

# Writing Tips from Ellen Cassedy

[www.ellencassedy.com](http://www.ellencassedy.com)

## Talking Turkey: When to abandon a project



How do you decide your work in progress is not progressing? When do you declare it a turkey and move on?

The ability to let go of one writing project and start another is important. It's not all that different from editing your own work. Only now, instead of replacing a particular word, sentence, or paragraph, you're setting aside an entire body of work in favor of another.

We all need to give ourselves permission to admit failure. We can't expect everything to work out.

Of course, sometimes what's needed is *not* the courage to abandon ship but the courage to rededicate yourself even when you don't feel entirely confident.

How can you tell when it's time to face the truth and walk away – and when, instead, it's time to buckle down and recommit?

I'm remembering the time I sought out a literary consultant, [Anne Dubuisson](#), for help in deciding how to move forward. Anne is a former agent who helps writers develop manuscripts and approach agents and publishers.

We sat down at a tiny table in a dimly lit restaurant, a place I remember as warm and glowing, perhaps with a fireplace. (In fact I suspect it's Anne's warmth I'm remembering.)

I showed Anne three works in progress, a novel and two non-fiction projects. Without hesitation, she zeroed in on one of them. "This is your best work," she said. "Don't you agree?"

At that point, I didn't know that I did agree. Somehow, though, Anne's gentle words were exactly what I needed to put my novel in a drawer, send my partly-completed memoir to a back burner (where it remains – so far), and embrace the new project with all my heart. Ten years later, the result was [We Are Here](#), my book about my moral journey into Lithuania, the land of my Jewish forebears.

Since then, I've developed a set of questions to help me decide whether a project is a go or a no-go. I don't pose these questions right away. At first, I give myself a chance to experiment, to take risks, to give my attachment to the work a chance to grow. But after a while, I ask myself:

- Am I behind this work 100%? Do I love it to pieces?
- When I imagine it published, do I feel peacock-proud, or kind of nervous?
- Can I see myself traveling around the country, reading it from a podium?
- Have I sought out readers who really matter, experts who have the authority to judge the work and suggest improvements?
- Have I listened very carefully to what these readers have to say?

If you do decide to stop moving ahead with a book project, don't throw it away. Maybe you can publish a piece of it in a small magazine, your local newspaper, or someone's blog. Maybe you could speak about it at your local library, an organization, or another venue? Maybe it would bring you satisfaction to share it with people who are important to you.

Don't destroy what you've done. Do put it in a drawer. Pull it out every so often and take a look. Can you recognize what you learned from writing it? Do you see a new way to make something of it?

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Ellen Cassedy is the author of *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust* (Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2012). To see all of her Writing Tips, visit her website at [www.ellencassedy.com](http://www.ellencassedy.com).