



# Breaking Writer's Block: Morning Pages Day and Night

by *Noelle Sterne*



Three shelves in my library are crammed with guaranteed-to-break-your-writer's-block books. All have a thick dust blanket, some have grown moss, and a few have put down roots.

One book, though, never even got to the shelf. Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way* (Tarcher, 1992) went with me everywhere and, to my astonished wonder, revived my lifelong, nearly stone-cold dream of writing consistently. BC--Before Cameron--all my fervent declarations and self-promises, after a few heady days or weeks, crumbled like smashed cookies before the screaming demands of the rest of life.

Cameron understands this. As her bestsellerdom confirms, she has reawakened many blocked writers, artists, composers, sculptors, cinematographers, and other "creatives," as she calls us, to get going again and keep moving (p. 139). She is a true doctor of letters, and her elixir works whatever your mode or malady and whenever you start treatment.

Cameron's rehabilitative program is carefully designed to entice you back into writing. Over twelve weeks, in gradual doses of one chapter a week, she prescribes explicit assignments that nudge you to regained respect for yourself and reacquaintance with your creativity. Integral to the treatment is what she calls the Morning Pages (MP). But unlike the assignments, their contents are not prescribed at all.

## Combatting the Inner Censor: Morning Pages

At first jolt, the MP seem like all those timeworn, well-meaning platitudes from our early writing teachers about keeping journals and diaries. But the MP are different. They jumpstart our inventive engines so we can reach the cruising speed of uncompromising daily writing.

Their main purpose is to clear our heads of the pervasive preoccupying gunk we carry around that drags us from our work or stops us cold. As Cameron tells us, the MP are the unjudging receivers of that constant stream of dismal thoughts, feelings, railings, and lamentations that bombard our minds and get in our way.

You know the ones: whiny, grossly self-pitying, obsessively repetitive. The MP provide a safe, nontoxic dumping ground for these landfills of jealousies, rages, and self-indulgent trivialities. She consoles us, "Nothing is too petty, too silly, too stupid, or too weird to be included" (p. 10).

You may be protesting, "Wait a minute. This is the stuff I spilled out ad

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nauseam in my secret adolescent diary, cursing my existence for not yet having a bestseller at 14."

Exactly. Well, now it's not only okay, it's required.

Don't worry, as I did, that the MP must be "real" writing. Cameron assures us otherwise, not that this should be discouraged. If you're already doing the Pages, you've probably discovered that occasionally, without preparation or warning, a little gem pops through. You've experienced that mysterious creative state beyond conscious effort that results only from consistent application of pen to paper or fingers to keyboard.

Such times are surely to be cherished. But, as we all know, they're regrettably few. And one way to induce more of them is by doing the Morning Pages.

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Cameron specifies only two conditions. First, whatever we write, however tortured, small-minded, mean-spirited, or monotonous, we must daily fill three handwritten pages. They can be looseleaf pages, loose pages, or notebook pages (not one of those tiny ones). And second, we should fill our pages in the morning.

She coaxes us to the task with several great reasons:

1. In their innocuous way, the MP combat "the Censor," that ubiquitous inner shrew that never shuts up (p. 12). Even if, by other people's standards, we have an all-A life, or a list of works longer than Mozart's, the Censor endlessly informs us that we never do enough or do it well enough.
2. In bold rebellion to the Censor, the Morning Pages feed our "inner child" (p. 12), that twinkly part of us long imprisoned by parents, religion, school, and society. Whether we know it or not, our child is giggling to break out.
3. When we do the MP faithfully, they get us beyond the Censor's reach to the other side "of our fear, of our negativity, of our moods." This is the place where "we find our own quiet center" and our own triumphant voice (p. 12).

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With Cameron's excellent reasons, I've discovered a few others:

4. The Morning Pages, despite their dubious quality, undeniably count as writing. Never mind that the rest of the day whizzes by with jobs, kids, partners, laundry, dental appointments, and all the other relentless to-dos. You've written something besides a list of groceries or car problems.
5. You feel like a serious, committed writer doing the MP. They tell you, *Yes, I am keeping this daily promise to myself.*
6. You've put your writing first. If you must fault yourself for how you write, you can at least stop the self-flogging for not writing at all.
7. The MP give you an ongoing, physical record of progress. You can label your notebooks by the year or quarter and prop them on a bookshelf or file them in a cabinet. Take heart and encouragement watching the shelf or cabinet fill with the fruits of your self-discipline.

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Whatever your method, know that the MP work. Cameron herself is ample

evidence, a veteran of a decade (!) of doing them, with an impressive, ever-growing list of writing and other creative accomplishments.

The testimonies to Cameron's methods by grateful unblocked creatives span all the arts, with many "made-it" names you'd instantly recognize. It's sobering to realize that success, fame, position, wealth, bestsellers, talk shows, even your mother's approval don't automatically immunize you from the blocking affliction. Cameron tells of a successful writer-producer who religiously rose at 5:00 a.m. every day to do the MP and credits them "with inspiration for her recent screenplays and clarity in planning her network specials" (p. 9).

## Doing Your Morning Pages at Night

My testimony is somewhat less dramatic, and I'm still a novice at just past three years. But unless the universal pen supply dries up, I will not quit.

However, as you already may suspect from the title of this piece, I've taken creative liberty with one of Cameron's fundamental conditions. My Morning Pages are no longer done in the morning.

After the first burst of perfect rule-following, as if by themselves, the early entries stopped. An undeniably non-morning person, at first light I'm completely incapable of bounding eagerly out of bed, sweet-lipped and bright-eyed. It's a feat to get up at all, much less do anything like writing.

I work independently in my office residence, and I've learned that I must sneak into the day. After dressing, I ease in by going out to the terrace and gather several essentials: coffee, daily meditative book, TV guide, newspaper or magazine, and the ubiquitous clipboard and pen. I sit, sip, stare, sigh, survey the sky, smell the air, and, blurry eyes slowly focusing, take in the relatively newborn day.

After a few jolts of caffeine, I begin to think about the day's demands and scribble them in a rough schedule. Then I check out the prime time TV, read a feature (always looking for markets), and turn to the day's meditation for spiritual refueling. This routine has been a habit for years, and when the Morning Pages were added, before I got to the morning's work it was almost lunchtime. So my MP grew later and later. At first I did them after lunch about 2, then between projects around 5:30. Finally, they hit the evening and stuck.

In the beginning, I felt like an irrevocable sinner. But soon, I found that switching to the evening did not condemn me to metaphorless purgatory. The MP at night, I saw with shocked relief, still did for me everything Cameron promised they would in the morning, and maybe more.

They're the cathartic receptacle of the day's pettinesses and redundant gripes against those closest and most annoying. They're the open-armed accepters of ceaseless rationales and self-justifications. They're the patient receivers of too-frequent cries of "Nothing to say!" And occasionally, they're the recorders of small, significant victories ("Did 15 minutes on this piece today!").

## Keeping Your Morning Pages Alive

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As the MP have continued to work, I've developed many ways to keep them working, whatever the time. Like evolutionary adaptations for survival, these methods ensure that the Pages stay alive, in my heart, mind, and write brain.

Here are some of them.

1. Plunk paper and pens everywhere—main writing area, kitchen, bedside night table, bathroom near the magazines, briefcase, tote, car seat. The MP can be done anywhere and at any time.
2. Use any waiting time anywhere to do them, even if you don't finish them in a single stint.
3. Finish the day's MP whenever you next can, as long as it's before midnight.
4. Do them slowly or quickly. At first you may need 45 minutes or more, but eventually, according to Cameron, most writers settle into 10 to 15 minutes. This time leaves room for a little thinking and eventually some honesty.
5. Do them neatly or messily, and don't worry about whether you'll be able to read them later.
6. If you feel absolutely blank, just keep writing, "I have nothing to write." Very soon you will.
7. Keep doing the Pages. Keep doing the Pages.

What if you miss a day, or night, completely? It feels awful, worse than stealing from your partner's pocket.

When I've missed an entry, I sometimes don't realize it for an hour or even a day. But the instant I remember, I stop everything and pinpoint the exact moment this supposedly steadfast habit flew from my mind like a hawk from captivity.

There's only one thing to do—forgive myself. And take corrective steps: set the clock, plaster signs all over the house, beg for help from my significant other. Most crucial of all, I jump back on the horse and kick the pen into a gallop, whatever the hour.

The MP work in the morning, afternoon, night, or any other time of day. Despite all my rationalizations and naughty rebellions, I'm writing proof that they do what they're meant to.

They've gotten me back to thinking and living like a writer. They've helped resurrect my lifelong goal from the mountainous ashes of decades-long distractions. And last spring, two years after starting the MP, on an uneventful work morning I got a call from the regional Sunday magazine editor. He wanted to publish an essay!

So, do the Morning Pages whenever you choose—brunch, high tea, or vampire dawn. Commit to them, hold fast, and keep scribbling. You'll gradually notice some amazing things. You're less afraid, you're growing ideas, picking up unfinished work, and even feeling spurts of hope. And, best of all miracles, you've given yourself the delicious practice of regular writing.

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About the Author

With a doctorate from Columbia University, Noelle Sterne is a writer, editor, and consultant who has been published in many magazines. These include *Children's Book Insider*, *Writer's Digest*, *Writers' Journal*, and *The Writer*. Her column, "The Starbucks

Chronicles" on the struggles of writing and joys of latté-sipping is a monthly contribution to the writers' online newsletter *Absolute Write*. Current projects include a book based on her academic consulting practice, *Grad U: How to Survive and Succeed in Graduate School, Get Your Degree, and Ease the Trip for Yourself and Everyone Who Has to Live with You*; and a collection of essays for writers, *First You Find Your Desk: Start Writing and Keep Writing with Less Agony and More Joy*.

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