What do you hope to get out of this workshop?
How to “Sit Down & Write”

A Writing Guide Presentation by CK Kirch

Writing Guides:
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Think of a project you’re currently working on:

What is the next step?
“Sit down and write”
Brushing teeth in the morning:

1. Enter bathroom
2. Put toothpaste on toothbrush
3. Brush teeth
Brushing teeth in the morning:
1. Enter bathroom
2. Put toothpaste on toothbrush
3. Brush teeth

How I brush my teeth in the morning:
1. 6:45 - Alarm A
2. Remove sleep mask & turn off alarm
3. 7:15 - Alarm B (app allows me 2 snoozes)
4. Take meds & open shades
5. 7:30 - Alarm B (first snooze)
6. Boop around on phone
7. 7:45 - Alarm B (second snooze)
8. Scan barcode inside medicine cabinet to keep alarm from going off again
9. Put toothpaste on toothbrush
10. Brush teeth
Going under the hood
Automatic transmission:

1. Put key in ignition
2. Turn key to start engine
3. Press gas pedal to drive forward
Automatic transmission:

1. Put key in ignition
2. Turn key to start engine
3. Press gas pedal to drive forward

Manual transmission:

1. Make sure car is in neutral
2. Push clutch all the way in
3. Turn key to start engine
4. Keep clutch pressed in while moving gear stick into first gear
5. Release parking brake
6. Ease off clutch while giving engine a little gas
7. Drive forward in first gear
Going under the hood

1. Why our engines won’t start
2. What makes our transmission run
3. How to use the mechanics of our own engine to get ourselves moving forward.
Going under the hood

1. Why we might struggle to initiate writing
2. How the motivation & reward system works in the brain
3. How to use that knowledge to hack our brain & more easily initiate the writing task
Why the engine won’t start

Executive dysfunction and the struggle to initiate writing
Executive Dysfunction
EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS

- Directing attention
- Planning & organization
- Decision making
- Working memory
- Initiating/switching tasks
EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS

Executive Dysfunction = impairment in these functions

- Directing attention
- Planning & organization
- Decision making
- Working memory
- Initiating/switching tasks
Executive Dysfunction

- ADHD
- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Anxiety
- Bipolar Disorder
- Depression
- Dementia/Alzheimer’s

- Epilepsy
- Learning Disabilities
- OCD
- Schizophrenia
- Substance abuse/withdrawal
- Trauma/PTSD

Executive Dysfunction

- Hypo/hyperglycemia
- Hypo/hyperthyroidism
- Kidney/liver problems
- Multiple Sclerosis
- Parkinson’s
- Traumatic brain injury
- Tumor/Stroke
- Sleep Disorders (e.g. insomnia, sleep apnea)
- Vitamin B12 deficiency
- Electrolyte abnormality
- Exhaustion
- Stress
- Boredom

What makes the transmission run

Dopamine and the reward system
Dopamine: the “feel-good” chemical
Anticipate → Feel Good → Do/Experience
anticipate

reward

automatic transmission

task
This can make it difficult to start the task of writing and difficult to complete the writing projects that we do start.
anticipate  

manual transmission  

task  

reward  

antidote
manual transmission

anticipate

reward

task
The Problem with Traditional Writing Advice

my ADHD makes it hard to write consistently

it's okay

Just sit down and write!
The Problem with Traditional Writing Advice

It's not about having time, it's about making time.
The Problem with Traditional Writing Advice

It's not about having time, it's about making time. If you really cared about it, you'd find a way to do it.
This type of writing advice assumes that the issue is one of motivation—that if we just want it enough, we’ll be able to do it.

But executive dysfunction is not about motivation.
Good news!
How to hack the system

Writers, start your engines!
manual transmission

anticipate

OTHER TRIGGER

task/WRITING

reward

antibiose
OTHER TRIGGER

manual transmission

WRITING

WRITING SATISFACTION
DOPAMINE HACK

WRITING

manual transmission

WRITING SATISFACTION
systems, structures, routines, rituals, and cues that help give us a reliable ping of dopamine
It’s not about finding motivation to write.

It’s about creating infrastructure to help initiate the steps of the writing process.
Question 1:
What makes writing feel satisfying?
Question 1:
What makes writing feel satisfying?

Examples:
- Seeing how much I’ve written
- Crafting a really good sentence
- Writing to music
Question 2:

What routines, rituals, or structures can make it easier to initiate writing?
Question 2.0:

What can trigger the ping of dopamine so I can “start the ignition” and move out of a state of executive dysfunction?
Question 2.0:
What can trigger the ping of dopamine so I can “start the ignition” and move out of a state of executive dysfunction?

- Seeing how much I’ve written → printing out finished pages after writing and keeping a stack on my desk
- Crafting a good sentence → adding new great sentences to a “wall of fame” or phone background
- Writing to music → setting a repeating alarm that kicks off my Spotify writing playlist
Goal: create infrastructure that doesn’t also depend on executive functioning to initiate writing tasks.
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9. Put toothpaste on toothbrush
10. Brush teeth
What can trigger the ping of dopamine so I can initiate writing?

- Printing out finished pages (happens after writing has already occurred, when there’s already satisfaction)
- “Wall of Fame” (also happens after writing, directly contributes to dopamine ping)
- Music alarm (alarm repeats automatically)
Recap:

- We can think of initiating writing like **starting an engine**
- Understanding **how the brain works** can help us move forward, whether we’re driving an automatic or manual transmission
- Instead of telling ourselves to “just sit down and write,” we can ask: **How can we give ourselves a reliable ping of dopamine – without relying on our executive functioning – to initiate the writing task?**
References & Further Reading


- Dopamine Hack methodology developed by Catherine “CK” Kirch, 2020