

# Writing Tips from Ellen Cassedy

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## Stuck? Go for a Walk



We've all been told that the secret to writing is simply to sit down and write. Every day, we're told, we must chain ourselves to our desks and not get up until we've met our daily quota of 500 or 1,000 or 2,000 words.

The German word "sitzfleisch"—literally, "buttocks"—means the ability to persevere, to stick with a task, no matter how difficult, until the job is done. But now comes new scientific evidence that long periods of sitting may be exactly *not* what we most need as writers. *Getting up from the desk*, researchers find, is important both for health and for the creative process.

Henry David Thoreau seems to have figured this out back in 1849. “Methinks,” he wrote in his journal, “that at the moment my legs begin to move, my thoughts begin to flow.”

Researchers Marilyn Oppezzo and Daniel Schwartz of Stanford University measured creative thinking in people who were sitting and those who were walking. The walkers were able to generate 60 percent more creative ideas.

Walking, it turns out, is a great way to boost “divergent thinking”—that is, to increase our ability to come up with lots of alternative ideas, lots of solutions to a problem, lots of different ways of looking at something. Walking is good for thinking outside the box—coming up with ideas other people might not think of.

For more focused thinking, however, it’s better to sit down. “Convergent thinking”—coming up with *the* one correct answer to a problem—works out better when you’re seated, the researchers found.

To the researchers’ surprise, it didn’t matter whether the walkers were treadmilling in front of a blank wall or strolling through a beautiful green landscape. It was walking itself, not the surrounding environment, that made the difference. And the effect persisted—for a while—even after the walkers sat down.

Why walking helps us think isn’t clear. Dr. Oppezzo hypothesizes that since walking improves mood, that alone may help you think more freely. Or, she suggests, walking might loosen the mental strictures that would otherwise hamper your imagination. But she doesn’t really know. She told a reporter she was planning to go for a walk to brainstorm more possible explanations.

In my experience, writing requires a variety of different kinds of thinking. When I need to scribble down a lot of ideas at once, I'll often stand at, or walk on, my recently acquired treadmill desk. (A treadmill desk is great, but there are cheaper ways to spend some of your writing time on your feet. Try keeping a couple of cardboard boxes on hand to elevate your keyboard and screen at times. Or take a brief walk around the room.)

If what I need to do is not to brainstorm but to tune inward to listen for precise ideas and exact word choices, I tend to sit down. There are times when I abandon the keyboard and use a pencil or pen.

Trees are also in the mix for me as a writer. In Japan, *shinrin-yoki* means “forest bathing.” A short walk on a tree-lined path is a proven stress reducer, as the walker turns away from the human world to inhale the essential oils emitted by wood.

Here again Thoreau got it right. “I frequently tramped eight or ten miles through the deepest snow,” he wrote, “to keep an appointment with a beech-tree, or a yellow birch, or an old acquaintance among the pines.”

It's hard to imagine a literary project that doesn't involve at least some time sitting at a desk. But more and more, I value the benefits getting up and getting moving—with or without trees.

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