

How to do the Job that Stumps or Scares You

By Rose Jonas, Ph.D.

Why does the work scare you? It's because you don't believe you know enough to step forward with authority and put your opinions in a place where they can be seen and judged by others. In a Ph.D. program, the main reason people don't finish is that they complete their coursework, but cannot step up to the plate as a scholar and assert in a dissertation: "This is knowledge because I say it is." They quit. Become ABD ("all but dissertation"). They rarely go back to complete their work. I'll never forget the cold fear I felt when I began mine.

You have plenty of obstacles to getting work done: fear, boredom, life's other distractions. But here you are, it's the eleventh hour, you've exhausted every avoidance strategy in your repertoire, and still no inspiration comes.

Don't feel bad about yourself, kiddo. You have a lot of project-phobic friends out there. Because everyone pretends to the contrary, you think you're the only one. As a recovering project-phobicaholic, let me spare you some anxiety, and share with you the tricks I've learned over time about how to do work that scares me or that I don't want to do.

1. *Understand where failure truly begins.* Few people fail in life because their grand initiative didn't work. They fail because they never take on the project in the first place. They don't become athletes because they can't find the energy to put on white socks and tennies in cold, dark mornings. They don't become great writers because they never pick up a pencil. They fail from not doing, not from trying and failing.

The Confucian saying, "The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step," has another layer of meaning. Your success in life does not depend on your being able to go a thousand miles, but only on that first step. Big victories are built on little disciplines, like not hitting the snooze alarm a third time, like folding your laundry instead of pitching it in a corner, like calling to thank your aunt for the check she sent you, like walking away from the second cookie. Your inner devil beguiles you a thousand times a day, whining that you're too tired or too busy or too inexperienced or too overwhelmed to take on whatever odious task confronts you.

"Bah!" as detective Nero Wolfe said whenever he dismissed the police inspector's theory about the latest murder. You can do one thing, take one step; that's all you should ask of yourself. Once you have taken the step, the next is easier, and the third is a breeze; by the fourth, you're cookin'.

2. *Get your attitude right.* Ben Harris is the son of a minister who became a wealthy man taking portraits of people in Oxford. His group portraiture company became one of the largest in the U.K. He is an enthusiastic driver of himself and others. How does he keep his drive going?

"I love to work," he says. "But it's not all fun and, at the end of the day, we want to have fun in our lives. So, when I have a task I don't want to do, I decide to make it fun and get it done as quickly as possible. Look, the work's going to be there whether I like it or not, so I change it in

my mind from drudgery to pleasure. That way, I'm always enjoying myself, no matter what I'm doing."

3. *Start with a clean slate.* If you are my soul-sister-of-bad habits, I know you have a messy desk. One of the things that stops people like you and me is that we don't like clutter, even though we're good at creating it. Take every single thing off your desk except what you will need for this project. Put it somewhere besides on the desk. You will feel as if you've done spring cleaning, and your heart and mind will feel lighter and ready to work.

Don't let desk-clearing become your project (and you know you can). You cannot become emotionally involved with one single piece of the treasure on your desk. It is merely a pile of paper bricks you're moving from one location to another. Lift, transport, drop, return; lift, transport, drop, return. As one last delaying tactic, you'll probably spray the desk with Windex and wipe it with a paper towel before you get serious, but another thirty seconds won't kill the project that's due tomorrow.

You may be too tired or too anxious to even do this. If that's the case, move to a table that's cleared and clean. You will become amazingly efficient without a mess around you.

4. *Break down your fear into its simplest tasks and do the one that scares you the least.* Make your project an imaginary slow-motion study. What are the exact steps it will take to get this done? Every job has a tolerable starting point. Be like Curly in the movie, *Curly's Gold*. As he held up one finger talking to Billy Crystal he told him, "Just do one thing."

Pick up the pencil. Turn on the computer. Spread a piece of paper on the desk. Turn off your phone. Grab a diet soda. Check your inner self. I'll bet you're closer to feeling able to begin.

5. *Tell yourself you will only work on the project for five minutes, and that you will give your absolute best shot in that time.* You can stand anything for five minutes, you correctly reason. Preview of coming attractions: Something is likely to move you forward in those 300 seconds. If not, put it down for a few minutes, and come back for another five.

6. *Use whatever tools make you feel good.* All writers have their idiosyncrasies. Do you like the scratch of a fountain pen nib across the page? Shelby Foote, novelist and Civil War historian, does. In fact, he likes the old fashioned dip-and-write pens that once graced Post Office counters, saying their deliberate slowness nourish his creativity.

I am just as specific. I like plastic mechanical pencils with a rubber finger-grip and .7 mm. soft lead with white erasers. Makes me feel like an artist. Respect the artist in you. Give her the tools that will expedite her work.

7. *Start with a pencil, not your computer.* Your mind is not yet engaged in the work, and you are oh so clever — here at the resistance wall — at avoiding the task.

I write articles for national magazines, always a daunting task. If I start at the computer, I get distracted by other files or play computer games. I'm so pathetic I can't even start with clean

paper! If I do, I fear the misfired words on it and the consequent crumpling of it. The vision of Sister Mary Thrifty rises from my childhood, threatening eternal punishment for such wastefulness. So I use a pencil and the back of used computer paper. Now I can toss away bad ideas at will, and Sister Thrifty only smiles on me from her heavenly perch.

You may be a talker instead of a writer. Then say your ideas into a tape recorder, and type them up. If you use a pen or pencil or a tape recorder, you have engaged your body, your eyes, and your mind. Creativity leaks out better by hand, at least initially. Once you're cookin', switch to your PC so you can ram that project forward.

8. *Get something on the bleeping page.* What keeps you stuck is that blank whiteness before you. Alan Lakein, author of a great time management book, *How to Get the Most of Your Time and Your Life*, suggests that if you can't think of anything else, just write your name on the page. Write it again. See if anything comes to mind.

I like an adaptation of a journaling technique from *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron. It's part of a daily writing discipline for awakening the artist within you. When I'm stuck, I begin a written dialogue with myself. I start from the "stuck" place and write about how I can't do this. The helpful, can-do part of me then responds.

"Hmm. Very interesting. Tell me more," she says, keen psychologist that she is. Then "Stuck" pours out all the "can't's," the inadequacies, the fear that people will see how stupid I really am. I ask "Can-do" if she has any suggestions.

"Of course!" (She always does.) She rattles off idea, strategy, organization plan - in the telling of which she tries not to sound superior about what was obvious to her. And so the project begins in earnest. I pick up on Can-do's enthusiasm and shamelessly steal all her ideas.

Not into the dialogue thing? Then try the technique of Timothy Gallway who wrote *The Inner Game of Tennis*. He says we're too focused on the outcome and we clutch rather than doing well what we're doing. Instead of focusing on getting that "A" or the panic created by your delay, focus on the flow of the pencil point across the page. You will be amazed at how the words will flow, almost as if you're taking dictation. And you are, from the artist in you.

9. *Consider mind-mapping your project.* This is probably my best advice, and it encompasses all the previous techniques. It gets you doing things you can do, and taps the creative part of your brain. It gets pencil marks on that desert of white that stretches before you on your desk.

Take a piece of (scrap!) paper. In the middle of it, write your subject (papal visit). Draw a circle around it. Draw a line away from the circle toward the 2 o'clock position, the upper right-hand corner of the page. Write "Introduction" (gotta have an introduction), and circle that. Can you think of main points to include in it? Write little downward radiating lines from that circle, and write key words next to it. If nothing comes, go on to your major topics.

As each topic occurs to you, radiate a line outward from your "papal visit" circle: "the traveling pope," "preparation," "a city rejoices," "majestic worship," "people's pope," "farewell, Shepherd

1, "what impact?" and "conclusion." Within minutes, your hand will be flying, followed by keyboard clacking because you'll be working from what became a creative outline.

Yes, you could also do the formal outline: I and II, followed by A and B, followed by 1 and 2, then a and b. That technique is meant for more ordered minds than mine. If I knew how to do this, I would've finished the paper days ago. I'm messier, more crisis-oriented. Outlines scare me.

10. *Pray the work, work the prayer.* If you aren't zooming by now, you are way too stuck on yourself and your pathetic plight. You need to bring yourself and this project to a higher place. Mother Teresa exhorted her Missionaries of Charity to "pray the work." Make your work a prayer.

Give your task a nobility it doesn't have on its own. Do you know a friend who's suffering? A parent with an illness? A young mother whose baby died? Make your work a prayer on behalf of that person. Resolve to make your effort as eloquent as any saint's prayer, and then do the work with that earnest, prayerful spirit. You and the receiver of your prayer will probably feel better.

Real prayer also helps. Chanted, repetitive prayer has the ability to calm and focus the mind. "I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me." (for Christians), "Shema, Yisroel, Adonai eloheinu, Adonai echod" (for Jews), "Nam me yoho rengay kyo" (for Buddhists). Said over and over again, while you're putting your body into the work, will pull you toward productivity and the end of this fretful project.

11. *Work with others.* At the very end of this piece comes its capstone (but if you're paper's due tomorrow, it won't help. You'll use it for the next assignment): Working with others makes the work go better. Just the association with others keeps you focused and working and feeling less scared. Also, others have skills you don't have. The step that's absolutely stumping you might be a breeze for them.

"Look," they'll say. "Just. . ." and rattle off what you should do next. I'm not advocating cheating (and anyhow, how smart is that for two people to turn in the exact same paper on the pope?). Do what you did when you were a two-year-old. You weren't quite ready for "co-op-er-a-tion," but you did a lot of what's called "parallel play." You enjoyed playing alongside a little friend.

Parallel work has many benefits. You feel a bit of competition with your pal, so you keep going. You have a resource for knowledge you might not have. You have someone to take a break with, but who's in the same boat, so one of you is likely to prod you back to the paper.

Get a study buddy (or two or three), and see if it doesn't make life easier.

With such amazing counsel as this, you can't possibly still be stuck. If you are, you'll be too embarrassed to say, so you'll sit down and pretend to be working, and just doing that will get you going.

Good luck, and have fun. I know it'll be a great paper!

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