

The First Thousand Words

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Original Publication Date in *Love Notes*: April 2007

Now that I've left the mind-numbing, soul-sucking day job, I'm a full-time writer. I write a minimum of two-thousand words a day, Monday through Fridays with weekends off for good behavior. Before I retired, finding both the time to write and the creative energy at the same time was a minor miracle. I no longer have that problem; however, I've discovered something else. Each day, the first thousand words are the most difficult to write. I already know once I make it over my magic number, the next thousand-plus words will roll out in record time.

Here are some of my successful tactics. I go back and read the last scene I wrote and make a few edits. Hopefully I've left myself a clue about where the next scene is going. I have classical piano music playing on my computer or the CD player because that seems to help me focus on the story. I might write a personal blog entry... Anything to get those ten fingers moving over the keys. And a confession: I keep an Excel spreadsheet with my daily word and page counts. (Just a touch of OCD.) When I'm really struggling with those first thousand words, I'll <hangs head in shame> click on word count after every burst of writing. Dang it! I like seeing my word total climb. Watching that number grow inspires me. It reminds me I'm truly a full-time writer, and I can make my writing goal another day. Remember, when goals are met, books are the result.

And this makes me wonder if other authors experienced a similar phenomenon? Maybe for you it's not the first thousand words. It could be the first hundred or the first two thousand. I posed the question to my fellow Music City Romance Writers members. What do you do to get past that little bump? And here's what some of them had to say.

Jody Wallace aka Ellie Marvel says: With two little non-angels at home, I don't have sizeable blocks of time to write thousands of words these days. I can't imagine the writing part getting easier after a certain hurdle, unless those hurdles are my youngest child's ability to scream, teethe and stay up as late as me. (Usually combined. She's good at multitasking.) However, I've heard that if you quit writing in the middle of a flow or a scene, it can be easier to kick-start your engine the next day. www.jodywallace.com or www.elliemarvel.com

From Ramona Richards: Here's a tip that helps me whenever I'm stalled out, whether it's at the beginning, middle, or end of the book: I flash my hero and heroine.

Nope, this doesn't involve prancing around the computer bereft of clothes. That would just scare the neighbors. A few years ago, I was challenged to write a number of "flash fiction" pieces. One even sold to a publication that specializes in flash fiction. For those unfamiliar with it, flash fiction is extremely short, usually less than 500 words and as little as 50. Yep, a 50-word short story, featuring a beginning, middle, and end, complete with character development. The that I sold was called Compassion's Antihistamine and went like this: "Last year at Christmas, Carlene set a dozen roses on the church organ, one for each month since her mother's death. The choir director hated them, since he was allergic and didn't think they belonged at the front of the church. This year, he brought his own dozen. And a new understanding."

So... "flashing" my H/H involves plopping them into a 50-100 word short story OUTSIDE where I am in the book. I place them either ahead in time in the same plot, or beyond the book, say, when they have to deal with their teenager's first fender bender. This gets me to brainstorming about where they are and where I want them to be, and it provides a few hints on how to get there. Let me know if you have any questions. www.ramonarichards.com

Sandra Wales aka Haley Elizabeth Garwood offers this sage advice. The horrible "what if I get blocked?" thought is forced from my tired brain with conflict. Not my own but my characters'. I put them in a situation and let them duke it out. That has always worked to get me going again. It doesn't matter if I never use that scene. Most of the time it turns out to be good enough to work into the story somewhere. It doesn't seem to be forced, and somehow comes from the world where my characters live.

Another fail-safe trick I use is to have two or more projects going at the same time. When I get stuck on one, I switch to the other. I dive into the other project and refuse to think about the dragon. (I call it that because it seems to be dragon me down. You have my permission to groan.) Eventually, the dragon roars at me. "Pay attention to what I'm telling you, jerk face. Here's what you need to do."

So I mull that advice over, wrestle it around in my brain, and switch back to the first project. Usually one project takes over, and I am able to finish it before going back to the second one.

I do extensive outlining with banner paper and post-it notes. On the notes I summarize the scene. I also include whose POV we're in (I'm a purist), each character's internal and external conflicts (if they're known), and each character's goal. That usually points out potential problems and helps me keep the plot straight. Since I write medieval historical novels based on real women, the plot is partially there for me already. I do have to flesh it out and create the character traits based on their actions.

The best way to break that block is to run it by your critique partners. Mine are great. They see solutions I don't see. Heck, they even see the problems that may occur because of how the situation is set up. If you have to fight a dragon, it's easier when you have help to put out the flames. <http://haleyelizabethgarwood.com>

From Trish Milburn: There's not a magic number for me, but just getting started is difficult. And I don't know why. It's a complete mystery. I do different things to get started: take my laptop to the couch and write there; make a deal with myself that I will write one page then I can get up and do something else for fifteen minutes, then repeat the process; make myself sit at the computer and write for a certain amount of time then I can go read a chapter of a good book; or tell myself that as soon as I meet my goal for the day, I get to watch a movie. It's all about tricking my brain. And I know that when I do reach the daily goal, I'll feel really good about it. If I piddle the day away, I always end up feeling bad. So why on earth is it so hard to get started each and every time? It's as much of a mystery as why we park on driveways and drive on parkways. <http://trishmilburn.com>

