

The 31-Minute First Draft

By Debra Landwehr Engle

I came up with this idea several years ago when a friend was struggling with the most daunting of all writing challenges: the blank page.

Like everything in life, the blank page can be an enemy or friend, depending on how you choose to see it.

It may taunt you like a grade-school bully: “You think you have something worthwhile to say? Then prove it!”

Or it may act like your favorite aunt—the one who has always believed in your brilliance: “This page is all yours, and I can’t wait to see what you do with it!”

In fact, the blank page is an invitation. Fill it up with something—anything—and you have visible progress. You’ve got raw clay that you can mold and into a polished story.

So I developed a technique designed to get words down on paper fast. It does a few other things, too...

- **It helps you bypass the logical editor** in your head so you can listen to your highly creative voice instead. I call that voice your higher self (and believe it collaborates with unseen guidance), but you can call it what you like.
- **It only takes 31 minutes**, so you can fit it into your day on a regular basis.
- **It gives you a step-by-step approach** to generating material, eliminating a fear of writer’s block or thinking you have to wait for inspiration. You get to create your own inspiration and see that you can start anywhere, any time.

I’m happy to say that the technique was featured in a story I wrote for *Writer’s Digest* a few years ago, and many of my writing students and clients have used it with great success.

Now it’s up to you. Try it out and see what happens.

1. Take five minutes to sit quietly. Close your eyes, take a few deep breaths, then clear your mind and release tension. Once you feel relaxed, think of a particular topic you want to write about. It could be the introduction to your book, the opening chapter, a particular scene, or the book as a whole.

Ask yourself: Why is it important? Why do people need to know about it? Why am I passionate about writing it? Who am I writing it for?

Think of one specific person who you know will benefit from reading it. Focus on the ways your message will help this person's life.

2. Open your eyes and, for 10 minutes, jot down notes about the topic. Just make a list of ideas; don't worry about complete sentences. Write down anything that comes to mind.

3. Take one minute to look over your list and review the items on it.

4. Set the timer for 15 minutes and do a free-writing beginning with this: "Carol" (or whoever that specific person is you're writing to), "what I want you do know about _____ is this:" Write for 15 minutes, never lifting your pen off the paper. No cross-outs, no edits, no judgments. Outrun the censor. Keep going.

After 31 minutes, you'll have a first draft. Tell yourself, "Wow, look what I did in just half an hour."

Now you can go back and revise. Compare what you wrote to the list of items you wanted to include, and weave in anything you left out. Make sure you start the piece with one strong and clear theme statement, and that everything else flows from that one thought. Spend up to 30 minutes revising it.

Put it away for at least three days, then look at it again and continue to revise as you move along with your book.

Congratulations! Do this over and over again, generating material for your book quickly and effortlessly.

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