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Guest Post: 6 Cool Keys That Unlock the Block

By Jennifer Theriault

Writer's block. That ill-timed, fade-to-black that even the most laureate writers suffer. How's a scribe to replenish a creative well run dry? Instead of deepening the faithful dent on the wall you've been banging your head against all these years, back away from the evil blank page and take the far less painful high road by opening your mind to fresh wisdom, ideas and exercises that will have your imagination cup runnething *over pronto*.

Years ago, I picked up Jason Rekulak's little hunk of genius, *The Writer's Block: 786 Ideas to Jump-Start Your Imagination*. The 2001 book is a cleverly designed 3"x3"x3" "block" brimming with all sorts of sage and irreverent quotes, methods, buzzwords, ideas, and proverbs from literary lions like Joyce Carol Oates, A.S. Byatt and Elmore Leonard, as well as advice and anecdotes from editors and agents.

Particularly cathartic for fiction writers, here are six of *The Block's* tried and coolest keys to unlocking powerful processes, ideas, characters and dialog from your imagination.

1. Extreme Imitation: When writer Ethan Canin felt "what it was like to have written" famous words, as he did typing out John Cheever's short stories, he gleaned a few things from getting hands-on with the subtle nuances of brilliant prose. Re-tracing your favorite writer's keystrokes can shake up your own writing style and, as their words flow from your fingertips, put you on the path to envisioning your own published success.

2. Four Sides to Every Story: Point of view hangs even the best writers up by their narrative bootstraps. Take a cue from Japanese director Akira Kurosawa whose film *Rashomon* tells the same story four times, each from a different point of view. Analyzing your story from multiple character angles is a priceless trick when you're having an omniscient narrator meltdown, since your storyteller is spinning with an all-knowing eye.

3. The Blank Page Rule: Clutter kills the imagination nowhere worse than on the page, which is why Don DeLillo, a meticulous crafter, always starts new paragraphs on a blank one. The white space frees ideas otherwise trapped in the distraction of what he's already written. This is one rare case where a blank page is anything but an evil thing.

4. Imitate a Painting's Style with Your Prose: Writers and artists go hand-in-hand. Booker Prize Winner A.S. Byatt was inspired by the French painter Matisse (great friends with Gertrude Stein, by the way), to write a trilogy about him, while Hemingway couldn't get enough of Van Gogh, Brueghel and Gauguin. Hit galleries, museums, photography exhibitions or browse art books for inspiration to paint a picture with your prose.

5. Begin in the Middle: Don't lead up to the storm. Start out in the cataclysmic eye of it. If, to rob James Joyce, your characters are "circulating toward nothingness," think about starting your story in the middle, where all the juicy themes, drama, and tension exist from the start. "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" is one of literature's greatest novel-openers for a reason.

6. Write for the Screen: If you can't seem to fix your bad manners and keep interrupting your characters with what he, she or it "said" or "asked" every other line, it's time to strip your dialog down to its bare bones. A fun way to trump jarring jargon is to try writing dialog in screenplay format, cleaning up all the excess baggage that was bogging down your now sharp, witty, flawlessly-crafted banter.

Know any of *The Block*'s other 780 secrets, or do you have other gems to share? The floodgates of inspiration are open!



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