

Let's get physical

A runner gleans 10 helpful fiction-writing tips from working in physical therapy.

Fiction writing makes me happy. It also makes me want to stick tacks in my eyes. It's hard work, and unlike my other writing projects, it doesn't pay my bills – yet. So it's easy for me to put it aside, promising myself I'll get to it when there's time, or I have energy, or I've got the plot untangled. The list of promises is long.

I thought about committing to things that are sometimes painful – or at least challenging – as I went through my daily physical therapy routine. I've been in PT for a year in an effort to loosen my left hip, which would ache after I'd run or sat too long at my desk. My physical therapist recommends four or five exercises at a time, changing them as my hip responds, and soon, he assures me, I'll graduate.

Physical therapy hasn't historically appeared on the same continuum as fiction writing, but it could. Much that applies to the former also rings true for the latter.

Get to it early. On the days I don't make time for PT first thing, I often don't do it at all. And that might be the oldest rule in fiction writing, too: Get it done before you're distracted or your internal editor is awake, before you have to go to work or rouse the kids for school.

Do it regularly. The benefits of physical therapy dwindle if you skip a few days – sometimes even a single day. Whether you're working on balance or going for endurance, the work is cumulative. Same with writing: Readers of advice books by Walter Mosley, Anne Lamott and dozens of others know that half the battle is just showing up, preferably

daily, because it's in that routine that the story comes to life. Consider trying National Novel Writing Month – announcing that you're going to come up with 50,000 words in 30 days will force you to face your fiction.

Get professional help. I'd been limping around for ages before I finally followed friends' recommendations and made an appointment with a PT known for work-



ing wonders with runners. He saw right away what the problem was – and that it was fixable – and showed everything to me on a plaster skeleton so I understood what I was working toward.

Likewise, there's no shortage of fiction writers and editors who are only too happy to provide guidance through workshops, coaching and online classes. Even established authors continue to work with editors who'll tell them whether their plot makes sense and their characters seem real, while helping them stay on task.

Get nonprofessional help. Some exercises require me to get in slightly convoluted positions or lie with my hips and knees at precise 90-degree angles. I'll ask my kids to compare what I'm doing with the official photos my therapist provides, just to be sure I'm on target. Usually they tell me I need only a little adjusting.

Likewise, it's easy to lose perspective on whether your characters are realistic, the components of your setting work, or your story arc is clear. Remember that your average reader is also a great resource. Feedback from a writing group, friends, an online forum such as the Internet Writing Workshop – even (gulp) family – can provide insights that might make the difference between a story that's unreadable and one that's headed for publication.

Recognize when things aren't working. One assigned exercise involved stretching a large yellow band around my knees while squatting. I did it for a few days before realizing it was making my hip hurt in a new way, so I stopped. At the next visit, my therapist agreed it wasn't the right move for me.

Killing one's fictional babies, as they say, is a painful exercise, but doing so can lead you to a new place, somewhere you hadn't expected your story to go. Be honest with yourself and recognize when something's not working.

Learn by sharing. My visiting brother-in-law happened upon me mid-exercise and appeared perplexed. I explained the goal to him, and realized that as a result, I, too, better understood what I was working toward. It reminded me of a

suggestion Daniel Coyle makes in *The Little Book of Talent*: “To learn it more deeply, teach it.”

Describing your plot to others – whether as one-sentence summary or in detail – can help you see weaknesses and sagging elements. Your listeners may have ideas to offer, but even more important, you may realize things need tweaking.

Watch your tempo. Rushed PT exercises aren't much better than no PT exercises. You're less likely to do the moves properly and might even make things worse. While the pace of your novel probably won't cause physical harm, it will affect your readers' experience. Too fast, and it may be impossible for them to keep up with the plot; too slow, and they may grow bored. Either way, they're not likely to stick it out until the end.

Give it time. You can't rush the changes physical therapy brings about, whether post-accident or in response to a life-long condition. Likewise, countless novelists will attest to having spent a decade or more on a manuscript before believing it was ready to send to an agent, even though, yes, they worked on it every day. Make sure your writing's fully cooked.

Breathe. Turns out, a lot of physical pain can be alleviated through proper breathing: in through the nose and out through the mouth. That will also alleviate the kind of anxiety brought on by a struggling plot or limp dialogue. “Death by fiction writing” is not a commonly seen epitaph. When all else fails, breathe.

Sometimes your dog will sit on your head. Because whether you're lying on the ground stretching or pouring your heart into your writing, you'll be a little vulnerable. And that's OK. **W**

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