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Jill Dearman

Eclectic Nonfiction and Fiction Writer



The Early Bird Catches the Bananafish: On Writing in (Naturally) Altered States



The New York Times

that the late JD Salinger got up early to do his writing, usually by six ... seven the latest. But in these days of email and Facebook, Twittering and texting, most of us fritter away our precious early morning ideas. Writing is not a group sport (except in Hollywood!); it calls for focus, and for a willingness to face the loneliness of our work. On the best days we revel in the fabulous chance we get to connect to our *real* selves within the internal world, instead of the much less fascinating high school-esque personas we tend to cultivate online.

Salinger is dead, but Holden Caulfield and the Glass Family, and all those other wonderful and wonder-filled characters live on. Let's do them justice by admitting that

we're phonies, and finding a way to be authentic writers again. But how? Perhaps the question is not *how* but *when*?

You may believe that there is no magic secret to great writing, but if so you are sadly mistaken, bub! There is, and I am going to tell it to you: All you have to do is keep a notebook at your bedside, and when you wake up first thing in the morning (or in the middle of the night) ask yourself what you should write. You may get a great idea, the answer to a plot problem, or a direction to go in to deepen a character, add texture to a story.

The trick is to train yourself to write down these wise notes before you are fully awake. We all know the feeling of being half-asleep. It's when you are so delightfully "out" that even a full bladder can't stop you from saying "five more minutes". This state of hypnagogia (between sleeping and waking) is precious, and it is brief. Within a couple of minutes it could disappear. But if you let that unconscious voice, a voice whom Holden and Franny, Seymour and Teddy, and all the rest, would deem *real* and worth listening to (hell, a voice whom even Salinger himself might feel respect and affection for), you will discover exactly what you need to write, and how to write it.

Once you are in this groove for awhile something equally simple and miraculous may occur. When you wake, while still in your half-slumbering state, your unconscious may feel secure enough with you to get pushy and simply *tell* you what you need to write, rather than wait on your questions.

But what about the rest of the day? If you have trouble with early mornings, or if the morning magic is not enough, there is another deceptively simple way to connect with the Muse, and lose the loser known as your conscious self. Salinger knew it well and dropped it into his prose as frequently as a splash of milk in a cup of joe. And it's a "trick" that's been around for centuries: Meditation.

In my book, [Bang the Keys](#), I give lots of in depth tools for your writerly meditation practice. But here is just one that covers the whole enchilada: sit comfortably with all your devices and distractions put away, and focus on your breath. Observe the inhalation and the exhalation. If you are human, you are bound to get distracted (probably by thoughts like "I'm not doing this right!") by the third breath. Don't sweat it, doll. Just return to the breath. Again. And again. Try this for five minutes a day. Anytime of the day. Right afterwards: write. The next day go for ten minutes. And report back. I'm curious. But don't email me till you've done your hypnagogic magic or mindful meditation.

Jill Dearman is an author, writing coach and freelance editor. She is a part-time professor of journalism at NYU. For more: www.bangthekeys.com.

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—[Huntington W. Sharp](#), Senior Editor, Red Room

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[Line West](#) says:

Thank you!

Dear Jill,

Thanks for writing this! It got me back on track :) It feels like you are talking about me and I find it very true what you write here. I am glad to hear that it is not just me who gets the best ideas when I am in bed or meditating - or in the shower.

Bests, Line

Tue, 03/30/2010 - 9:20am

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[Kirk Nessel](#) says:

Bravo

Jill,

What a helpful, compact article this is! We should be reminded to breathe every hour of every day . . . to find that stillness that makes good writing happen.

Kirk

Tue, 03/30/2010 - 4:49pm

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[Jill Dearman](#) says:

Keep it up!

Line, so glad this resonated for you. And no, you most certainly are not alone. In fact I am writing this while half asleep, meditating and in the shower -- ha! Seriously, it's a refreshing way to work with your writerly mind. All the best, Jill

Wed, 03/31/2010 - 7:49am

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[Jill Dearman](#) says:

In praise of breathing

I'm with you, Kirk. This darn world has gotten too overloaded with information. Slowing down is actually more "efficient" than multitasking like maniacs. And it all starts with the breath, yes!

Wed, 03/31/2010 - 10:54am

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