

## **Ask the Book Doctor: About Inspiration and Completion**

By Bobbie Christmas

**Q:** When I finally make time to write, I can't think of anything to write about. Where do writers find their inspiration?

**A:** Everywhere. That is, we find inspiration almost everywhere but in the very place we need it, in our writing space. When we sit down to write, if we don't already have inspiration, the computer will mock us with its uncaring silence. Instead of waiting for inspiration to hit while you sit at your computer, take paper and a pen, a smart phone, or a recorder with you everywhere you go. Pay attention to what goes on around you, and take notes.

I jot down bits of overheard conversations, unusual names, and stream-of-consciousness thoughts while I'm waiting at the dentist's office or at the veterinarian. I've written short-story ideas while waiting for a movie to start. I scribble notes to remind myself of memories that go through my mind while I'm doing something else. Potential titles come to mind when I'm cleaning house or running errands. I've been inspired by a tidbit that a minister said in church or a speaker said in a seminar. I've even had to jump out of the shower to scrawl a memory or a dream worth writing about.

Inspiration, insight, and stimulation come at inconvenient times. If we let those moments pass because we are busy, the thought could be lost forever. Never think you'll remember those inspired thoughts; most of the time you won't, unless you record them.

Once you have notes, you have instant inspiration, whenever you sit down to write. While at your computer, read your notes or listen to your recordings, and without a doubt something will trigger the urge to write. You'll be off and running.

**Q:** What does it mean if a writer has about seven drafts and they all stop in the same place? I have completed everything at the first-draft level, meaning I know the story, have written book proposals on them, written synopses, done research, and clarified the characters. I work around the clock to get the immediate idea on paper, but then stop and go on to another book idea and do the same thing. I really like that initial stage when I'm inspired to work on a new book: I seem to hate the stage where I work on the book chapter by chapter.

At first I worked on one draft, then worked on another. I said it was to keep from getting bored. (Writing is my life.) I thought I was discovering my genre and writing style, but it seems crazy now. It's overwhelming, yet I'm a columnist; have been a columnist for years. I complete the columns okay. I'm sixty, have an M.A., and am planning to go on for a doctorate. I'm thinking I'm developing my scholarship, but all these books! (Not books. Ideas. Drafts!) I feel like I will never finish any of them at my age. I'm thinking I need to open an office and hire staff to finish these manuscripts. Is there a name for me? How crazy is this? Is this normal? Help! Please.

A: The book doctor is here to help! Here's my diagnosis, and the prognosis is good.

First, is there a name for you? Yes. You are what we call in the industry “a writer.” Oh, you expected a disparaging term? Writers must create. Call it their inspiration, muse, right-brain thinking, creativity, whatever, but something drives writers to develop characters and stories.

Being a writer does not necessarily mean you have the editor within you, though. The revising and editing of a manuscript comes from a different part of the ether; call it the academic, left brain, or analytical side.

You have highly developed one side of your thinking, but not the other. You thrive on the beginning, rather than the completion—the creation of ideas, not the thought of seeing the book in stores. Sure, you would like to see your book finished, but your focus is not set in that direction, right now.

The fact that you have no problem meeting column deadlines says to me that you work best with short-term goals. The long-term work necessary to revise, rewrite, and edit a book-length manuscript may overwhelm you, so you get stymied. What happens when a doe sees a car barreling down the road at her? Is her first reaction to leap away? It should be, but instead, she freezes; hence the “deer in the headlights” syndrome. I think you see the completion of a full-length manuscript as too large a project to confront.

Here are my recommendations to break through your barriers and confront your metaphorical two-ton vehicle:

1. Decide what you really want. Do you want to complete one of the novels? Do you want to sell the book to a traditional publisher? Do you want to self-publish?
2. Place a deadline for completion of what you really want. Do you want to finish one novel within twelve months? Do you want to sell the book to a traditional publisher by the end of next year? Do you want to have a book in your hands within a year and a half? Write down your answers from numbers one and two. I mean it: write down what you want and the date by which you want it. When you write down a goal and deadline, you set the goal in motion. It is a proven fact. Post that piece of paper with your goal and deadline somewhere where you will see it every day. I have a wall peg in my office where I post my goals in big letters.
3. Break your goal into small pieces. You have shown yourself that you can meet deadlines. Your goal for your novel, then, may be “Rewrite, revise, and polish one chapter a month.” It might be one chapter every two months. Set realistic mini goals based on your schedule and your final goal. Write down your mini goals. Add them to your calendar or planner.

4. Break the mini goals into micro goals. If you want to finish polishing one chapter a month, write down that you will polish five pages a week (or whatever will break down to a typical chapter length, once added together). Write down those micro goals in your planner.

5. Celebrate each time you meet your micro or mini goal. Take yourself out to dinner, see a movie, buy a book, whatever. Reward yourself for meeting your goals, no matter how large or small, and you will be inspired to continue.

Napoleon Hill, author of *Think and Grow Rich* said, “A goal is nothing but a dream with a deadline.” I live by that quotation.

Goal-setting works for most people, but for even more inspiration to keep going, find a mentor, join a critique circle, hire an editor or a coach, but do whatever you must to find someone or something that keeps you motivated.

If you do all those things and still do not see yourself moving forward, consider enjoying the creativity that you have. Remember that eventually you can compile your columns into a book (or pay someone to do it), and you will still have a book to sell.

*Bobbie Christmas, book editor, author of Write In Style (Union Square Publishing), and owner of Zebra Communications, will answer your questions, too. Send them to [Bobbie@zebraeditor.com](mailto:Bobbie@zebraeditor.com). Read more “Ask the Book Doctor” questions and answers at [www.zebraeditor.com](http://www.zebraeditor.com).*