

In Writing, the Critical Mind Is Not Your Friend

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So Don't Bargain With It

Granted, your conscious critical mind is useful in life. It's even necessary. Its functions are twofold:

1. It helps you take new information on board and learn new things, and
2. It safeguards you.

Re safeguarding you, for example, your conscious, critical mind, in conjunction with your nerve system, is what stops you from putting your hand on the hot burner of a stove or jamming a knife blade into an electrical outlet when you're otherwise distracted.

It also keeps you from wandering across a busy interstate without at least looking for approaching cars.

In other words, it keeps you from appearing to be stupid.

Unfortunately, the conscious critical mind also sees itself as your protector when it comes to writing fiction.

It 'protects' you by literally flooding your brain with self-doubt and unreasoning fear—fear with *zero* real-world consequences—to delay or stop you from writing. It will do this several times and at every stage of the process:

1. As you initially sit down to write, any old excuse will serve to delay or stop you:

- Oops, did I remember to feed the dog? or
- Oops, did I remember to clean and fill his water bowl? or
- I should really brew a cup of coffee before I sit down, or
- Oops, I'd better go pee first; otherwise I'll need to go later and that will interrupt me, or
- Oops, was that the baby crying? Oh, no, it was only the cat. Well, I'll go check just to be sure, or
- Ooh, I'd better plan supper for the next few days before I start this, or or or....

2. And once you DO finally sit down to write, it floods your brain with more fearful thoughts and doubts to delay you actually putting new words on the page:

- I can't write this story until I know where it's going, right? or
- I'd better outline this novel first. I don't want anything to happen out of order. If it does, how will I ever straighten it all out? or
- If I don't outline, readers will know I didn't plan anything at all. (Um, no, actually they won't) or or or....

3. And if you DO finally put some new words on the page, your critical mind does its best to keep you from finishing:

- Maybe I should've done more research, or
- I'd better revise this. I don't want to look like a fool, or
- Did I use 'that' too many times? I'd better check, or
- Did I alternate sentence structures enough? or
- This isn't working. I'd better just rewrite the whole thing, or or or....

4. And if you DO finally finish, your critical mind will do its level best to delay you from publishing. Why? Because actually putting yourself and your work out there invites rejection:

- I need to research cover designers, or
- I need to order that book about writing sales copy, or
- I need to find some beta readers, or
- Now I can print this out for my critique group, or or or....

5. Or to completely STOP you from publishing:

- Nobody's gonna like this stupid story anyway, or
- What if I some readers don't like it? or
- What if I get bad reviews? or
- Readers loved my last book, but I don't think I did as well on this one, or
- Damn. Maybe I'm not a writer after all. Maybe I'm only a pretender! or the ever popular,
- How can I compete anyway? There are SO many other books being published every day!
or
- Why bother? The market's flooded with AI-generated books anyway, or or or....

To all of the above, my response is the same: Um, so the Hell what?

If you do it right and don't polish your unique, original voice off your work, Your Story Is Unique and Original. Full stop.

Every Single Time one of those critical mind thoughts enters your head and you don't immediately push back or laugh it off or dismiss it, you're sending your creative subconscious a loud, clear signal that you don't believe in yourself or your characters.

I Have Examples

Awhile back, a friend wrote that although he's finished some books and stories, he hasn't uploaded (published) anything yet because "How can I compete with the flood of AI books out there?"

My response? "Well, I'll tell you the one sure way you CAN'T compete: By not publishing what you've written."

Another friend and mentoring student with a deeply embedded critical voice emailed me recently with a plan for his resurgence as a writer.

In part, he wrote that he wanted to send me his daily totals each day (that's fine). Then he wrote

"I'm sick and tired of letting [my critical voice] stop me...."

I was thrilled, and I was about to respond with, "Yay! Good for you!"

Then he continued:

"I'm *intending to start slow*: just write a minimum of 500 words per day (though hopefully more) for the next week, then increase it slowly...." (Emphasis added. Your creative subconscious picks up on your conscious-mind intentions.)

This despite the fact that this particular writer has sold short stories to major markets on more than one occasion AND despite the fact that his stories are absolutely wonderful. I've read some of them.

Folks, what my second friend wrote above is a stark example of critical mind at its sneakiest.

So I wrote him back with two questions for him to ponder privately:

1. Why let your critical mind set your creative subconscious up for failure with "I'm intending to start slow"?
2. And for that matter, why signal to your creative subconscious the belief that you can't pull it off?

My point is, 'can't' and 'might' and 'hopefully' never did anything worthwhile.

Folks, your creative subconscious is privy to everything your critical mind throws at you, and more importantly it's privy to your response.

Don't try to hedge your bet by giving in to the critical voice 'just a little.' To your critical mind, there is no 'little.' It either wins or it doesn't. And every time you question yourself or doubt yourself, it wins. Period.

If you need me to be the straight-talking guy who tells you to pull up your big boy or big girl pants, sit down, and write fiction, I can do that with or without a mentorship agreement.

But I can't pull 'em up for you. You've gotta do that part yourself. I have a feeling if I tried, I'd get locked up.

So as it turns out, once you've decided you want to write fiction to entertain yourself and others, you still have one more decision to make:

Do It or Don't.

In the final analysis, that's all I can really teach you about writing. Characters, scenes, settings, hooks, and cliffhangers are kind of non-starters if you don't choose to put new words on the page in the first place.