sketchbook, noticeboard or wall help? Maybe you'd rather not write by hand at all, and you'd prefer to do it all on the computer, either privately or as part of your social media? Consider where you will do your writing and what the environment will be like. Do you like the quiet and light of morning, or would listening to music inspire you? Choreograph your experience so that every aspect of it feels good.

### Stick at it

Ah, yes. The difficult bit. We all know how this goes, you get excited about the new routine, get into it properly for a week or two and then find that slowly things slip until you haven't managed your goal for a while. This will most likely happen, unless you make it easier to do the writing than not to. In this great article *5 Scientific Ways to Build Habits That Stick* on [99u.com](http://99u.com) the piece of advice that really works for me, is to set up 'behaviour chains'. Find something you already do as part of your routine and link your new habit onto it. So, if you have a routine of making a cup of tea or coffee before you start work, why not use that time to also write a bit about what happened the day before? Or if you have a commute why not use the time to write? It could be the last thing you do in the workshop/studio before you leave, 10 mins of reflecting. Whatever works for you.

*Whatever works for you* is the key. This is *your* writing routine, it needs to feel right for you. If it doesn't, you won't do it, which is exactly what I have learned: For just over a year I have been trying to build my own writing routine using a tool from Julia Cameron's [The Artist's Way](#) – the Morning Pages. Simple enough, you sit down every morning and write 3 whole pages in a stream-of-consciousness anything goes kind of way. The trick is not to stop writing and not to miss a day. Well, I managed that for about a week, then I didn't, then I picked it up again with renewed focus, and then I started missing

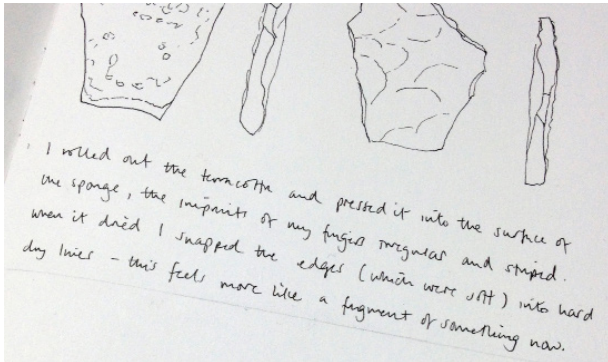
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days. This has been going on for months. And then I realised why it wasn't really working for me. Because I hadn't chosen the details of the habit for myself.

So, I made some changes. I stopped calling them Morning Pages for a start. I noticed quite quickly that I couldn't always make time in the mornings, and therefore failed on a regular basis before lunch, but if I just had the goal of doing them by the end of the day then it happened more often. Another reason I found I didn't stick to it was that I would end up using the pages as a place to moan, but I was getting tired of hearing myself say these things everyday. So, I set up the challenge of only allowing 1 page of moaning and 2 pages of less negative stuff, and this new balance seems better. And, finally, I bought better paper. If you're writing 3 pages a day you end up tearing through exercise books, so I started buying cheap school exercise books which snag a biro and suck ink from gel pens. My handwriting looked awful and I hated the actual experience of writing. So, now, I pick a notebook with decent quality paper and pens I enjoy using and it has made a big difference. So, having constructed the terms of the habit for myself, to fit with the way I am and how my life is, I'm doing better at cultivating my writing routine. I hope you have a go for yourself.

# WHAT TO WRITE ABOUT

Now that you've set up a writing routine, on your terms, so that you feel excited and inspired to write about your practice regularly, it's time to figure out what you'll write about.



## Audience

Whenever you're faced with the task of writing something about your work, the most important place to start is to think about the audience. Who are you writing for and what do they expect? You figure this out and it makes deciding what to write, and how to write, much easier. In the case of the writing routine, you are your main audience. This is a personal practice, it is meant to help you understand your making and to generate words that you are happy with. So, what are your expectations? What do you want the writing to help with? What do you want to learn? It may be that you want to understand why you make, to explore the ideas in more depth, or it might be that you want to find the right words to describe a technical process or to convey aspects of the materials you use.

You also have a secondary audience: the people who will eventually read the words that you begin to write here. They may be clients who wish to buy your work, people choosing makers to be part of an exhibition or trade show, they may even be people deciding who to give funding to or a residency. At this stage it's hard to pinpoint the secondary audience, but you can pretty much guarantee that they will be expecting to learn more about why you make your work, how you make it

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and what you feel about it. So you should probably cover these things within your writing.

## Aspects to focus on

Having thought about the audience you're writing for, and what their expectations are, it can feel as if you're trying to cover lots of ground in your writing routine. And the most important part of this process is to write regularly, not to write lots. Having some key questions that you refer to can help you focus. I recommend looking at your work from these aspects: process and response. Process allows you to reflect on what you have made and your relationship to it, while Response allows you to see your work from other perspectives.

## Process

Describe what you have made.

(Imagine that you are telling someone about your work who doesn't know anything about making)

- How did you make it? What materials, techniques, tools did you use?
- How did it feel while you made it? (Think about the physical aspects of touch as well as the emotional feelings)
- What did you think about while you made it?



## Response

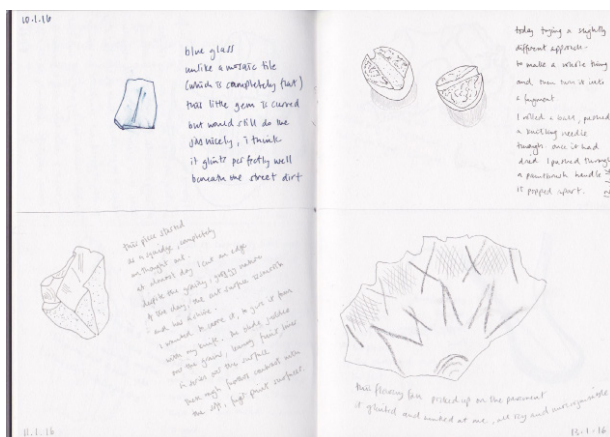
Describe what you have made.

(Imagine you are describing the work to someone who will not see the actual object, in real life or photograph, but will only read your words.) Use sensory language:

- What does it look/feel/smell/sound/taste like?
- What does the work remind you of?
- What does it make you think about (memories, experiences)?
- How does it make you feel?

Some of these questions will be easy for you to answer, others will put up some resistance. Notice which ones they are, ask yourself why that is.

As with everything to do with building a writing routine, it's most important that you find out whatever works for you. You might choose to cover a question a day, or to devote a chunk of time once a week to spend on writing just about 'process' or 'response'. You might want to ignore the questions and just let it all out. It's up to you.



Last year I set myself the challenge of collecting or making something small every day for 30 days, and writing about it. Some days I had lots to say, I enjoyed the process or the feel of the materials, other days I wasn't feeling very inspired and wrote only a few words. It didn't really matter, by the end of the month I had lots of snippets and fragments of writing that could easily have been the start of something.

That's the joy of the writing routine, pretty soon you'll find you have created quite a lot of stuff out of nothing, words just ready for you to polish and use to tell your unique making story.

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## WHAT KIND OF WRITER ARE YOU?



This is probably not a question you ask yourself very often, but spending a bit of time pondering how you feel most comfortable writing will help you find when it comes to getting started. You might have no idea; the concept of being comfortable when writing might seem really different from your experience of writing. So, let's start with an easier question: what kind of maker are you?

Are you someone who designs through making? You get an idea and you run with it. You explore your material,

play around with processes, to see what works and what doesn't. You tend to respond to what happens while you are making, and then you build on that.

Or, are you someone who makes by design? You have an idea and you plan it out. You consider what you'd like to do and how best to make that happen, with the knowledge and skills you have in your material and processes. You may draw accurate designs, or you might write out step-by-step instructions for yourself. And as you go along you respond to what happens and modify your plans, testing things over time.

As with all personality traits, there is no hard and fast rule about this – you might fall firmly in one camp, or you may bounce back and forth. You might experiment with materials and processes so that you can then design and plan the making. You will have found your own way of making that works for you. The idea here is to recognise which aspects you identify with and feel most at ease with, because your 'style' of making will probably translate quite easily into your 'style' of writing.



## ARCHITECTS & GARDENERS

There's a lot on the internet about different approaches to writing, but one that I particularly like is George R R Martin's [analogy of architects and gardeners](#). In writing, you are an architect if you like to have a plan. If you like to know everything about your characters, setting and plot. If you know exactly what is going to happen, when, and you write to fill this out. You are a gardener if you like to plant a seed of an idea and then let it grow. Your characters, setting and plot unfold as you write.

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Of course, many writers will say that they are definitely architects or gardeners and many will say that they find themselves wearing both hats.

I don't think it's a stretch to wonder if makers who design through making, might feel that they are gardeners when it comes to writing, and that makers who make by design, might feel at home with the architect's approach. Understanding which approach feels most natural, most comfortable, will unlock some aspects of your writing – especially how to get started.

What sort of writing style resonates for you? Does it reflect your making 'style'? Do you find yourself using a mixture of approaches? When does this happen, at what stages of your making process? Take a bit of time to reflect on this, and next we'll look at how to get started writing using techniques for gardeners and architects.

# HOW TO START WRITING...

So, now you've reflected on what kind of writer you are. Are you a 'gardener' type who likes to plant a seed and watch it grow? Or are you an 'architect' type who likes to have a structure or plan to work to? We discovered that often the way you make can help you to discover what kind of writer you might tend to be:

Makers who *design through making* are often **gardeners**

Makers who *make by design* are often **architects**

Now, here are some tips for starting a piece of writing, depending on which type of writer you feel you might be:



## HOW TO START IF YOU ARE A GARDENER

### The Zero Draft

Gardeners might want to try the 'Zero Draft' approach. The Zero Draft is a way to get out all your ideas without any thought about structure, grammar or even making sense. It is something that only you will see, a splurge of words onto the page. You start writing and let your mind go wherever it wants. The Zero Draft is great for gardeners as it isn't constrictive; you will do the tidying and editing later.

What to do:

- start by considering- what is this piece of writing going to be about?
- write a list of questions you would like to answer and mull them over.

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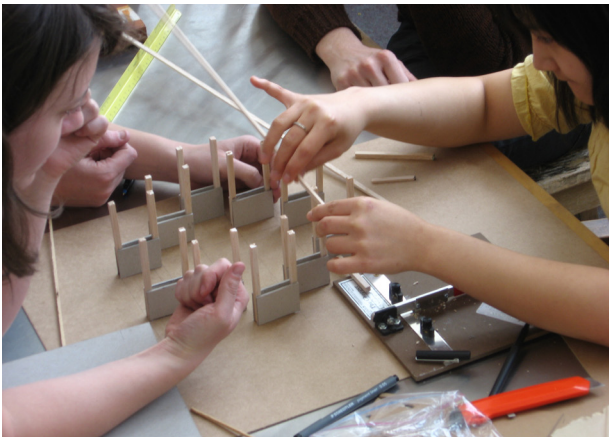
- begin writing about your work- let your train of thought wander and explore.
- if you get stuck or need a prompt look back at your list of questions.
- once you have your text: look through it. Re-arrange sections that go together.
- is there anything missing? Did you answer all your questions? Continue writing to fill the gaps.

## TIPS FOR GARDENERS

### Little and often: free writing

Because gardeners like things to be flexible and spontaneous, writing about your work regularly in a free and low-pressure way (ie with no deadline) will allow your ideas to flow. Try using the Zero Draft regularly so that you build up a store of writing ready for that deadline. Then, you can harvest your ideas and edit them when you need to write something specific (like an artist's statement or application).





## HOW TO START IF YOU ARE AN ARCHITECT

### The Blueprint

Architects might want to try the 'Blueprint' approach. The Blueprint allows you to construct a framework for your writing so that you know exactly what you need to cover and in what order. The Blueprint is great for architects as it takes away some of the uncertainty of writing and lets you free up your mind to think about the making.

#### What to do:

- start by considering- what topics or themes do you want to cover? What sections will these become? Order them so they make sense to you.
- write a list of questions you would like to answer. Which sections do they need to go in?
- begin writing- write responses to each question on your list.
- once you have your text: look through it. Does it flow? Are there any sections that need a bit more work? Are there any questions you didn't answer?
- Are there any more questions you need to ask? Continue writing to cover everything.

## TIPS FOR ARCHITECTS

### Little and often: with focus

Because architects like a bit of structure, writing about your work regularly with a specific topic in mind will help you to get out all the ideas in your mind. Create a Blueprint that you can refer to: a list of topics to cover or questions to ask, which you can use as a guide. Then, when you have a specific piece to write you can see which areas might need a bit more writing or refining.

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Of course, you may find that both approaches work for you. Personally I like to start with a Zero Draft, to just get a lot of my thoughts down on the page, and then I like to plan a structure, a Blueprint. I outline sections and think about what needs to go where. Then I cut and paste bits from the Zero Draft to see what I already have. Sometimes I find I've covered most things, and sometimes I need to do a bit more writing. In which case I might write only to answer the question or I might do another Zero Draft to generate more words. This back-and-forth works for me.

There is no right way or wrong way to write. The best way is your way, the way that feels easiest for you. The more you experiment with your writing you'll soon start to find out which approaches work best, and the struggle to get started will be that little bit easier.

## ...OR NOT (THE NON-WRITING APPROACH)



I am going to let you in on a secret here; one that is going to sound odd coming from someone who spends a lot of her time asking people to write more. The thing is, to write about your work you don't even have to write at all. One of my favourite methods for 'writing' is simply to talk about it out loud.

I like to walk. And, since I'm alone and no one can really hear me, I use that time to talk to myself. If I have something I'd like to write about I often start by saying things out loud, just to see what they sound like. Sometimes I ramble, and find I've stumbled across a lovely turn of phrase, and sometimes I pretend I'm having a conversation with a good friend and I'm telling them about my work. I frequently find the words I am after flow out of me in a way that doesn't always happen when I sit at my desk, pen in hand or at my laptop. I recommend this technique in all my writing workshops and it's also a technique I use with my clients. People are less self-conscious when they talk (we are so used to doing it) and I find that people always end up saying out loud the words they need, often in the most perfect way.

If you are a seasoned talker-out-loud like me, you may find you can remember the words you found and can write them down later, or you may like to have a notebook to hand to jot them down. But this isn't a fool-proof method, and it's always disheartening to know that you had the right words but then lost them. So, I recommend recording yourself on your phone, which

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isn't so bad if you are inside but can be a bit weird if you are outside in public, so I leave it entirely up to you.

Here are two approaches that always seem to strike writing gold. As with the other techniques for writing I've suggested previously, one will suit Gardeners down to the ground and the other will resonate with Architects. But don't let that stop you trying both and seeing which one works for you.

### The not-so-inner monologue (great for Gardeners)

Find a spot where you won't be heard by other people (out for a walk is good, or by yourself in your studio or workshop). You want to feel relaxed and natural.

Start talking out loud about the topic you want to write about, just go wherever your mind takes you and don't worry too much about what you say. You may find yourself circling around the same ideas, refining your words and honing in on what it is that you want to say, or you may find that you end up somewhere completely unexpected.

If you get stuck and can't think of anything to say, imagine you have a friend with you – someone who understands your work – and you need to explain it to them. What questions would they ask you?

Use whatever method of capturing the words you prefer. Stop and start writing down the bits you liked best. If you recorded yourself then find a quiet spot to listen to the audio file and make notes. The great thing about a recording is that you can come back to it again and again, and you can transcribe your words verbatim which is so handy when you came up with that ideal way of describing your work.

#### The one-sided interview (great for Architects)

Draw up a list of questions you want to answer. Find somewhere quiet to conduct your interview, as this technique works best if you record what you say. It's up to you whether you want to do this on your own, or if you'd like someone else to ask the questions. If you don't have anyone else around, interviewing yourself can still work well – pose the question and answer it as fully as you can. If you run out of things to say, imagine someone else is there to push you to answer.

However, this is technique that works brilliantly if there are two of you. Give the other person your list of questions – these will start the conversation and be prompts if the discussion fizzles out. What is great about doing this with someone else is that they can ask you questions you didn't think up, they can enquire into aspects of your practice that you didn't even consider, and they can respond or ask you to clarify things.

Both methods will leave you with a wealth of words to use and no writing was done! Transcribe your audio files, or type up your notes, and you may find you have the first draft of an artist's statement, an application or website text ready to go and only the editing to worry about.

Why not give it a try next time you have a piece of writing to do?

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## FINAL THOUGHTS

The aim of this e-book is to offer some guidance on how to set up your own writing routine and to build regular reflection, through writing, into your creative practice.

The tips and guidelines are things that I have discovered through years of my own writing practice, and also through the work I do with contemporary craft makers. There will be some techniques or approaches that work really well for you, and others that just don't click. Don't worry, keep going, find the things that sing for you.

Writing about your work can be challenging, but it can also be wonderful. It can be another creative outlet for your ideas, and can compliment and support your making practice. It is worth doing well, because your making practice deserves good writing. Only you know how and why you make, no one else can fully share that narrative with the world. Embrace the writing as a necessary part of your work and you will soon see how it can shine!

Good Luck!

This e-book was written by Melody Vaughan (they/them)  
Text and images by Melody Vaughan.

[except: p.7 [Woman Gardening via Max Pixel](#) p.8 [Architectural Model via Pexels](#). Both images under a Creative Commons CC0 licence.]

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*Creative mentoring tending to cultures of care*

Melody is committed to working with professional artists, designers & contemporary craft makers who want to build ethical and sustainable creative practices full of care.

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