

Liberty University

The Writer's Grit Guide:  
Practical Methods for Effective Writing

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*To Nathan, my husband and best friend. You make me better.*

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### Abstract

Successful writing practices involve confidence, idea generation, and productivity habits. Writers can lack confidence about their abilities or about the quality of their writing when pitted against the creative and technical challenges that come with writing. Fear—which leads to both insecurity and egotism—is often what drives confidence issues in writing. True confidence emerges from the middle ground—or balance—between insecurity and ego. Writers can also struggle to develop new ideas when the competition to come up with original material results in writer’s block. Writers must improve their productivity and follow through on their goals by developing grit. This thesis will reveal how to increase the quality of writing by following biblical guidance and advice from successful and productive writers, thus optimizing writing practices.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Both humans and animals can communicate with others in their own species, but humanity's ability to communicate abstract concepts through writing sets humans apart from all other living things. Writers especially understand the significance that writing has for humanity. Therefore, it is not surprising that many authors—such as Stephen King, Annie Dillard, Eudora Welty, Elizabeth George, Bonnie Friedman, Natalie Goldberg, Anne Lamott, John McPhee, Walter Mosley, William Zinsser, and Flannery O'Connor—have written guides on how to navigate the writing craft. In this thesis, a “writer” is defined as anyone who writes fiction, nonfiction, scripts, plays, or poetry with the intent to publish and sell his or her work. But what motivates writers to write guides on the craft of writing? It may be their attempt to answer questions such as: What is the best way to write? What keeps writers writing even when the chances of publication seem futile? Based on their testimonies, writers write because it helps them find meaning in their lives, enjoy their lives, discover truth, and make sense of the world (Csikszentmihalyi 216; Fassler 240-42; Goldberg xix; O'Connor 40; Welty 90). By extension, an author's writing can help readers discover meaning and purpose in their lives (Csikszentmihalyi 236; Fassler 189; Morrison ix; O'Connor 78).

While successful writing practices depend on many aspects of writers' lives, this thesis focuses on writers' confidence, idea generation, and productivity habits and how these contribute to effective writing. This thesis will reveal how to increase the quality of writing by following biblical guidance and advice from successful and productive writers, thus optimizing writing practices. Although written from a Christian perspective, this guide offers invaluable advice for maintaining diligence, overcoming jealousy, and developing perseverance for both Christian and secular writers.

Writers can lack confidence about their abilities or about the quality of their writing (McPhee 83; Lamott 13; King 50; Larimer and Gannon 390). In this thesis, “confidence” is defined as the self-assurance and appreciation writers have in their own abilities and quality of their writing. Many writers struggle with confidence when pitted against the creative and technical challenges that come with writing (Csikszentmihalyi 11; Silvia 4; Stein 41). Multiple fears tax writers’ confidence; Elizabeth George names a few: “the fear of failure, the fear of success, the fear of completing something and having to say [sic] ‘Now what?’, the fear of looking foolish in the eyes of our friends, the fear of being criticized or judged” (George 188). Writers’ fear of failure includes the fear of not getting published, while their fear of success refers to the dangers of making themselves vulnerable to the public. As with most people, writers react to fear in one of two ways: They are stressed by insecurities that can paralyze them or they lash out in anger or resistance to criticism because of their inflated egos.

When feeling insecure, writers may experience excessive self-doubt to the point where they lose motivation to write or willingness to submit their work to any reader, and in particular, to an editor or publisher. Fear harms writers in the following ways: it can cause writers to develop an oversized ego as a defense mechanism, it can distract writers from writing well and prevents them from creating anything meaningful, it can prevent writers from being objective and professional about their work. Even if writers create something good, insecurity can prevent them from recognizing it (Allen 3; Bell 3,590; Dillard 46). Contrarily, egotism blinds writers to their bad writing. Egotistical writers tend to write unclearly and circuitously (Goldberg 61; Hemingway 78) because they use long words and strange syntax to sound smart and important (Zinsser 6). They also refuse to take criticism from their editors (Stein 252). When this happens, a writer most likely will not improve.

If insecurity and ego blind the writer, what must a writer do to maintain a healthy level of confidence? They must find middle ground—or balance—between insecurity and ego (Dillard 46) where true confidence in writing abilities emerges. This thesis explores how to achieve this type of confidence. Some techniques to be discussed are: seeking community, practicing self-compassion, accepting imperfection while striving for excellence, embracing rejection and failure as learning opportunities, and resisting negative emotions such as jealousy and perfectionism.

Along with fears that lead to confidence issues, writers can struggle to develop new ideas. Although many publishers of novels do not mind following a conventional paradigm for plot, writers are expected to offer something new for the reader. The competition to come up with original material often results in writer's block (Friedman 105-106; McPhee 51; Silvia 43-44; Zinsser xi). Writers should write what they know and feel emotionally (Cron 62), as well as what they know can move their readers. This thesis discusses several things that writers can do to improve their idea generation, which includes striving for originality, keeping commonplace books, reading a lot, recognizing and using the elements of storytelling, making good selections, and learning how to overcome writer's block.

After writers develop a healthy confidence level and develop creative ideas, they need to follow through on writing goals by maintaining or improving their productivity. Before writers can do this, they must motivate themselves to write. This motivation can be intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsic goals can include the search for meaning, for truth, for hope, and for making sense of the world (Csikszentmihalyi 216; Fassler 240-242; Goldberg xix; O'Connor 40; Welty 90) while extrinsic goals can include fame or money (Austen et al. 76). Once writers are motivated, they must set goals, and accomplish them by using grit. Psychologist Angela Duckworth describes

grit as the combination of passion and perseverance (8). Writers develop grit through deliberate practice and embracing creative flow (Duckworth 131). Successful writers are not necessarily the most talented: they are the ones that persevere and persist (Bell 146; Friedman xv; George 308; King 144; Larimer and Gannon 19; Maum 236; Stein 277).

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The literature cited in *The Writer's Grit Guide* are extant texts. In this literature review, all sources are ordered by the categories they provide for grounded theory. This thesis is organized by three main categories: "Confidence" first, "Idea Generation and Creativity" second, and "Productivity" third. The following sources are listed in the order that they appear in the guide and according to which categories and subcategories they inform. This review includes a description of every major source in the bibliography, summaries of the main points, discussion of any possible gaps in the research, and an evaluation of the source's contribution to the overall thesis. The sources are listed alphabetically per section in this chapter for quick reference.

### 2.1 Sources on Confidence and Productivity

Because this thesis is written from a Christian perspective for both Christian and secular writers, the New Living Translation of the Bible will be used to address some aspects of the thesis such as a writer's fear, envy, or perseverance. The New Living Translation was chosen for this thesis because it is written in pedestrian language that makes the Bible accessible to the modern reader. Although the Bible is a spiritual reference, it is relevant to writing. The Bible is the most widely circulated piece of literature of all time. Robert Stone spells out the important role that the Bible has in the history of finding meaning through literature:

in the Western world...Our prototypical book has been the Bible, regardless of whether we are believers or whether we were brought up by believers. After centuries of being Christians and Jews, our context and perceptions continue to be conditioned by the Bible's narratives. It's hard to overestimate its impact on our civilization and on our language. The novel came into existence with the rise of literacy and mass readership, and the greatest vehicle of mass literacy in the

English-speaking world has been the King James Bible, the great primer... The narratives about people in the books of the Bible are thought to *mean* something; they are thought to be significant. (Adichie et al. 163)

The Bible promotes the search for truth and moral values. Some of these moral values include overcoming envy and persevering in spite of difficulties, which are useful for all writers regardless of their faith, or lack thereof.

Jennie Allen is a Christian podcaster, writer, public speaker, and founder of a women's discipleship ministry called IF:Gathering. Her book *Get out of Your Head: Stopping the Spiral of Toxic Thoughts* (2020) takes on a biblical approach to how people can control their thoughts about self-worth. This source provides a Christian perspective on the subject of writer's self-confidence. The techniques that Allen describes for taking control of toxic thoughts and turning them around with and to biblical truth can help Christian authors gain a healthy level of self-confidence in their writing by trusting God and seeking supportive communities.

James Scott Bell is a thriller writer and winner of the International Thriller Writer Award. Bell wrote his book *Write Great Fiction: Plot & Structure: Techniques and Exercises for Crafting a Plot That Grips Readers from Start to Finish* (2004) as a guide for writers to develop character-driven plots in their novels. In the first mention of Bell in this thesis, he touches on how the fear of criticism can impact writers' self-confidence. See the subcategories of "Generating Ideas" such as "Taking Risks" and "Selection." He gives guidance on how writers can improve their productivity by setting daily and weekly writing goals, and then how to track progress. See "Discipline" and "Revision and Rewriting."

Charles Bukowski is a famous American writer of poetry and prose. His book *On Writing* is a collection of letters from Bukowski to his friends, fellow writers, publishers, and editors.

They reveal how Bukowski's methods and opinions on the writing craft changed over time, especially about rewriting and editing his work. Bukowski's letters inform the subcategories "Insecurity," "Motivation to Write," and "Revision and Rewriting." Bukowski reveals some of his insecurities from early in his writing career that impacted his confidence as a writer. But later his letters emphasized how rejection from editors and publishers helped him improve as a writer.

Susan Cain is an American writer, former corporate lawyer, and an honor graduate of Princeton and Harvard Law School. Susan Cain is not a psychologist, but she has researched introverts and personality characteristics for fifteen years. Her book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* (2013) covers the American ideal of extroversion and how Americans tend to ignore introverts and their personality strengths. See Cain's research in the subcategories "Deliberate Practice" and "Jealousy" to see how they both impact the writing practice.

Lisa Cron teaches writing at the University of California in Los Angeles. She has worked in publishing at W. W. Norton and as a story consultant for Warner Brothers. Her two books, *Story Genius: How to Use Brain Science to Go Beyond Outlining and Write a Riveting Novel* (2016) and *Wired for Story: The Writer's Guide to Using Brain Science to Hook Readers from the Very First Sentence* (2012) inform the subcategories "Embracing Failure," many segments of "Storytelling," "Selection" "Overcoming Writer's Block" and several other subcategories of "Productivity." Covering several aspects of the writing craft, Cron provides instructions on how to develop best writing practices and tell engaging stories.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is a world-renowned psychologist who is best known for his research on pleasure and optimal experience—which he calls *flow*. He defines flow as "the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter" (3-4). Several

authors, including Stephen King, Elizabeth George, Annie Dillard, Paul J. Silvia, and Natalie Goldberg, all mention experiencing flow in their writing, even if they do not directly call it “flow” or recognize psychology’s definition of the experience. Csikszentmihalyi’s research in his book *Flow: The Psychology of Experience* (1990) informs several categories under confidence and productivity, mainly as his research applies to developing grit for the writing practice.

Besides being famous for his poems and plays, T. S. Eliot was also a publisher and editor. In a letter to Virginia Woolf (1924, published by *The Paris Review*), he gives insight to a writer’s work ethic and the importance of community amongst other writers. Eliot’s letter informs the “Deliberate Practice” subcategory.

Joe Fassler is the editor of *Light the Dark: Writers on Creativity, Inspiration, and the Artistic Process* (2017) which is a collection of essays from famous authors such as Stephen King, Elizabeth Gilbert, Amy Tan, Marilynne Robinson, and more, about what inspires and motivates them to write. Their answers inform the subcategory “Motivation to Write” in the main category “Productivity,” but one of the essays touches on issues with writer’s insecurity which is why it is included with the “Confidence” sources.

Bonnie Friedman is an American author and winner of the PEN/Diamonstein-Spielvogel Award for the Art of the Essay. Her book *Writing Past Dark: Envy, Fear, Distraction and Other Dilemmas in the Writer’s Life* (1993) is a guide to the emotional part of the writing career. Friedman discusses the writer’s identity, the significance of persistence over talent, the negative impact that jealousy has on creativity, and the importance of having courage to write about hard things. See “Insecurity,” “Jealousy,” “Reading for Inspiration,” “Selection,” “Taking Risks,” “Flow” and “Deliberate Practice.”

Elizabeth George is an American mystery writer. Her book *Mastering the Process: From Idea to Novel* (2020) gives a step-by-step review to how she wrote one of her novels. This review acts as a novel-writing guide for other writers. George provides insight on how fear hinders creativity, creating conflict in storytelling, and other subcategories such as “Discipline,” “Deliberate Practice,” “Flow,” and “Outlining.”

Natalie Goldberg is an American author best known for her instruction on Zen writing. Her book *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within* (1986) correlates writing discipline with athletic discipline. She emphasizes the importance of attention and daily writing routines. She also agrees with Stephen King and Trish Hall, who insist that writers need to read a lot to write well. She describes her creativity methods of keeping a notebook with lists of ideas and claims that writers, like all other professionals, gain confidence through experience. She warns writers about the dangers of egotism. Her book informs several subcategories under all three main categories.

Trish Hall worked at the *New York Times* for over twenty years as a reporter, editor, and Op-Ed lead. Her book *Writing to Persuade* (2019) provides her insights on connecting emotionally to the reader, the importance of editing and revising, finding the balance between insecurity and egotism, and discussing the reasons why people love a story. Her book argues the importance of cutting out jargon and writing clearly. See “Egotism,” “Embracing Failure,” “Reading for Inspiration,” “Motivation to Write,” “Developing Grit,” and several other subcategories of productivity.

*Ernest Hemingway On Writing* is a collection of excerpts from letters, interviews, and other works that show Hemingway’s philosophy on the writing craft. This book is both a primary and secondary source: The excerpts from letters are primary sources, while the other excerpts

from his books and interviews are secondary sources. See “Insecurity,” “Egotism,” “Community,” “Embracing Failure,” “Reading for Inspiration,” “Storytelling,” “Developing Grit,” and “Revision and Rewriting.”

Stephen King is a world-famous bestselling author with over 30 bestselling novels. His book *On writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (2000) is frequently cited and quoted by famous authors and writing teachers as an authority on the craft of writing. The main points in this book are that writers can get ideas from anywhere, as well as the importance of having confidence in your work, community support, routine, and revision. See “Insecurity,” “Jealousy,” “Community,” “Originality,” “Reading for Inspiration,” “Storytelling,” “Deliberate Practice,” and “Revision and Rewriting.”

Anne Lamott’s book *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (1994) is a popular writing reference that offers instruction for all emotional areas of a writer’s life, such as struggling with self-confidence and jealousy, and the importance of discipline and routine. See “Insecurity,” “Perfectionism,” “Jealousy,” “Originality,” and “Deliberate Practice.”

Kevin Larimer and Mary Gannon have been editors of *Poets & Writers Magazine* for fifteen years. Their book *The Poets & Writers Complete Guide to Being a Writer: Everything You Need to Know about Craft, Inspiration, Agents, Editors, Publishing and the Business of Building a Sustainable Writing Career* (2020) provides advice on building a successful writing career. They include lists for writing conferences, agents, and reading recommendations from famous authors. Their suggestions on goal setting and persistence agrees with that of Angela Duckworth’s research on grit. They also advise to writers to keep a commonplace book to collect ideas, as does Natalie Goldberg. See “Insecurity,” “Community,” “Originality,” “Keeping

Commonplace Books,” “Storytelling,” “Taking Risks,” “Motivation to Write,” “Discipline,” and “Deliberate Practice.”

Courtney Maum is an author and also works as a publishing consultant, product namer, and a humor columnist. In her book *Before and After the Book Deal: A Writer’s Guide to Finishing, Publishing, Promoting and Surviving Your First Book* (2020) she outlines the publishing process for both new and experienced writers, covering all aspects of planning a successful writing career and navigating the emotions that come with it. Her advice is similar to that in Kevin Larimer and Mary Gannon’s book. See “Jealousy,” “Embracing Failure,” “Reading for Inspiration,” “Taking Risks,” “Developing Grit,” and “Deliberate Practice.”

John McPhee is a non-fiction Pulitzer Prize-winning writer at *The New Yorker*. His book *Draft No. 4: On the Writing Process* (2017) reveals how all writers deal with insecurity. His insight provides a unique perspective on the balance between insecurity and ego. He also agrees with Bonnie Friedman, Natalie Goldberg, and Anne Lamott that the best way for the writer to overcome envy is to write and concentrate on their own development. McPhee stresses that revision and rewriting are the most important parts of writing. This thesis will use McPhee’s source to discuss productivity and confidence. See “Insecurity,” “Selection,” “Taking Risks,” “Overcoming Writer’s Block,” and “Revision and Rewriting.”

Walter Mosley is an American novelist. His latest reference book, *Elements of Fiction* (2019) covers the art of character growth, plot lines, the importance of embracing failure, and revision. This thesis will use Mosley’s book as a complement to the other writing reference books that discuss the revision process and how writers learn from mistakes. See “Insecurity,” “Embracing Failure,” “Motivation to Write,” and “Revision and Rewriting.”

Flannery O'Connor is an American author who is most famous for her short stories. Her book *Mystery and Manners* (1969) is a collection of essays of her thoughts about writers and the writer's craft. O'Connor provides a Christian perspective on writing, expresses her cynicism about writing classes and writing teachers, as well as her belief in the importance of community. This thesis will use her essays to discuss how people read and write stories to find truth, meaning, and hope in their lives. See "Seeking Community," "Originality," "Selection," and "Motivation to Write."

Dr. Laurie Santos is a psychology professor at Yale and runs her own podcast called "The Happiness Lab with Dr. Laurie Santos." In the podcast episode "Dump Your Inner Drill Sergeant," she discusses the topic of self-compassion with Dr. Kristin Neff who teaches developmental psychology at the University of Texas. Neff's research focuses on self-compassion and how it improves people's mental health, confidence, and their productivity. See "Egotism."

Sol Stein was a writer and the Editor-in-Chief of Stein and Day Publishers for almost three decades, during which he edited for multiple bestselling authors. His book *Stein on Writing: A Master Editor of Some of the Most Successful Writers of Our Century Shares His Craft Techniques and Strategies* (1995) includes guidance on how writers can craft story in both fiction and nonfiction, and the importance of revision. This thesis will use his work to talk about some of the downsides of a writer's ego and how they relate with editors, as well as practical advice for routine and productivity. See "Egotism," "Community," "Storytelling," "Selection," "Taking Risks," "Motivation to Write," and "Revision and Rewriting."

Helen Sword is a humanities professor at the University of Auckland. She interviewed one hundred academic writers for her book *Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful*

*Academics Write* (2017). Her book provides a framework for how academic writers can stay productive which she calls the “Base Habits” for writing. The “Base” includes behavioral habits, artisanal habits, social habits, and emotional habits. See “Insecurity,” “Perfectionism,” “Community,” “Embracing Failure,” “Keeping Commonplace Books,” “Reading for Inspiration,” “Overcoming Writer’s Block,” “Discipline,” “Developing Grit,” “Deliberate Practice,” “Outlining,” and “Revision and Rewriting.”

William Wordsworth has often been called the Father of English Romanticism. The first edition of his famous preface appeared in 1798, in which he argues that it is through the language of the common person that the writer appeals to the reader’s emotions. Like Shelley, he argues that poets are an important part of human societies because they help bind together different forms of knowledge. Like Vonnegut and Cron, Wordsworth believes that the written word is an agreement between the readers and the writer. See “Motivation to Write.”

William Zinsser’s guidebook *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction* (1976) has been one of the most popular references for writing style. He provides advice for clarity and style for every subgenre of nonfiction writing. See “Egotism,” “Originality,” “Selection,” “Taking Risks,” “Motivation to Write,” and “Deliberate Practice.”

## 2.2 Sources on Generating Ideas and Productivity

Annie Dillard is a Pulitzer Prize-winning author. Her book *The Writing Life* (2013) describes the writer’s struggles, such as balancing insecurities and ego, and using their passion for writing to motivate them to keep writing about what they love. See “Egotism,” “Originality,” “Taking Risks,” “Motivation to Write,” “Developing Grit,” and “Deliberate Practice.”

Paul J. Silvia, PhD, is a researcher for the psychology of creativity and the arts at the University of North Carolina. Even though he is a psychologist, his book *How to Write a Lot: a*

*Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing* (2019) is more of a writer's reference book. It details the daily habits that academic writers need to fund their research, finish writing projects, and publish their work. See "Selection," "Taking Risks," "Overcoming Writer's Block," "Developing Grit," "Deliberate Practice," "Flow," "Outlining," and "Revision and Rewriting."

Darian Smith's book *The Psychology Workbook for Writers: Tools for Creating Realistic Characters and Conflict in Fiction* (2015) describes some bachelor-degree-level summaries of common psychological theories and how to apply them to characters through a workbook style guide. This book will not be used as an authority on psychology, but rather as a tool for writers to generate ideas in their characters analysis. See "Storytelling."

Eudora Welty was a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, and garnered numerous other accolades during her four decades of writing. Her memoir *One Writer's Beginnings* (1983) provides examples of how her life has enriched her knowledge about writing. She advises writers to learn about other art forms, such as photography and painting. See the subcategories "Selection," "Taking Risks," "Motivation to Write," and "Reading for Inspiration."

Tony Williams is a poet whose article "The Writer Walking the Dog: Creative Writing Practice in Everyday life" discusses how mundane tasks such as dog walking, cleaning, and exercise free up the writer's mind to get creative. See "Originality" and "Deliberate Practice."

### 2.3 Sources on Productivity

A compilation of essays by famous authors entitled *The World Split Open: Great Authors on How and Why We Write* (2014) contains excerpts from a lecture series on writing given by professional and notable authors such as Marilynne Robinson, Edward P. Jones, Margaret Atwood, Chimamanda Adichie, and more. This compilation is a viable source for a writer's guide because all the authors have published several successful and award-winning books. The

authors discuss the importance that literature has on human cultures and on finding purpose and meaning during our lives. These essays along with essays compiled by Joe Fassler, and books by Natalie Goldberg, Flannery O'Connor, Percy Shelley, and William Wordsworth reveal writers' deepest motivations that keep them productive. See "Taking Risks," "Overcoming Writer's Block," "Motivation to Write," "Deliberate Practice," and "Community."

Percy Bysshe Shelley was a popular English poet from the Romantic Era of English literature. His essay "A Defense of Poetry," (1840) is a widely taught and cited essay on the importance of art and poetry in culture. Shelley differentiates between poetry and storytelling, and what readers learn from both forms of literature. *The Writer's Grit Guide* will use his essay to explain why both poets and storytellers should be motivated to write and have confidence in their writing. See "Motivation to Write."

Angela Duckworth, PhD, is a psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania and a 2013 MacArthur Fellow. Her book *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* (2018) uses psychological principles from both psychologists Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and K. Anders Ericsson's research to discuss her own theories on grit. Her studies show that grit is an irreplaceable trait in successful people. Duckworth's research reveals how writers can increase their productivity and persevere in spite of the difficulties of trying to publish their work. See "Developing Grit," "Deliberate Practice," "Flow," and "Revision and Rewriting."

Toni Morrison is a Nobel Prize-winning author. Her book *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* gives insight on social issues such as race, gender, and human rights in the United States. This thesis will use excerpts from the preface of this book to discuss writers' motivations for writing and explain why writers are important agents of change in culture. See "Motivation to Write."

Kurt Vonnegut is a famous American writer. His essay “How to Write with Style” (1980) provides a step-by-step guide for writers to achieve clarity in their writing. His methods line up closely with the techniques that William Zinsser lists in his book *On Writing Well. The Writer’s Grit Guide* will use Vonnegut’s source to complement the other writing references that discuss clarity and style and apply them to the discussion of rewriting and revision. See “Selection,” “Motivation to Write,” and “Revision and Rewriting.”

#### 2.4 Sources for Methodology

Kathy Charmaz’s textbook *Constructing Grounded Theory* (2006) is a methodological guide to grounded theory research. Charmaz provides detailed instructions for developing grounded theory in one’s research from all aspects including data collection, coding, memo-writing, sampling, and drafting. Charmaz gives her instructions based on citations from the formative scholars of grounded theory. Charmaz’s book is the main source for organizing the modified grounded theory methodology used in this thesis.

Maye Espiritu is a scholar that published a text chapter covering grounded theory on *Academia.edu*. This chapter provides a brief description of the history and intent of grounded theory methodology. This text is used in conjunction with Charmaz’s text in this thesis to define grounded theory and how the modified grounded theory used in this thesis deviates from standard grounded theory.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### 3.1 Research Type:

*The Writer's Grit Guide* is based on qualitative research of philosophy on writing proffered by established authors. These writers' philosophies were collected as quotes and excerpts, which will be referred to as "data" throughout Chapter 3. The research methodology is a modified grounded theory model, which involves gathering rich data, coding the data, analyzing then data, theoretical sampling based on research gaps, (Charmaz vii-ix) and drawing new conclusions about the subject. Kathy Charmaz defines the intent of grounded theory as, "systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories 'grounded' in the data themselves. The guidelines offer a set of general principles and heuristic devices rather than formulaic rules" (2). This thesis is based on a modified grounded theory methodology because it strays from the original guidelines for data coding, as will be explained more in the coding section of this chapter. The result of this research is a guide for writers to increase their confidence, idea generation, and productivity. The collected data reveals the practical knowledge about writing practices based on the behaviors and shared beliefs of writers and psychologists. Many resources exist on the craft of writing. However, there is not a comprehensive guide that consolidates all the best practices for increasing confidence, idea generation, and productivity. This thesis will fill that gap in the literature by creating a toolkit for these three specific areas of the writer's life.

The researcher's participation in and perception of the material impacts the results because research questions drive the selection process. The intent behind the research was to find answers for how writers can improve their confidence, idea generation, and productivity. The researcher's experiences can also influence the data because researchers in grounded theory

contribute their own knowledge to the data, as Charmaz states, “Knowledge is not neutral, nor are we separate from its production or the world” (185). In the constructivist approach to grounded theory, the categories do not just emerge from the data but the researcher constructs the categories from interaction with the data (Espiritu 77). That being said, it is important for grounded-theory researchers to avoid preconceptions that come from personal backgrounds, and these preconceptions can only be recognized when they are challenged (Charmaz 67). Researchers must interpret a data and not impose a pre-existing frame to it (68).

The research in this thesis strays from the standard grounded theory method in that the main categories did not emerge from the data itself. Rather, the researcher used some aspects of content analysis when pre-selecting the main categories of confidence, idea generation, and productivity before analyzing all the data (Espiritu 70). The research methodology resembles grounded theory more than content analysis because, in content analysis, the data can exist in only one category. In this modified grounded theory methodology, the data’s meaning reaches across the different categories and subcategories as they relate to each other. The researcher created a system of coding the data to identify subcategories within the main categories that make up writers’ behaviors and attitudes toward writing. These subcategories all emerged from the literature itself. Through further analysis, connections emerged between the main and subcategories that combine to create new conclusions about writing practices, which is discussed in Chapter 5.

### 3.2 Rationale for Choosing Methods

Qualitative methods were a better fit for the objectives of this research than quantitative methods. The data for creating practical approaches to increase confidence, generate ideas, and increase productivity is not quantifiable. The qualitative method was the best method to find the

different customs and behaviors amongst the writing community. Another qualitative research method that could have been used for this thesis was the Historic method. However, the main objective was to find practical and contemporary approaches to writing rather than to write about the history of writing. Grounded theory helps researchers apply historical sources, but this research focuses on finding what can be done with writing, rather than what has been done with writing. Grounded theory's methods of coding the data, creating a coding system, building categories within the coding, and then drawing new conclusions about the research subject was the best way to create a guide for writers.

### 3.3 Data Collection Methods

The researcher for this thesis was an active participant in the research process, performing all the reading, data collection, and data coding. The data collected for this thesis is existing data from published primary and secondary sources, psychology reference books, writers' reference books, and essays on writing. Most of the primary and secondary sources were found at bookstores and on the Liberty University online database. In bookstores, the researcher looked in the writing reference and psychology sections, picking the books that related most to productivity, creativity, and confidence. The books were chosen based on the suggestions from opinion websites that listed the best books about writing. Most of the sources are guidebooks that address the overall aspects of the writing life, rather than style or genre specific books on writing. The few genre specific books used in this thesis are academic writing books, which were selected for their tips on increasing and sustaining productivity. Several sources came from the bibliographies of other sources. The researcher's writing professors also recommended other literature on writing that they think are helpful in their writing practices.

The data collected for this thesis is not enough to create a new theory about writing, which is usually the intent for using the grounded theory methodology. A smaller set of data was used to develop categories of habits that writers can employ to improve their writing practice. Although grounded theory calls for rich data (Charmaz 14), some experts in grounded theory say that smaller sets of data can still be useful for grounded theory, as the data can be used “to develop conceptual categories and thus data collection is directed to illuminate properties of a category and relations between categories” (18). While smaller data sets can lead to superficial analyses, the smaller set of data in this thesis does not harm the end result. While the methods used here are not sufficient to construct a new theory, they are enough to define categories of the best writing practices.

### 3.4 Coding Methods

Just as knowledge is not neutral or separate from the researcher, the coding of data is also not an isolated process. In fact, as the researcher codes data, the researcher’s choices reveal how the researcher thinks rather than only revealing what the data says: “Our codes show how we select, separate, and sort data to begin an analytic account of them. Qualitative codes take segments of data apart, name them in concise terms, and propose an analytic handle to develop abstract ideas for interpreting each segment of data” (45). The data was coded as it was collected, and it was separated into different categories. Charmaz offers an example of what coding means in grounded theory, “Coding means naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data. Coding is the first step in moving beyond concrete statements in the data to making analytic interpretations” (43). Grounded theory coding consists of at least a preliminary phase called qualitative coding and two other phases: initial coding and focused coding (43, 46).

Qualitative coding is the process of defining what the data is about (43), which was established for this thesis before the data collection process. The researcher defined what the data would be about when pre-selecting the Confidence, Idea Generation, and Productivity categories. Categories build context and subcategories fit under the major categories, and these help clarify the arguments and analysis in clear terms (161). Regular grounded theory rules do not apply pre-selected codes or categories to the data (46). However, the pre-selected categories can be considered *In vivo* codes (55), or terms that are common in the writing community that writers recognize and about which they have preconceived ideas because the words have loaded meanings. The *In vivo* codes helped the researcher cross check the data to see what parts were significant (57).

After qualitative coding, the rest of the coding involves finding higher level categories then lower-level categories (Espiritu 70). This is accomplished through initial and focused coding. Initial coding involves close reading (Charmaz 46) and “naming each word, line, or segment of data followed by 2) a focused, selective phase that uses the most significant or frequent initial codes to sort, synthesize, integrate, and organize large amounts of data” (46). While reading through the sources, the researcher marked sentences or paragraphs that either related to Confidence, Idea Generation, or Productivity, and would indicate to which of these categories they belonged. The researcher indicated the type of code by writing in the margins or—if it was an electronic source such as an e-book—using the note taking abilities on the Kindle device to keep track of the codes. These notes written inside the sources were part of the early memo-writing process during coding, which will be discussed in section 3.5.

Another step in the initial coding was consolidating all the lines text or quotes into three separate documents that were named after the three main categories: Confidence, Idea

Generation, and Productivity. All the quotes were sorted into the category that best fit the writer's intent. Sometimes data segments would fit into more than one of the main categories. In these instances, the researcher placed it in the category that fit best and then highlighted the data in red to indicate it could apply to multiple categories. These pieces of data indicated relationships between the categories, which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

In grounded theory, the researcher reshapes the initial coding and refines the data (Charmaz 15), which requires focused coding. During focused coding, the researcher read closely through the three documents with all of the data for the main categories. Line-by-line coding was used to develop subcategories in all the main categories. This coding method helped determine the fit and relevance of key words to the data (54; Espiritu 73), and it fit best with the intent behind the writer's guide as it helped develop "detailed data about fundamental empirical problems or processes" (Charmaz 54). The researcher then re-sorted the data in the three documents based on key words that appeared enough times to show a trend. The subcategories that emerged in the Confidence category are Insecurities, Egotism, Perfectionism, Jealousy, Seeking Support and Building Community, and Embracing Failure and Learning from Mistakes. The subcategories from the Idea Generation and Creativity category are Finding Originality, Keeping Commonplace Books, Reading for Inspiration, Recognizing and Using Elements of Storytelling, Writing is Selection, Taking Risks, and Overcoming Writer's Block. The subcategories from the Productivity category are Motivation to Write (which also has several of its own subcategories), Discipline, Developing Grit, Deliberate Practice, Creative Flow, Outlining, and Revision and Rewriting.

### 3.5 Memo-Writing

Memo-writing is the in-between point of data collection and drafting. Grounded-theory researchers should start writing memos as soon as they discover some categories that they want to pursue, and the memos are correctable and changeable (Charmaz 84). Memo-writing is where the researchers stop to analyze the ideas and make codes and connections between categories (72). There are early memos which are written during initial coding, and advanced memos which are typically written during focused coding. The early memos shape the codes (80). The early memo-writing process for this thesis consisted of the thesis prospectus and the initial coding. The prospectus for this thesis was the first memo that discussed how the researcher would organize and explain the data findings. Then the researcher continued the memo-writing by creating three Word documents that contained all the data for the three main categories. Before many of the lines of texts and quotes from the sources, the researcher wrote notes that indicated how the data connected to other bits of data. These notes from the early memo-writing helped with the advanced memo-writing during the focused coding to create subcategories (80). These notes also revealed some bits of data that seemed to fit in one subcategory in the initial coding, but later proved to fit better in a different subcategory.

### 3.6 Theoretical Sampling, Saturation, and Sorting

As stated before, the purpose of this thesis is to provide a guide for writing practices, not to create a new theory about writing. Nevertheless, some aspects of theoretical coding helped with sorting and identifying the data that could fit into multiple categories, which revealed relationships between the categories (Charmaz 63). The theoretical coding informed more of the analysis and discussion of the data rather than the process of creating categories.

The purpose of theoretical sampling and saturation is to find any gaps in the data and seek out data that fills those gaps (96, 102), therefore saturating the data until there are no new

insights on the subject and there is enough data to develop a substantiated theory (113). The modified methodology omits much of the theoretical sampling and saturation because the aim was not to create a new theory.

### 3.7 Analysis Methods

The full version of grounded theory is when researchers analyze and collect data at the same time, and the analysis guides the data collection (Espiritu 72-3). This was implemented the data collection and analysis when the researcher sorted through categories for Productivity and then sought out more data on what motivates writers to be productive writers. This change in data collection ended up creating a new category, "Motivation to Write," with its own subcategories.

This thesis uses textual analysis, specifically content analysis, of extant texts. Content analysis applies to the different meanings that writers and psychologists apply to the words *routine, revision, perseverance, ego, egotism, insecurity, creativity, motivation*, and all other terms that make up the categories and subcategories. The content analysis provides the means to code the categories and subcategories in this modified grounded theory methodology. The researcher did not construct any of the raw data (Charmaz 37).

It is important to note that the texts used in this thesis are not objective facts. Rather, they are representative of the authors think of as objective facts (Charmaz 35). Most of these texts were written with the intent of imparting wisdom about writing careers to other writers who are seeking this wisdom. The data mainly consists of elite voices regarding the writing practice (39). Although in normal circumstances a pool of data from mainly elite sources can be considered biased, the purpose of this thesis is to guide writers in their practice based on collected wisdom. Therefore, the bias in the data does not negatively impact the results.

## Chapter 4: Results

### 4.1 Developing a Healthy Self-Confidence

#### 4.1.1 Insecurities

Insecurity is one way that fear manifests itself in writers' lives. These fears include those listed by Elizabeth Gilbert in Chapter 1. When feeling insecure, writers may experience excessive self-doubt to the point where they lose motivation to write or willingness to submit their work to any reader, and in particular, an editor or publisher. Writers expound on issues with insecurity:

So many of the challenges of being a writer are rooted in fear. And many of the fears we have as writers are based in insecurity. Writers are a sensitive bunch, generally speaking—that's what makes us capable of feeling what we need to feel in order to create our art, inhabit other lives, practice superhuman feats of empathy, write from the heart, and move strangers with our words. But it's also what can lead to insecurity. (Larimer and Gannon 178)

Writers must be sensitive to the world around them in order to write the truth. But the truth is that the world is broken. As writers expose themselves to the world's darkness, they can get become internally troubled and insecure about their art. This happens often as John McPhee says, "Writers come in two principal categories—those who are overtly insecure and those who are covertly insecure" (83).

Fear of criticism—from others and self-criticism—cause writers to feel insecure and can sometimes develop into a mindset called imposter syndrome. Imposter syndrome can be loosely defined as the feeling that someone is faking their way through something and cannot genuinely identify with their profession. Larimer and Gannon also clarify why writers may feel imposter

syndrome: “Much of this is due to our tendency to define ourselves based on what other people think or how other people view us. This is especially prevalent with writers because our value is so often tied to publication, which is ultimately tied to the judgement of others” (179). When other people see a writer who has not published anything or has published a few things that have not sold or achieved any fame, they may see writing as a waste of time. This could cause a writer to feel insecure and feel as though they are wasting their time (King 50; Bell 3590). American poet Charles Bukowski revealed that he didn’t think of himself as a real artist during his early writing career when he struggled to publish anything (14). Another writer Jeannie Allen laments a dark time in her life where her struggles with writing impacted her mental health and sense of self-worth (3). Researcher Helen Sword reveals that many writers still experience imposter syndrome even after years of writing (3135). But when writers feel like imposters, if they keep writing, then eventually the words start to break through, and they can feel like writers again (Friedman 114). The most effective way to overcome this feeling of imposter syndrome is to keep writing despite the feeling (Bukowski 166; Lamott 13, 128). Writers should work their hardest to overcome their own imposter syndrome so they can do what they most enjoy and want to do—which is to write something meaningful.

Is the key to gaining confidence as a writer to keep writing and trying to get published? Some writers believe that graduating from a prestigious MFA program or publication will ensure publishing success which will instill confidence (Maum 24). And perhaps that is true for some. But many other writers argue that MFA programs and publication are not guaranteed avenues for confidence or success (24-25; Larimer and Gannon 14, 16). For example, many people go to writing programs because they need affirmation that they are good writers, and they want a mentor that can show them all the “secrets” (Friedman 43; Lamott 9). Walter Mosley argues the

opposite claiming that “universities don’t make good writers, not any more than war, poverty, chemical imbalance, a good sense of humor, or a parent who loved it when you told stories” (99). A writing education alone cannot make a good writer. Rather, this thesis will argue that good writing is more dependent on writers’ choices, daily practices, and efforts to improve. If writers don’t believe that they are good enough before publishing, they won’t think so afterward. The feeling of being enough comes from within (Lamott 204). Writers who have been published many times still feel fear and insecurity when they start new writing projects because past success does not guarantee future success. Every project is different and there is no guarantee of success with each new project (McPhee 19).

Insecurities and fears—whether about writing or other areas of their lives—have compelled some writers to rely on substances such as drugs or alcohol. A few of these writers are Ernest Hemingway, Charles Bukowski, Edgar Allan Poe, James Joyce, and William Faulkner. Some of these same writers became so mentally troubled that they committed suicide. These are extreme cases, and not all writers will turn to substances or suicide to escape their fears or insecurities. But all writers will need to find a way to overcome these by developing confidence from within.

How then does a writer get this confidence from within? Ernest Hemingway would encourage himself that because he completed a project once he could do it again one true sentence at a time (28). Friedman tells herself when she encounters something she doesn’t like in her writing, “Not bad...Needs work, but even so. There’s something there. There’s something that can certainly be brought on” (67). Elizabeth Gilbert tells herself, “My path as a writer became much more smooth when I learned, when things aren’t going well, to regard my struggles as curious, not tragic” (19). Lamott gives this good advice, “You get your confidence

and intuition back by trusting yourself, by being militarily on your own side. You need to trust yourself, especially on a first draft, where amid the anxiety and self-doubt, there should be a real sense of your imagination and your memories” (105). Lamott’s advice may be good for overcoming insecurity but when writers are “militarily on their own side” in excess they may reject any criticism, including constructive criticism. If a writer has not dealt with their own insecurities while also rejecting criticism it can lead to another confidence issue called egotism.

#### 4.1.2 Egotism

As with most people, writers react to fear in one of two ways: They are stressed by insecurities that can paralyze them or they lash out in anger or resistance to criticism because of their inflated egos. Fear can cause writers to develop an oversized ego as a defense mechanism. Nevertheless, a little bit of ego is good for writers (Zinsser 134). Ego helps writers maintain thick skin, which is essential in the writing business in which writers are constantly assailed by criticism (Stein 5). But there is a difference between an ego and egotism, Zinsser clarifies, “A thin line separates ego from egotism. Ego is healthy; no writer can go far without it. Egotism, however, is a drag” (134). When ego becomes egotism, it impedes judgment and is counterproductive to writing. There are several indications of egotism in a writer, some of which are refusing to accept constructive criticism, writing only for oneself and not for a reader, and writing stuffy sentences to sound important.

Some egotistical writers inflate their writing to the point where readers cannot understand just so that they can sound important (Zinsser 6), but good writers can recognize that clear writing is better than sounding smart (9). When writers give into egotism, it clouds their minds and by extension their writing. Hemingway, who was known for his large ego, still had no patience for egotism when it messed up clear writing: “Guys who think they are geniuses

because they never learned how to say no to a typewriter are a common phenomenon. All you have to do is get a phony style and you can write any amount of words” (78). It is when writers are self-absorbed or egotistical that their writing becomes vague and confusing (Goldberg 61). Letting go of egotism in writing actually helps the writer cut closer to the truth (9).

Editors claim that writers are at their best when they can look at their work objectively, without egotism. As Sol Stein says, “The best writers of the hundreds I’ve dealt with over the years were also the toughest on themselves” (203). These types of writers can look at their writing objectively and critically instead of getting sentimental about their writing (Goldberg 175).

Egotism is not the cure to insecurity. They are two symptoms of the same problem: the fear of not being good enough. It is important for writers to resist both feelings of insecurity and egotism (Dillard 15) because they cause stifle creativity. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi insists that excessive self-consciousness and self-centeredness—otherwise known as insecurity and egotism—block creative flow because artists are focused on only themselves and cannot pay attention to their art (85). Writers must learn to find middle ground—or balance—between insecurity and ego (Dillard 46), which is what Trish Hall calls a “calm confidence” (196). A good sense of self-confidence is not bragging about oneself, but rather believing in one’s abilities to write something good (Goldberg 166).

Writers can find this middle ground by practicing self-compassion, which involves being kind to oneself, practicing mindfulness to acknowledge and process pain, and recognizing that mistakes are part of common humanity (Santos). Self-compassion is different from mere self-esteem. Self-esteem is dependent on success and it is based on comparing oneself to others (Santos). When writers have too much self-esteem, it can lead to egotism. But self-compassion is

not dependent on success or failure; it is a way to accepting oneself despite imperfections (Santos). Self-compassion can help writers remove the toxic emotions and mindsets that lead to both insecurity and egotism. These toxic mindsets include perfectionism and jealousy.

#### 4.1.3 Perfectionism

One mindset can ruin confidence is perfectionism. Although perfectionism can potentially motivate writers to do their best, it is more often counterproductive. Writers need to get over their perfectionism if they want to progress in their writing (Lamott 30). Otherwise, they may never finish because they get discouraged at the smallest difficulty. There is no perfect environment or circumstance for writing, either (Goldberg 110). And writing will never be perfect because perfectionism is an illusion (Sword 3949) since writers will very rarely produce a flawless piece of writing. Writers who can cut through the desire for everything to be perfect and just write will be the ones that write the most and may eventually write the best material (Goldberg 39-40). Writers can use self-compassion to avoid getting tangled in perfectionism by realizing that mistakes and failures are part of being human (Santos).

#### 4.1.4 Jealousy

Jealousy also ruins confidence. Jealousy can come from feeling excluded or deprived of something (Lamott 117). Some examples of times when writers may feel jealousy are when another writer's book is successful, especially if they are writing in the same genre. Another example is one writer may have trouble getting published but then will see another seemingly incompetent writer get published. Personality researcher Susan Cain claims that jealousy can show the person experiencing jealousy what that person really wants (218). Although jealousy is a negative emotion, writers can use it to help themselves recognize what they want. Writers can get jealous of other writers that have published and sold more than they or have a superior

writing style. Some writers even perceive this jealousy to mean that they are in competition with the other writers, but this is not the case. No two writers are the same in their creative abilities and tastes. Sometimes writers need to identify their competition within the writer's market to differentiate themselves to publishers. But based on creativity alone, there is no real competition with other writers, as John McPhee points out:

no two writers are the same.... No one will ever write in just the way that you do, or in just the way that anyone else does. Because of this fact, there is no real competition between writers. What appears to be competition is actually nothing more than jealousy and gossip. Writing is a matter strictly of developing oneself. You compete only with yourself. You develop yourself by writing. (82)

Jealousy distracts writers from what really matters which is staying productive with their own writing (Friedman 1). The best way to get over jealousy is to keep writing and focusing on one's own work (Goldberg 16-17; Friedman 7). This method is a biblical principle from Galatians 6:4 which says, "Pay careful attention to your own work, for then you will get the satisfaction of a job well done, and you won't need to compare yourself to anyone else" (New Living Translation). Writers can feel satisfied with their own work by focusing on their writing goals and avoid comparing their success—or lack thereof—to that of others.

#### 4.1.5 Seeking Support and Building Community

Writing, although it is often completed in solitude, does not have to be a lonely profession. In fact, for writers and people in general, one of the most important things they can have is a supportive community of people (Allen 88)—whether it is friends and family or other writers. Some successful writers have claimed that writers are doomed to a lifetime of loneliness, like Hemingway in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech when he said, "Writing, at its best, is a

lonely life. Organizations for writers palliate the writer's loneliness but I doubt if they improve his writing.... For he does his work alone and if he is a good enough writer he must face eternity, or the lack of it, each day" (64). Hemingway may have been lonely in his life but it does not mean that all writers need to be lonely. Flannery O'Connor argues the opposite, "Unless the novelist has gone utterly out of his mind, his aim is still communication, and communication suggests talking inside a community" (53). If writers subscribe to Hemingway's cynical outlook, it could have devastating impacts on their confidence. Even though Hemingway claimed to be lonely much of the time, he still had close friendships with other writers like F. Scott Fitzgerald and Gertrude Stein who both encouraged him and helped him improve his writing. Stephen King discusses that his wife is his main supporter; "Her support was a constant, one of the few good things I could take as a given.... Writing is a lonely job. Having someone who believes in you makes a lot of difference. They don't have to make speeches. Just believing is usually enough" (74).

Sword states that social interaction is an important pillar of writing practices: "With supportive friends and colleagues included in my writing practice, I write more often and more fluently. Every round of constructive feedback helps me hone my craft and reach out to my target audiences more effectively. And when I write in the company of others, my emotions tip much more readily toward pleasure, self-confidence, and joy" (2114). The need for social support is not unique to writers; it is part of human nature. Writers are always seeking support and validation whether they are aware of it or not (Larimer and Gannon 99). Therefore, one of the best things that writers can do to encourage each other is to admire each other's work—and be honest about it and tell the other writer that they admire it (Goldberg 63).

Communities help writers improve their work because social interaction aids the creative process (Larimer and Gannon 101). Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi says that other people stimulate writers' creativity because "Everyone feels more alive when surrounded with other people" (165). Communities—whether they are physical groups of people or literary communities where people know each other through writing—are arguably the reason why writers write in the first place. Writers who write with the intent to publish want to communicate their ideas to readers. Writing is an act against loneliness and helps both the writer and the reader expand their knowledge of human nature (Stone 166-67). Many writers write because they want to be part of a literary community and their writing cannot survive without this community.

Sword also touches on this part of publishing for nonfiction and academic writing:

Writing for publication is ... a deeply human act: we write to communicate our research findings to other people; we learn to write from other people; our writing habits are enabled and inflected by other people. Even risk-taking and resilience become meaningless concepts when considered outside the context of social interaction. Writing is risky only when other people can deride you for what you've written; resilience is required only when other people have the power to knock you back. (2088)

Writing for a community is essential and risky. Writers always face the risk of rejection from publishers or readers, failure, or embarrassment when they try to publish. But this risk is also essential for good creativity and writing.

#### 4.1.6 Embracing Failure and Learning from Mistakes

Since writing and publishing are always risky, writers will fail sometimes. The best writers embrace failure and use it as a learning opportunity if they want to develop confidence in

themselves. Success doesn't come easily, and it usually does not come without a few failures, which should be celebrated (Sword 3464). But these failures are only worth celebrating if writers learn from them and change their behavior or practices to keep pursuing success. How can writers change their paradigms about failure? First, they must not give into the paralyzing shame that can accompany failure (Allen 4-5). Christians believe that by allowing God to help change the way they think, they can stop the spiral of self-defeating thoughts. When they stop the spiral of toxic thoughts, they can overcome some of the anxiety associated with failure. Allen explains how this works; "We can reset and redirect [our thoughts and] allow God to take up so much space inner thinking that our fears will shrink in comparison" (16). Christian writers can change their focus away from their failure so that the failures do not seem too big in comparison to their God.

Secondly, writers can change by focusing on the small areas of progress that they make with writing even when they are rejected. Rejection is a large part of the writing and publishing process, but some rejections can be seen as progress—especially when writers start seeing more rejections from editors who respond personally and give advice for improvements rather than a generic rejection letter (Maum 48). When writers view their rejections as progress, their optimism improves their confidence. Bukowski even said that rejection encouraged him to write better and acceptance kept him writing (69). Failure can also be used as material for writing (Mosley 10). For instance, writers can use the stories of their own failures in life to inspire new stories. Many readers can relate to the story of someone's failure because failure is part of humanity.

One paradigm that can harm writers' attitudes toward failure is the false belief that writing should be effortless, which can discourage writers at the first sign of difficulty

(Csikszentmihalyi 11). Experienced writers know that writing is always going to be difficult (Sword 1573-81; Hemingway 18), and it may take some writers many years to achieve success (Bukowski 181). Therefore, writers will benefit more from being kind to themselves when they have a hard time (Cron 57). Graciously learning from failure should become a way of life for writers. Rejection and failure should not come as a surprise, but writers can use them to recognize weaknesses and then focus on improving them (Hall 30).

#### 4.2 Generating Ideas and Creativity

Many writers may struggle to develop new ideas for writing. Although many publishers of novels do not mind following a conventional paradigm for plot, they do expect the writer to offer something new for the reader. Some methods for developing ideas for writing are to strive for originality, keep commonplace books, read a lot, recognize and use the elements of storytelling, make good selections, and learn how to overcome writer's block.

##### 4.2.1 Finding Originality

Writers should strive for originality which usually comes from their interests and fixations, those things that are constantly on the writers' minds. These fixations "come out in our words, in our feelings, in our decisions. They are the focus of the books we read, the podcasts we subscribe to, the websites we scour, the groups we join, and the obsessions we pursue" (Allen 41). Since writers gain ideas from the world around them and their own imaginations, it is natural that they would write the most about what they think of the most (Goldberg 42; Dillard 67). Writers write what they are uniquely interested in, and then hope that they can make the subject interesting for their readers.

Writers get their original ideas from their own lives and their own desires. Some Christian writers claim that they also receive ideas from the Holy Spirit (Ayres). When writers

participate in their everyday life, it generates fresh ideas for their writing (Lamott 167; Larimer and Gannon 384; Williams 225). While more life experience can certainly help writers come up with ideas from their own lives, the quantity of years is not the determining factor to the quality of the ideas as O'Connor says, "The fact is that anybody who has survived his childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his days. If you can't make something out of a little experience, you probably won't be able to make it out of a lot" (84). Living and being interested in the real world and gaining experience is how writers get their most original ideas because no one lives the same life (Zinsser 245; Le Guin 101-102, 147; King 37-38).

#### 4.2.2 Keeping Commonplace Books

As writers go about living their lives, they need to remember all the original ideas as they come up with them so that they can use them later. There is no secret formula to living or a hidden database that has all the best ideas (King 37-38), but writers can maintain their own databases by keeping commonplace books. A commonplace book is something that writers can carry around—either a notebook or something digital—where they can record all their ideas as they come. Writers use commonplace books to write down all the things that are right in front of them that will make for good stories (Goldberg 21, 31). Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, like many other writers, carries a notebook around with her because anything can be a source of inspiration (17). Commonplace books do not need to be organized, but they are a good place to refer to where all the ideas are listed together (Larimer and Gannon 43). A commonplace book does not even have to be an actual book; some writers use scraps of paper, sticky notes, or voice recordings on their cellphones (Sword 2934).

#### 4.2.3 Reading for Inspiration

Ideas come from experience and imagination (Welty 89; Le Guin 101-102). Even nonfiction writing which records real events as they happened still contains imaginative elements in the writer's prose. Writers write what they see in real life, but it is all informed by their memories and worldview which draw from their imaginations to make something new. But imagination and experience alone cannot teach a writer to write. Writers learn to write from reading other writers; they feed their imaginations by reading. Reading is widely considered to be an essential practice for anyone who wants to be a writer (Maum 319; King 145; Hall xiv; Sword 1364). King explains why reading is important:

The real importance of reading is that it creates an ease and intimacy with the process of writing.... Constant reading will pull you into a place...where you can write eagerly and without self-consciousness. It also offers you a constantly growing knowledge of what has been done and what hasn't, what is trite and what is fresh, what works and what just lies there dying (or dead) on the page. The more you read, the less apt you are to make a fool of yourself with your pen or word processor. (150)

By reading a lot, writers not only learn how to perform the mechanics of writing, but other people's stories can inspire new stories (Hemingway 91; Le Guin 114). Other writers all contribute to the collective knowledge base that is called literature, and writers should attempt to become experts in the field that they want to enter.

Reading is not just looking at words on the page. It is important to learn how to listen closely (Goldberg 58) and read closely to fully understand meaning. Good writing requires a lot of practice in the three areas of listening, reading, and writing (58-59). These three practices help the writer recognize the world around them, and then record the emotional truths that they hear

and observe. Hemingway says, “Good writing is true writing. If a man is making a story up it will be true in proportion to the amount of knowledge of life that he has and how conscientious he is” (10). Even when writers make things up, it still has some connection to something that they’ve known or thought of in their real life. Their stories draw from their experience and imagination. They use both sources of ideas to write about emotional truths. The truth that writers seek to tell is not necessarily objective truth, but rather emotional truth (Friedman 33).

#### 4.2.4 Recognizing and Using the Elements of Storytelling

Writers need their imaginations to make good stories, but first they need to know what makes a good story and what doesn’t. When writers can recognize and use the elements of storytelling effectively, they can keep their readers hooked on their story. While some forms of writing—like lyrical poetry—may not tell a full story, they still tell emotional truths. Storytelling is one way to get to emotional truths. King claims that storytelling is more important to readers than literary style (King 160). Readers recognize and relate to characters in a book by knowing their story and what they want. Characters with strong desires are relatable (Stein 83) because it is part of human nature to want things. What these characters want drives the story (Cron 48).

But to have a story, there must be a conflicting force that prevents the character from getting what he or she wants (Cron 18). This conflict can be internal or external (George 236). It is the conflict, or the possibility that the character will not get what they want, that keeps the reader reading to see how it all turns out. Writers should make as much tension and conflict in the story as possible (Stein 105) because this tension shows the consequences or stakes in the story in the story, which are what the readers care about (Cron 13). To create conflict, writers first need to be keen observers of human nature (Smith 1; Larimer and Gannon 40). This means listening and looking closely to people and attempting to understand the motivations behind their

actions. By observing the world, writers attempt to understand it. By reading, the readers also are attempting to understand the world and people. The reader wants to see if the writer knows something more about human nature. Writers create conflict by building from this knowledge of human nature, and pitting the natures of two humans, or conflicting desires in one human, against each other. They also create conflict by giving characters different narratives or understandings about a situation that oppose each other (Stein 92). The conflict comes from the misunderstanding or the attempt to understand what the other person means, which is a typical human obstacle in real life (Cron 66).

Conflict can be internal or external, but since the main character's desire is what drives the story, the internal conflict is just as important, if not more so, than the external plot because it creates the cause and effect in the story (Cron 157; Robinson 130-1). Conflict cannot happen in vacuum with no consequences. The actions must have reactions, and this back and forth is what builds the story until someone wins out in the end (Cron 112). Readers want this conflict because, whether they recognize it or not, the conflict teaches them something about life through someone else's eyes. Lisa Cron discusses how the brains mirror neurons help readers learn from stories; "our mirror neurons fire when we watch someone do something *and* when we do the same thing ourselves. But it's not just that we register what it would feel like physically; our goal is to *understand* the action.... Mirror neurons allow us to feel what others experience almost as if it were happening to us" (66). Mirror neurons make readers believe temporarily that the story is happening to them, and they feel the same things the characters feel (Goldberg 75).

Readers read because they believe that the writer has something to tell them that they don't already know—whether it is a new story or new information. It is up to writers to use the elements of storytelling to show the reader something new or a new perspective on something

that they already know. After recognizing the elements of storytelling, writers can use them to tell compelling stories.

#### 4.2.5 Writing is Selection

Writers can get good at recording all the different ideas that they have for writing. They may have several full commonplace books that have innumerable ideas for conflicts, desires, characters, and all the other things that writers need to keep a story going. So how do writers choose what to write? How do they choose what they think will interest readers? Writers can enthusiastically record their ideas and never write a publishable piece (Silvia 4). Eventually the writers must make a choice of what to write and commit to it until it is finished. This is a process called selection.

All writing is selection. Writers need to find the story ideas that interest them and (hopefully) interest readers as well (Bell 655; McPhee 182). For example, writers tend to write in the genres that they read the most and interest them. So a writer who is interested in the Romance genre can try writing an original romance, and because of their interest in the topic they may be able to convey that same interest to their readers. Selection does not only apply to story types, but also every single word in the narrative that makes up the story. Ursula K. Le Guin says about selection, “Fiction is experience translated by, transformed by, transfigured by the imagination. Truth includes but is not coextensive with fact. Truth in art is not imitation, but reincarnation. To be valuable in a factual history, the raw material of experience has to be selected, arranged and shaped” (105). When selecting words, writers should consider the reader and to pity their time—that is, to make one’s writing worthy of their time and only give them what they need to read (Vonnegut 66; Zinsser 156; Stein 186).

How do writers select the right things for their stories? After all, the goal of most writing is to provide an experience for the reader (Goldberg 75). So how do writers convey the experience? Many writers start with the five senses: sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste. These senses are how people experience the world, and they are how the reader needs to experience the writer's literary world (Welty 10; O'Connor 42; Friedman 99). By experiencing fiction through the five senses, readers can feel transported to the world that they are reading about.

But how many details are too much for a reader? Cron answers this question, "Too many specifics can overwhelm the reader. Our brain can only hold about seven facts at a time. If we're given too many details too quickly, we begin to shut down" (117). There is a balance between giving the reader the necessary sensory details and too many details that will bore them (Stein 186). The specific details need to be essential to the story (Cron 187). Readers expect every detail in the story to have significance to the story (189). The sensory details provide a sense of place, but they also need to move the story forward.

#### 4.2.6 Taking Risks

The best ideas may not be the safest ideas. The safe ideas are those that have been done before and have succeeded. Some may argue that writers are successful when they write what readers expect, but doing so does not necessarily help writers improve their writing. For writers to expand their talent and progress as writers, they need to take risks and try something new. In the beginning of developing a story, writers can use the clichés (Bell 400), but then they must get creative and write something new. When writers try something new, there is always the risk that it will not work. But without the risk, there would be no new stories. The best way for writers to do this is to keep an open mind and see what they come up with and determine whether it can work (Larimer and Gannon 40).

Writers will not be able to please everyone with their writing but there is a chance that at least a small group of people will have interest in it if the writer is interested in it, too. As Silvia says, “It’s better to serve a small, core audience well than to write a diffuse, generic book that no group in particular finds relevant or satisfying” (103). Taking this assumption one step further, some writers believe that writers should be willing to take risks even if it means that it could hurt someone. By this, they do not mean defamation or slander. Rather, they mean that writers must strive to tell the truth even if it means that the truth will hurt someone else or the writers themselves (Stein 157; Doctorow 74). Writers may have to take the risk of hurting someone who may recognize their shameful or embarrassing story in their writing (Friedman 22-23). Friedman claims that the best ideas can come from the things people shrink away from; “Only by examining what others shrink from—by viewing people’s degradation and corruption, that is—can he hope to make his great discovery...His work requires exhuming human bodies; writers work requires unburying the events and emotions which have been suppressed” (30-31). People tend to shrink away from the truth or what makes them feel ashamed, but it is often these two things that make the best stories and writers should always aim to tell the best story they can.

Some writers feel a sense of urgency to write their best work before they die, and they will need to take risks with their writing to accomplish this. They must be ready to recognize good ideas and have the sense of urgency to write them down while they have time (Welty 85). This does not mean that writers try to write their best stuff before they are ready (Maum 37). Rather, Dillard urges, “Write as if you were dying. At the same time, assume you write for an audience consisting solely of terminal patients. That is, after all, the case. What would you begin writing if you knew you would die soon? What could you say to a dying person that would not enrage by its triviality?” (68). Writers strive to write something that will make their lives and

their readers' lives on earth a little better and more meaningful. If a writer knows that they have good material right then, they should use it then while they have it (Dillard 78-79).

Taking risks in writing can also mean trying out different genres of writing to see if they work (McPhee 79). Writers may want to risk writing in a variety of genres before they find their favorite genre. Once they find it, Zinsser encourages them to write well: "Writing well means believing in your writing and believing in yourself, taking risks, daring to be different, pushing yourself to excel. You will write only as well as you make yourself write" (302). Risk also means pushing oneself to be better as a writer.

#### 4.2.7 Overcoming Writer's Block

What happens when writers have recorded all their ideas and are willing to take risks but still feel as though they cannot get any good words onto a page? This is a feeling that many writers lament as "writer's block." Most writers at some point cannot produce any good prose (McPhee 158), cannot follow through on writing goals (Jones 85), run out of ideas or have too many ideas that they cannot make a decision (Cron 168). Even famous writers like Jane Austen took extended breaks from writing for various personal reasons including writer's block (Austen et al. 73). Writer's block can cause writers to feel insecure or question their identities as writers, but it is when writers can face down these negative feelings that they establish themselves as professionals (Cron 215). Overcoming these challenges also improves writers' confidence.

There are a few ways for writers to stand up to writer's block. First, they can acknowledge writer's block for what it is, as Silvia says, "Writer's block is a good example of a *dispositional fallacy*: A description of behavior can't also explain the described behavior. Writer's block is nothing more than the behavior of not writing. Saying that you can't write because of writer's block is merely saying that you can't write because you aren't writing. It's

trivial” (44). This statement does not discount those times that writers feel as though they no longer have good ideas. Rather, it offers part of the solution to writer’s block which is to keep writing even if the quality of the writing is poor. Secondly, writers can adhere to regular writing routines. It is the physical practice of writing itself that helps writers break through writer’s block (Sword 350; Silvia 24; Le Guin 98). Writers can switch up their routines if they feel blockage, like changing their writing method or location (McPhee 51). Thirdly, the same practices that help writers develop original ideas are the ones that help them overcome the blockage. In a letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald, Hemingway stresses the importance of listening closely again to get over blockage, “a long time ago you stopped listening except to the answers to your own questions.... That’s what dries a writer up (we all dry up. That’s no insult to you in person) not listening. That is where it all comes from. Seeing, listening. You see well enough. But you stop listening” (32). Reading also helps writers overcome writer’s block (Adichie 6). The techniques that help writers get over writer’s block are writing, listening, and reading.

#### 4.3 Developing Grit for Productivity

After writers develop a healthy confidence level and develop creative ideas, they need to follow through on writing goals. Writers accomplish these goals by developing their own grit, which psychologist Angela Duckworth defines as the combination of passion and perseverance (8). Writers develop grit through deliberate practice and embracing creative flow (Duckworth 131), which will be discussed more in this section. Experienced writers insist that successful writers are not necessarily the most talented: they are the ones who persist and persevere (Bell 146; Friedman xv; George 308; King 144; Larimer and Gannon 19; Maum 236; Stein 277).

##### 4.3.1 Motivation to Write

Before writers can increase and maintain their productivity, they must motivate themselves to write. This motivation can be intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsic motivations can include the search for truth, meaning, hope, enjoyment, and for making sense of the world (Csikszentmihalyi 216; Messud 240-242; Goldberg xix; O'Connor 40; Welty 90). Extrinsic motivations can include desires for fame or money (Austen et al. 76). The category "Motivation to Write" breaks off into five subcategories of motivations: the need to find truth, to find purpose or meaning or hope, to discover one's own shared humanity, to survive and enjoy life, and to achieve fame. Once writers discover their own motivations, then they can focus on their productivity.

#### 4.3.1.1 Finding the Truth

Regardless of their belief system—with the exception of some post-modernists—humans have always been searching for truth; it is a uniquely ancient human quest according to the Christian perspective. Writers claim that their writing practice is part of their quest to find out the truth about the world and to help readers find the truth (Hosseini 58; O'Connor 40; Stegner 152; Shelley 8; Wordsworth 11; Goldberg 48). This does not include writers who do not believe in the existence of truth or absolute truth. O'Connor said, "The basis of art is truth, both in matter and in mode. The person who aims after art in his work aims after truth" (65). Jeanette Winterson gives a definition of truth as it relates to art; "Art tells this truth, and it is an emotional truth. That makes it desperately needed, and desperately feared" (188). Marilynne Robinson says that the beauty in the art of writing should relate directly to the truth; "For me, this is a core definition of beauty: that it is both rigorous and dynamic and that it somehow bears a deep relationship to truth" (125). Writers are clear that one of their main motivations for writing is to discover the truth and to share it with other people. But once they start to discover truth, to what does it lead?

#### 4.3.1.2 Finding Meaning, Purpose, and Hope through Writing

Many people who seek after truth desire that the results of the search will help them find meaning, purpose, and hope (O'Connor 101; Dillard 73). While truth can be considered a universal concept, every individual has his or her own purpose, idea of meaningfulness, and hope. As Hall says, "Stories make sense not only of the larger world, but also our personal world. The older we get, the more likely we are to create a narrative about the meaning of our lives" (116). Welty explains how storytelling and the search for meaning happen simultaneously; "Writing a story or a novel is one way of discovering *sequence* in experience, of stumbling upon cause and effect in the happenings of a writer's own life" (90). A story is cause and effect, so writers use storytelling to find the cause and effect in their own lives and other lives.

Csikszentmihalyi explains what all is involved in the pursuit of meaning:

Creating meaning involves bringing order to the contents of the mind by integrating one's actions into a unified flow experience...People who find their lives meaningful usually have a goal that is challenging enough to take up all their energies, a goal that can give significance to their lives. We may refer to this process as achieving *purpose*. (216)

When writers write they organize their own minds (Mosley 12), which in turn helps them find meaning and purpose.

Meaningfulness is subjective (Cron 89), so a simpler definition of meaningfulness is how writers make sense of things and impose order on the world (Robinson 131; Stegner 149; Larimer and Gannon 3). When writers use stories to find meaning and make sense of the world, the data indicates that it gives them hope (Larimer and Gannon 313; O'Connor 78). This does not mean that people need to indulge in escapism, but rather that writing is a transcendental act

that helps writers focus on hopeful things. Reading other people's writing can also give readers a sense of hope, and there is a psychological explanation for this:

At its best, literature contains ordered information about behavior, models of purpose, and examples of lives successfully patterned around meaningful goals.

Many people confronted with the randomness of existence have drawn hope from the knowledge that others before them had faced similar problems, and had been able to prevail. (Csikszentmihalyi 236)

The act of writing and reading literature to make sense of the world gives hope to the writer and the reader.

Hope is a uniquely human feeling, so when writers write to find meaning and hope, they are discovering parts of their own humanity. This may not be true of all writers, as some writers experience hopelessness and they express those feelings in their writing. But the data in this thesis shows that writers intentionally write to discover what it is that makes us human (Messud 240-242; Goldberg xxii). Because writing is a uniquely human activity, written products sometimes reflect human flaws (Atwood 27), like how the messiness in stories reflects the messiness of human emotions. Storytelling is so much part of the human condition that Marilynne Robinson claims civilizations are built on storytelling:

[When reading and writing fiction] we are doing something so ancient, so pervasive, and so central to human culture that we can assume its significance, even if we cannot readily describe or account for it. There is no reason to suppose the invention of narrative is in any way a marginal activity. Narratives define whole civilizations to themselves, for weal or woe. (136)

Storytelling is an art that lasts and that helps people recognize what really matters (Winterson 175) because it gives them a sense of their own identity and humanity (Hall 111; Zinsser 61).

Stories give people more understanding of the world than they may get in their daily lives because they tell us about human nature (Cron 82). Storytelling helps people understand themselves and builds community between the reader and the writer. It is an agreement and a relationship (Le Guin 106; Wordsworth 2; Vonnegut 67). It is a collaboration (Le Guin 113) and an intimate connection (Banks 40). Whichever way the writer chooses to view the connection with their readers, it is evident that writers who take their writing seriously know to be respectful of the readers (Vonnegut 67). People are all trying to enjoy this life as humans; reading and writing is a mutual way to enjoy life.

#### 4.3.1.3 Writing to Enjoy Life

Many writers write to fully enjoy their lives. Storytelling brings clarity and thrill to their lives that they cannot picture living without, and helps people enjoy life on a deeper level than mere survival (Raymond 4). Some writers even claim that storytelling keeps them from going insane (Le Guin 101). Csikszentmihalyi explains the psychology behind writing helping with sanity through the examples of poets in Iceland:

there are more poets per capita in Iceland than any other country of the world...[because] reciting the sagas became a way for the Icelanders to keep their consciousness ordered in an environment exceedingly hostile to human existence.... By mastering the orderly cadence of meter and rhyme, and encasing the events of their own lives in verbal images, they succeeded instead in taking control of their experiences...writing gives the mind a disciplined means of

expression...writing becomes a therapy for shaping some order among the confusion of feelings. (127-28, 132)

Writing can also be a form of therapy to deal with trauma (Morrison ix) and it can even be necessary for writers to maintain their sense of humanity (Morrison ix; Stone 166). Writing helps keep writers alive (Stein 13) and can bring a sense of peace during suffering (Goldberg xix).

But how can writers claim that stories keep people alive? Stories help people learn from other people's mistakes by living vicariously through them (Cron 9-11). Hall mentions the effect that storytelling has on the brain:

People are attracted to stories about disaster, about facing adversity and overcoming challenges, about conflict and self-doubt, and about connections made despite some kind of obstacle. Through story, we learn lessons about how to deal with our own lives.... Stories draw people in, and they connect the brain. Neuroscience has found that when an engrossing story is told, the listeners brain merges with the teller's, and they manifest the same brain-wave action. (113)

Robert Stone claims the same thing:

Storytelling is not a luxury to humanity; it's almost as necessary as bread. We cannot imagine ourselves without it, because the self is a story.... We tell ourselves our own stories, selectively, in order to keep our sense of self intact. The brain can't function without clearing its circuits during sleep, nor can we contemplate and analyze our situations without living some of the time in the world of imagination, sorting and refining the random promiscuity of events. (166)

Writers tell stories not just because they like it, but because it is a necessary part of their humanity. Humans survive because of the connections that stories build with other people, and the community keeps each other alive.

#### 4.3.1.4 Writing for Fame and Fortune

Some writers may write because they want to become famous. Nevertheless, some writers claim that money and fame are not prevalent motivations in the writing community, or writers have conflicting testimonies about how important or unimportant fame is to them. Jon Raymond notes the difficulty of the writing profession bringing any kind of fame; “Writing of the literary variety—poetry, fiction, nonfiction, all of it—persists as a marginal cultural activity, at best. It doesn’t generate much in the way of wealth, or almost anything in the way of usable technical knowledge of humankind.... A basic indifference to serious writing has probably always been the de facto attitude in our culture” (1). But other writers such as Jane Austen wanted to be known for writing, as she said in one of her letters, “I am very much flattered by your commendation of my last letter, for I write only for fame, and without any view to pecuniary emolument” (76). Contrarily, Bukowski didn’t care if he was famous, “Fame + immortality are games for other people. If we’re not recognized when we walk down the street, that’s our luck. So long as the typer [sic] works the next time we sit down” (101). Jeanette Winterson also claims that she does not care about fame or money (173). The data does not show any definitive or conclusive trend that writers write to be famous. Much more data exists that indicates writers are intrinsically motivated.

#### 4.3.2 Discipline

Successful writers agree that writing and productivity require self-discipline (Bell 106, 136; George 308; Bukowski 123; Goldberg 10; Mitchell 117; Sword 3005). But Sword also

points out that the word “discipline” when applied to the writing practice does not mean that writing is unenjoyable. Writers can enjoy their work, too; “Words like *pleasure* and *challenge* cropped up frequently in my interviews, suggesting that successful writers do not rely on externally mandated discipline alone” (Sword 528). This pleasure comes from an intrinsic motivation for writing and helps writers develop their own definition of success (Larimer and Gannon 390). Writers who have grit are the ones that use their self-discipline to achieve success.

#### 4.3.3 Developing Grit: The Essential Trait for Writers

Psychologist Angela Duckworth defines grit as the mixture of passion and perseverance (8). Duckworth differentiates between talent and grit:

Talent is how quickly your skills improve when you invest effort. Achievement is what happens when you take your acquired skills and use them.... Individuals in identical circumstances, what each achieves depends on just two things, talent and effort. Talent ... absolutely matters. But effort factors into the calculations *twice*, not once. Effort builds skill. At the same time, effort makes skill *productive*. (42)

Duckworth is not the only one that believes grit outweighs talent. Experienced writers claim that even though talent is necessary, effort beats talent most of the time (Friedman xxiii, xv; Cron 237; Goldberg 32; Hemingway 8). Not only does the writing discipline help writers succeed, but eventually that grit also helps writers develop confidence in their writing (Goldberg 32). The combination of talent and discipline are essential for the writer to make it in writing (Hemingway 8). But discipline is arguably more important, and it helps those who are already talented develop their talent. That is, if those talented people have a growth mindset. The people who develop their own grit are those people who adopt a growth mindset rather than a fixed mindset. Sword explains some of the psychology behind this mindset:

Psychologist Carol Dweck distinguishes between people with “a fixed mindset,” who believe that talent is a finite commodity, and those with a “growth mindset,” who believe that our innate talents can and should be stretched, challenged, and changed. For fixed-mindset people, Dweck explains, “effort is a bad thing. It, like failure, means you’re not smart or talented. If you were, you wouldn’t need effort.” For growth-mindset people, on the other hand, “effort is what makes you smart or talented.” Writers with a fixed mindset are likely to resist learning new skills, whereas those with a growth mindset never stop seeking out new ways of developing and testing the limits of their craft. (1738)

Writers with grit will see the setbacks in their writing—the rejection letters, the insecurities, the writer’s block—all as opportunities to overcome challenges rather than insurmountable blockages to their writing and publication. Csikszentmihalyi explains, “Almost every situation we encounter in life presents possibilities for growth... But these transformations require that the person be prepared to perceive unexpected opportunities ... a person must formulate new goals, and create a new flow activity for himself, or else he will waste his energies in inner turmoil” (207). Writers who believe in growth opportunities rather than giving up at the first sign of difficulty are the ones who end up publishing their work. These writers have grit.

So how do writers get grit? Duckworth discovered that people who are not naturally gritty can practice and develop their own grit (269). They start by finding their passion, practice at it, recognize their weaknesses and improve them, resist complacency, and then find the purpose and hope (91). When writers follow through on their writing goals and commitments, it requires grit but also builds their grit at the same time (233).

Although writers may not use the exact word “grit” to describe the essential character trait for writing, many of their descriptions fit with Duckworth’s definition of grit. Dillard discusses the importance of grit when she says, “Writing every book, the writer must solve two problems: Can it be done? and, Can I do it? Every book has an intrinsic impossibility, which its writer discovers as soon as his first excitement dwindles.... He writes it in spite of that. He finds ways to minimize the difficulty; he strengthens other virtues” (72). These “other virtues” that writers develop by writing through difficulty are called discipline and grit. Writers know how to do what Goldberg advises, “Do not be tossed away by your achievements or your fiascos. Continue under all circumstances. It will keep you healthy and alive.... There are no guarantees one way or the other. Just keep writing” (120). The “fiascos” to which Goldberg refers are usually the rejections that shoot down a writer’s confidence, and grit helps writers overcome rejection more than any other character trait does.

As discussed in the Confidence category, rejection is a reality for all writers (Silvia 94; Maum 236; Goldberg 117). Those writers who push past rejection and use it to improve their work have grit. Hall says she didn’t have a lot of talent and luck in her career like other writers seemed to have. She had to rely solely on grit (15). The key to developing grit is to press through in the face of rejection and failure, which writers can do through a combination of deliberate practice and creative flow.

#### 4.3.4 Grit and Deliberate Practice: The Routine

Deliberate practice, like diligence and discipline, is a term that people would naturally associate with the term grit. But according to Duckworth, deliberate practice has several specific steps that writers and any other people that want to perfect a craft need to follow. Duckworth outlines how people must practice with a deliberate purpose in mind to develop their skills in an

area. They 1) set a goal to improve a weakness 2) strive to reach this self-improvement goal in private (121). After that they 3) seek immediate feedback on what they did wrong (122), and 4) do it all again repetitively until they master many weaknesses (123). Deliberate practice is not only something that psychologists claim is necessary to perfect a skillset. Writers need to practice writing regularly with the focus on improving their writing to get better. Deliberate practice happens mainly when the writer is alone (Cain 81), and then being held accountable by other people to achieve one's goals (Sword 254; Silvia 50).

Writers need to set a writing routine for themselves (Silvia 12-13; Sword 388; Lamott xxiii; Zinsser 49; Dillard 32; King 157; Larimer and Gannon 19). They should allot a specific time for their routine, just like any other profession has specific work or office hours (King 157). By setting aside a time of day to write when they feel the most creative, writers can get in the mood for writing (Silvia 31) and then commit to it (George 310). Even T.S. Eliot would deny invitations to social outings with his friends to commit to his required writing, as he says in a letter to Virginia Woolf, "if I leave London at all I am most unlikely to get done all the things that I ought to do ... and certainly not any of the things that you want me to do. I have done absolutely nothing for six weeks. One thing is certain: I MUST stay in London...When do you want me to publish my defective compositions?" (1).

A set routine prevents writers from procrastinating on projects. But there are a few instances when deliberately taking a break from writing can help writers increase productivity. The everyday activities writers do when they take a break from writing can also be called rituals, and they include tasks that do not require a writer's full concentration. While doing these tasks, writers can allow their minds to wander, which allows them to think about their writing (Williams 231). Rituals are unique to every writer and they help writers get in the mindset for

writing (Lamott 109). A few examples of rituals include “dog walking ... running, washing up, painting and decorating ... swimming,” (Williams 235) and any other mundane activity that frees up the writer’s mind to think about writing and get creative (233). When writers use their time away from writing to think about their writing, it turns their non-writing time into productive time.

No matter what type of routine writers develop, they must still have some type of flexibility in that routine to avoid excuses for not writing if the circumstances aren’t exactly right (Sword 539). The important part of deliberate practice is to keep practicing, just as the important part about cardiovascular exercise is to keep doing it regularly to maintain strength. Goldberg uses this analogy:

[With running, you] practice whether you want to or not. You don’t wait around for inspiration and a deep desire to run. It’ll never happen, especially if you are out of shape and have been avoiding it. But if you run regularly, you train your mind to cut through or ignore your resistance. You just do it. And in the middle of the run, you love it.... That’s how writing is, too. Once you’re deep into it, you wonder what took you so long to finally settle down at the desk. (11)

When writers write routinely over time, they embrace their identities as writers, as Bukowski says, “Writing is only the result of what we have become day by day over the years” (193).

But there is more to routines than simply repeating the same action every day. To engage in deliberate practice, writers also need to set specific goals and then stick to them (Larimer and Gannon 14, 24-25; Goldberg 61). To maximize writing time, the writer should set goals that can be based on quantity of words, sections, time in the chair or content goals. The most important thing is to cut out distractions and your inner perfectionist (Maum 9-11; Friedman 15). These

goals come at different levels, but each level helps writers finish projects. Duckworth explains how grit factors into different levels of goals, “Grit is about holding the same top-level goal for a very long time.... In very gritty people, most mid-level and low-level goals are, in one way or another, related to that ultimate goal. In contrast, a lack of grit can come from having less coherent goal structures” (64). So if a writer’s long-term goal is to write and publish a novel, he or she can set short-term goals to accomplish the long-term goal such as writing chapters, character biographies, or plot maps. All these short-term goals can change and even be replaced by other short-term goals, but they all must lead to accomplishing the long-term goal. The short-term goals can also be called daily goals (Silvia 35), are specific and measurable, and help writers get to more abstract goals like creating a novel. It is important not to take writing too seriously at first because it can prevent writers from finishing the goal (Hemingway 45).

Goal setting and goal focusing has a biblical precedent in Proverbs 4: 25-26 which states, “Look straight ahead, and fix your eyes on what lies before you. Make out a straight path for your feet; stay on the safe path” (New Living Translation). When writers fix their eyes on what is in front of them, they are focusing on their long-term goal. Then writers make a straight path to that goal by setting short-term goals that lead them there. When they stick with the short-term goals over time, they can accomplish the long-term goal. Deliberate practice can look different for every writer, but all practices involve some shared traits: developing a routine of writing practice, setting daily goals and sticking with them, and finding ways to balance the creative side with the disciplined side of writing. Deliberate practice is writing, following through on goals, and improving oneself as a writer. When writers combine deliberate practice with flow, they create grit.

#### 4.3.5 Grit and Creative Flow: The Performance

The term “flow” was coined by the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and he describes it as an optimal experience that combines creativity and concentration (49). He describes the experience of flow:

The best moments usually occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile.

Optimal experience is this something that we *make* happen ... a theory of optimal experience is based on the concept of *flow*—the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter. (3-4)

Flow can happen spontaneously, but it is much more likely to happen in a structured and routine environment (71) which is why it is important for writers to keep a regular routine if they want to keep experiencing flow (Sword 689-94). Deliberate practice and routine help people experience flow—or what some writers call “inspiration” where the words just flow right out of them (Friedman 8; King 131-32; George 188; Le Guin 119)—more often.

While flow is usually more enjoyable than deliberate practice, both are important for grit. Duckworth explains the connection amongst grit, deliberate practice, and flow when she says, “*Gritty people do more deliberate practice and experience more flow*” (131, italics in original text). Flow is a result of hours of deliberate practice (132) Both practice and flow are enjoyable experiences, but they are enjoyable in a different way (137). Experienced writers warn younger writers to not get discouraged when they don’t experience flow for a while (Silvia 22). The deliberate practice is more important because inspiration may not always be there but the only way to get inspiration is to keep writing. Flow and deliberate practice help writers grow their own grit, but then they must apply that grit to their writing. They do this by planning, outlining, and constant rewriting.

#### 4.3.6 Outlining: Planning the Project

There are some writers who believe that inspiration should guide their writing, and they see planning as a way of stifling flow. While this may be true for some artists, many writers claim that there are far more benefits to planning than there are drawbacks. The outline does not lock writers into one set path for their writing projects, but rather it helps writers see all the possibilities for the project and plan out those which will work best (Cron 101; Sword 403).

Some writers end up blocked if they don't outline (George 227). Outlining breaks the story into manageable pieces, and it is as much a part of the writing process as the actual drafting and rewriting (Silvia 78). Therefore, when writers spend their writing time outline or researching, that time counts toward writing goals. Outlining also helps writers know their main point ahead of time so that they can reduce the clutter in their drafts (Cron 31). The process of cutting clutter is called revision or rewriting, and it is the final essential subcategory for productivity.

#### 4.3.7 Revision and Rewriting: The Essence of Writing

Rewriting and revising the first draft several times is the most important part of the writing process. The first part is to draft the manuscript and revise later after several readings (Bell 3590; Sword 865; Cron 222; Mosley 78; Lamott 24). McPhee says, "The difference a common writer and an improviser on a stage (or any performing artist) is that writing can be revised. Actually, the essence of the process is revision" (160). Because revisions are so important, writers agree that after the first draft is written, the writer should then assume a more objective attitude toward their writing and take on the role of the editor.

Taking on the role of the editor helps the writer get published, even though it is a lot more work for the writer. But because the writer's market is so competitive, editors are most

likely to offer a contract if the early draft does not require a lot of line-by-line editing (Stein 206; Silvia 87; Hall 62), Stein claims that egotism is the reason why some beginning writers refuse to edit their work:

The biggest difference between a writer and a would-be-writer is their attitude toward rewriting. The writer, professional or not, looks forward to the *opportunity* of excising words, sentences, paragraphs, chapters that do not work and to improving those that do. Many a would-be writer thinks whatever he puts down on paper is by that act somehow indelible.... Unwillingness to revise usually signals an amateur. (277)

The way to overcome the egotistical problem or insecurity problem at the first draft is to control one's attitude about the problem and accept the fact that revision is always necessary (Stein 290). Some people may view egotism as taking pride in one's work. But having true pride in one's writing means to discard and rewrite the bad material to get to the good material (Haddon 284). Even Bukowski, who spent most of his early writing career refusing to make revisions, eventually started to see the task of revising as an opportunity to improve (163).

Since all good writers agree that revision is important, most of them also agree that the first draft is almost always bad and requires revision (Mosley 78; Dubus 64; Lamott 24). King says that there are different purposes for different drafts:

every book—at least every one worth reading—is about something. Your job during or just after the first draft is to decide what something or somethings yours is about. Your job in the second draft—one of them, anyway—is to make that something even more clear. This may necessitate some big changes and revisions.

The benefits to you and your reader will be clearer focus and a more unified story.

It hardly ever fails. (201)

Most writers agree that it is a good idea to take a step away from the writing for a while before starting revisions, to have a more objective view (Hall 149-150; Goldberg 172; Hemingway 46). The end goal of improving writing is so that the reader's get the best experience from it (Vonnegut 66; Stein 284; King 57). The essence of revision is to cut out all the information that is not imperative for the story (Stein 197; Hall 142). The willingness to revise and follow through with the revisions requires grit, as Duckworth quotes an interview with the writer John Irving, "In writing a novel, it doesn't hurt anybody to have to go slowly. It doesn't hurt anyone as a writer to have to go over something again and again" (Duckworth 45). When writers revise, it is because they want to ensure that the reader understands everything and to keep only the most meaningful words (Friedman 55).

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### 5.1 Relationships between Categories and Subcategories

The focused and theoretical coding methods revealed several close relationships among the three main categories which are related through subcategories. Some of the subcategories incorporated elements from one or more of the main categories, which is shown in the Venn diagram (see Figure 1). This chapter will explain the relationships that the three categories share.

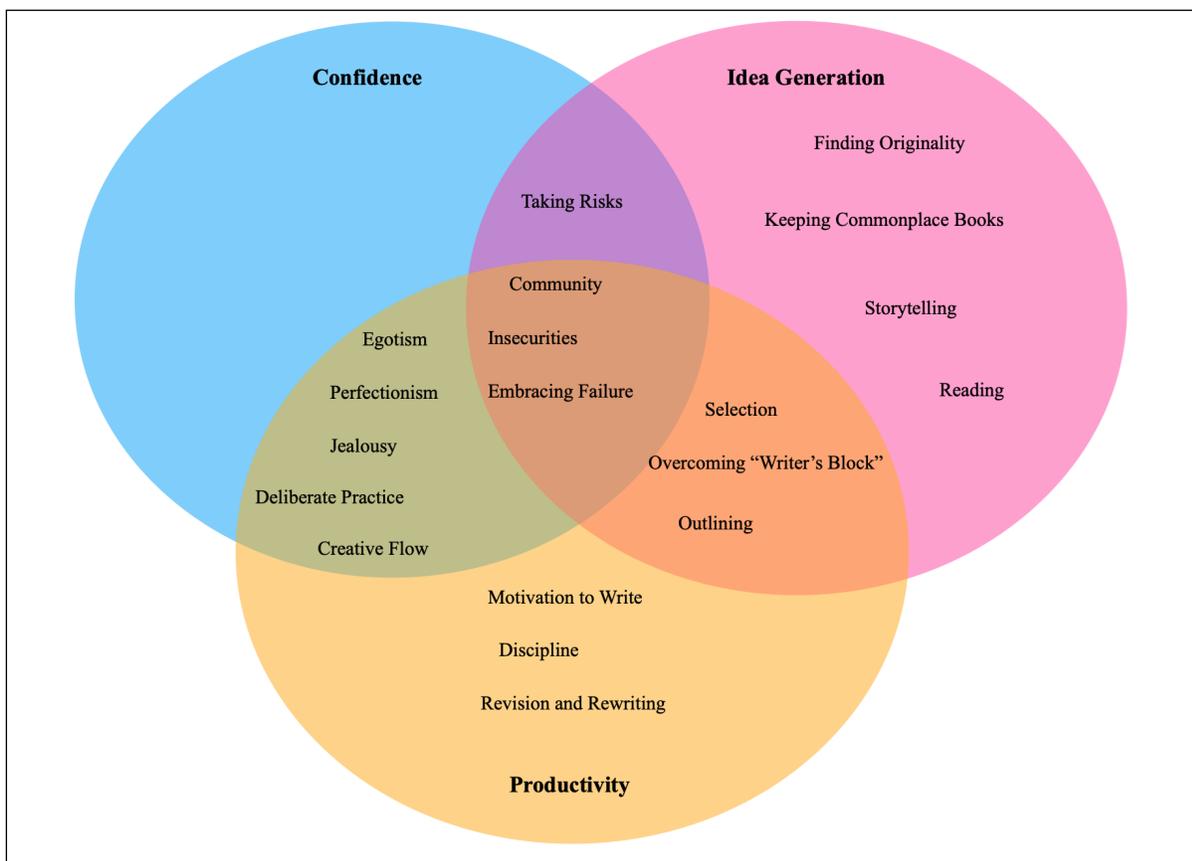


Figure 1. Venn diagram of writing practice categories and subcategories by Victoria Gomez, 2021.

### 5.2 Confidence: The Interdependent Category

All the subcategories of the “Confidence” category associate with either one or both of the other two main categories. This either indicates a large gap in the data on how writers develop confidence, or it indicates that writers’ confidence is interdependent with idea generation and productivity. Another possible category that could be explored to explain this seemingly interdependent relationship would be “courage,” as writers will need to have courage in order to take risks, embrace failure, and develop grit. Writers’ confidence may not cause writers to be more productive or creative and vice versa, but the process of developing all three may be cyclical. More research must be conducted to see if writers’ confidence in their writing exists outside of their actual writing practice.

### 5.3 Idea Generation and Confidence

“Confidence” and “Idea Generation” connect through the subcategory “Taking Risks.” When writers decide to take risks and challenge themselves by writing something new, they must learn how to trust their voice (Maum 37; McPhee 79), which is often developed after years of practice. This trust requires a certain level of self-confidence, an ability to believe in oneself, and a willingness to push oneself to be better (Zinsser 302).

### 5.3 Productivity and Confidence

“Productivity” and “Confidence” connect through the subcategories “Egotism,” “Perfectionism,” “Jealousy,” “Deliberate Practice,” and “Creative Flow.” Egotistical writers are unwilling to perform the revision and rewrites necessary to produce publishable work (Hemingway 78; Goldberg 26) making them less productive when it comes to writing a quality product. Perfectionism is a trait that can make writers too self-critical early on in their writing process (Goldberg 28; Sword 1383). Writers can practice self-compassion to avoid perfectionism (Lamott 30) and write freely without fear. Then they go back and revise later (Goldberg 39-40).

Jealousy of other writers is an emotion that can impair a writer's healthy sense of self-confidence. But writers can overcome jealousy by increasing their own productivity (Goldberg 16-17; Friedman 1, 7). Collective wisdom from writers on how to overcome jealousy has a biblical root in Galatians 6:4, which advises people to stop comparing themselves to others and focus on their own work.

When writers experience flow it develops their self-confidence because they feel as though they are contributing to the world (Csikszentmihalyi 42). But fear of failure prevents writers from experiencing creative flow (85). Perseverance helps writers push through their fears so they can experience flow again. Writers practice perseverance by setting short-term and long-term goals and working toward them daily. This has biblical precedence in Proverbs 4: 25-26 which advises people to focus on a clear way forward and to take deliberate steps that lead them to their desired goal. Perseverance is how writers develop grit. Writers and psychologists agree that grit is more important than talent when it comes to success in writing (Friedman xxiii, xv; Cron 237; Goldberg 32; Hemingway 8) and gritty writers have a balanced sense of self-confidence (Goldberg 32).

#### 5.4 Productivity and Idea Generation

“Productivity” and “Idea Generation” connect through the subcategories “Selection,” “Overcoming Writer’s Block,” and “Outlining.” It is unlikely that writers will use all their ideas—nor should they. They have to select their best ideas, or the ones that excite and inspire them the most or are the most suitable for effect and affect. But writers’ selections do not stop once they choose their topics. They also must select every word and detail through the process of drafting, rewriting, and revision. In this way, the subcategory “Selection” reaches across the main category “Idea Generation” into the “Productivity” category through its relationship to the

subcategory “Revision and Rewriting.” Writers balance their creative side with their productive side to select their best ideas and make the appropriate revisions (Goldberg 28; Bell 133). This balance increases the quality of their art.

“Productivity” also helps “Idea Generation” because the physical act of writing daily spurs writers’ creativity and it keeps them productive (Sword 350; Silvia 22). Arranging the ideas into an outline helps writers think of more ideas (Sword 403).

### 5.5 Subcategories Shared by All Three Main Categories

All three main categories connect through the subcategories “Community,” “Insecurities,” and “Embracing Failure.” Although most of the texts analyzed in this thesis focus on writing as an individual act, writers need support for their work—whether it is from friends and family, or other writers that help them with revisions. Many writers find this support through community that helps writers improve their confidence and inspires them (Larimer and Gannon 101; Csikszentmihalyi 165). Also, communities such as writers’ groups can also work as accountability groups for writers to maintain their productivity habits (Sword 254; Silvia 50).

The subcategory “Insecurities” stretches across all three main categories because of its inhibitive effect on all areas of the writing practice. Insecurity is directly related to writers’ fear of failure, which negatively impacts their confidence. Not only that, even if insecure writers come up with good ideas, insecurities inhibit them from recognizing the ideas as good (King 50; Bell 3590). Insecurity also prevents writers from engaging in creative flow because they are too focused on themselves (Csikszentmihalyi 85), thus impeding productivity.

Lastly, all three categories are connected by the subcategory “Embracing Failure and Learning from Mistakes,” which also describes grit. When some writers expect writing to be easy, they can lose confidence and motivation at the first sign of difficulty (Csikszentmihalyi

11). But writing is not easy; writers need to constantly improve (Sword 1573-81; Hemingway 18). Grit is a character trait that helps writers persevere after failure and view it as a learning opportunity (Csikszentmihalyi 207; Stein 277). This perseverance builds confidence (Cain 259) and refocuses writers' attention away from their insecurities (Maum 217; Fassler 284). Part of embracing failure and learning from mistakes is to develop one's own definition of success—whether that success looks like internal fulfillment or external accomplishments (Larimer and Gannon 390). Writers must see rejection as a normal part of a writer's life so that they can re-write and move on from it (Maum 236; Goldberg 117; Silvia 94; Hall 15; Mosley 78). Writers can also see these failures as inspiration for new ideas (Mosley 10) because they can use stories about failure to appeal to readers, since failure is a natural to humanity.

## 5.6 Conclusion

### 5.6.1 Contribution to the Profession

People can choose from a plethora of writing references about writing genre, style, plotting, storytelling, and much more. While several writers have written books that offer solutions to problems such as lack of confidence, developing ideas, and productivity habits, there is no single guide that covers these three problems in detail. This thesis contributes to the writing community because it uses a unique combination of expertise from successful writers and biblical principles to offer practical solutions on writing issues related to confidence, idea generation, and productivity.

### 5.6.2 Solution

Solutions to writers' lack of confidence, idea generation, and productivity can be solved with collective expertise from successful writers. Writers are individuals that develop their own

solutions to problems, so this guide does not offer homogenous advice. Rather, it analyzes the diverse opinions and lets writers decide which ones are best for their own style.

### 5.6.3 To the Writers

Writing is a uniquely human and challenging task. This guide should let struggling writers know that they are not alone; what they are doing is indeed difficult, but writers can have self-compassion and do what is in their control to improve their writing. Hopefully writers can read *The Writer's Grit Guide* knowing that there is a purpose to their work—which is to help themselves find truth, meaning, and hope—and to help their readers find the same things, because writing is the most fulfilling when its purpose exceeds personal gain.

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