

I asked my readers — my fellow writers — what the biggest problems standing in the way of earning more money were for them. One of the answers that came back was that a lot of writers struggle with finding enough ideas to work on regularly.

Throughout my own writing career, I've stockpiled ideas to work on later: my own experience is that it's not necessarily so hard to find good ideas, but to make sure they are somewhere that I can retrieve them. With that in mind, this ebook includes information on managing your ideas — as well as a variety of techniques to help you make sure that you've got plenty of ideas to choose from any time you sit down to write.



Image — Flickr user Drew Coffman (http://twitter.com/drewcoffman)

Creating an Idea Management Strategy

One of the most important factors when you're dealing with coming up with ideas is to have something to do with those ideas afterwards. The fact of the matter is that many of us are actually pretty good at coming up with ideas. The real problem is that we can't remember those good ideas. Having a system in place to get those ideas written down and usable for when we actually need them is crucial to having a good supply of ideas in place at any given time, to the point that it should come before any brainstorming.

Searchable Ideas

More often than not, writers tend to make notes of ideas in notebooks — written down somewhere safe. While flipping through old notebooks can be fun, this approach is not particularly user-friendly, especially for a writer who needs to come up with new ideas very regularly (such as a blogger). Being able to go in and search your ideas in such a way that you can quickly come up with something you can use is crucial in such situations.

That essentially means that **no matter how you choose to store your ideas, you have to do so on the computer**. The search capabilities inherent in something even as basic as a word processor file will speed up your ability to go through your ideas.

Choosing an approach that also lets you organize your ideas easily can also help. If you write regularly for specific publications or on specific topics, grouping those ideas together can allow you to easily browse through just what's related to the publication that you need to work on today.

Of course, you won't have your computer along with you everywhere you go, so thinking about how you're going to take notes while you're out and about is also important. Anne Lamott, in her book about writing, *Bird by Bird*, mentions that **she just keeps a note card and a pen in her pocket at all time**. It's a simple approach, but certainly one that works. A small notebook will work just as well. The real question is making sure that you have something to take notes with at all times and that you get in the habit of doing so.

Choosing Your Technology

There are a variety of tools these days that will let you manage as many ideas as you come up with. Some you may already have — creating a spreadsheet is an option that will likely let you use software you're already familiar with. There are also custom-built applications that are meant specifically for writers.

Tagging Your Ideas to Make Finding Them Later Easier

No matter what kind of computer program you use to keep track of your ideas, you'll be able to search for specific keywords when you need an idea within a given topic. The danger here is that you may not have included the keyword you first think of for that topic when you originally wrote down your idea. Getting in the habit of noting down the keywords you might search for later when writing out your idea can help with this problem.

The practice is called 'tagging' and you may be familiar with it from blogging or using social bookmarking sites. Here are a few questions to ask yourself when thinking about what keywords to include with your ideas.

- 1. What broad categories would this idea fit into?
- 2. Is there a particular publication I expect this idea to go to?
- 3. Is there a particular time of the year you would want to run this?
- 4. Are there any experts who are particularly suited to this piece?
- 5. What keywords do you think you'll be searching for in the future?

One of the best tools I've come across — and the one that I personally use — is Evernote (http://www.evernote.com). Evernote allows you to create any number of notebooks, adding notes to them easily. It's a web-based application, meaning that no matter what computer you're working on, you can log in to Evernote and access your notebooks.

There are also a variety of other ways to work with Evernote. There's a desktop-based client that you can download so that you can easily work with your different notes, even if you don't have an internet connection at the moment. There are also apps for different mobile platforms, such as the iPhone. You can install an Evernote extension on most web browsers, letting you virtually clip websites or quotes. And, as long as you let Evernote access an internet connection on a regular basis, it will keep all of your notes synchronized across all of these different tools.

You can add images and audio files as well — with the mobile apps of Evernote, you can record an idea by talking into your phone if you aren't at a place where you can type, as well as taking photos and adding them directly to a notebook.

Best of all, **Evernote is free to use**. There is a premium version available, but it is not necessary for most users. The premium version is available for \$5 per month or \$45 per year and does offer the flexibility of adding more file types.

My Evernote Workflow

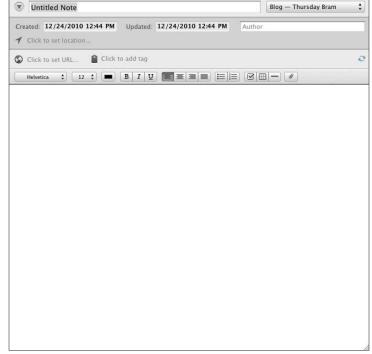
I'm one of those people who will write down notes on anything I come across — napkins, envelopes and anything else that comes along (I even keep a white board marker in the shower so I can write down ideas in there). While I've tried to train myself into using Evernote on my phone when I'm not at my desk, it hasn't stuck. That's okay, though: I have been able to build the habit of entering all my notes into the computer once a day. I just make a point of piling up those little scraps on my desk whenever I empty my pockets. Then I type them up and put them where they go.

Those ideas go into the desktop application of Evernote. Within my account, I have a notebook for every publication I write for, along with folders for my own writing projects, queries I'd like to send out and so on. I break down my ideas into these folders, elaborating as much as possible with sources I might talk to, headline ideas and so on. Some of my notes are just a few words, others are the first half of an entire article.

I also add regularly to Evernote as I'm working at my computer. **As I'm reading information online, I'll regularly highlight a section and click the Evernote icon in my browser** (I use Chrome and have the Evernote extension installed, but it's also available for Firefox, Internet Explorer and Safari). I'm immediately given the option of choosing what notebook to add that material to. Evernote will automatically save what is highlighted, along with the source that I found the information in so that I can go back later easily.



The web-based version of Evernote.



Adding a new note to Evernote.

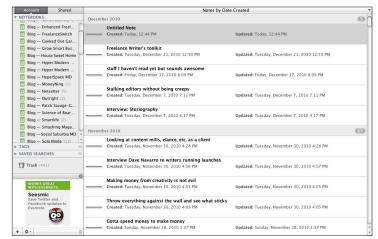
With the Evernote extension in your browser, it's possible to easily save notes on more than just ideas that you've come across. You can create a notebook of markets you'd like to work with in the future and clip their submissions guidelines as easy as anything else.

Finding What's Right for You

Despite my own opinion that Evernote is one of the easiest tools available for a writer to use to manage ideas, it's worth noting that everyone has a different workflow. If Evernote is not a good fit for the way you usually work, that's okay. It's worth your while to invest the time to find something that really works for the way you write. There are plenty of other ways to manage your ideas:

- You can create one word processing document and just keep them there.
- You can create drafts or individual files in a folder on your computer.
- You can add ideas as to-do's on your task list.
- You can use one of the many other computer programs built specifically for managing ideas or for writing, such as DevonThink (http://www.devon-technologies.com/products/devonthink) and Scrivener (http://literatureandlatter.com/scrivener.php).

No matter how you prefer to work, you can find an approach that really works for you.



The desktop version of Evernote.

Returning to Old Ideas

When you write on a regular basis about the same topic, it can feel like you're using up ideas. Every time you write about a given idea, it seems like you've exhausted that particular topic. Depending on your format, however, there are a variety of options that will let you revisit your old ideas and make use of them again.

Something as simple as an idea about writing ten tricks for avoiding a cold can be returned to time and again.

Reslant the Story

Got an evergreen topic that you've already written about once? Think about how you can reslant that idea and write about it again. A new slant can include anything: you can write about the topic from the point of view of one particular industry or niche audience, or you can write about from different levels (like a personal level or a very broad level). That idea of ten tricks can be made specific — ten tricks for moms to avoid a cold — or personal — where I learned ten tricks to avoid a cold.

In every publication, there are certain topics that you see again and again. That's because, after a while, your readers forget about older pieces and need the information again. With a blog, you might just link back to an old post, but if you can give the topic a fresh look, it's perfectly okay to write a new version. A different slant can make the topic seem fresh and new. Start with the ten ideas that you most enjoyed writing about and think up one new slant for each one. Who else could benefit from reading about this topic? The worksheet on the other half of this page can help you get your new ideas down in writing.

Reslant Your Story

Pick five of your favorite ideas that you've written about in the past and think up one slant for each.

Idea 1: Who else could benefit from reading about this topic? Idea 2: Who else could benefit from reading about this topic? Idea 3: Who else could benefit from reading about this topic? Idea 4: Who else could benefit from reading about this topic? Idea 5: Who else could benefit from reading about this topic?

Write a Follow-Up

In every story, we wonder what happens after the 'happily ever after.' There's always an opportunity to revisit an old article or post and take a look at what happened next. If, for instance, you wrote a profile, where is that person now? If you wrote a how-to, what kind of results have been obtained by people who have actually put that technique to use? If you wrote about an event, what was the impact of that event?

Start with your ten most read or most popular pieces. Write down what happened next for each of them. The odds are good that for each of those stories, you can find a follow-up idea. If you wrote about ten tricks to avoid colds, you can follow up with someone who actually avoided a cold this year or you can check and see if those tricks worked for everyone.

Placing those ideas may be a little more difficult. If you write a blog, you can simply write your follow-up and post it (be sure to link back to your original post to make sure that you get the most bang for your buck). But if you wrote the original piece as an article for a publication, you'll need either need to find a way to make your follow up piece stand on its own, so you can pitch it to other publications, or you need to pitch that original editor and convince her that a follow up piece will be a good idea. Sometimes, it will take and sometimes it won't. It's worth noting that with some publications you may not be able to sell a follow up article to one of your own pieces, but you may be able to sell one for another writer's article.

Follow Up on Your Story

Pick five of your most popular pieces and check into what happened ater your piece ran.

Article 1: What's happened since you wrote the original article? Article 2: What's happened since you wrote the original article? Article 3: What's happened since you wrote the original article? Article 4: What's happened since you wrote the original article? Article 5: What's happened since you wrote the original article?

Put the Topic in the Context of Current Events

If you wrote about a particular idea some time ago, you can update it with a look at current events. There's something new going on every day, so take a look at what has happened recently and see how you can put your topics into that context. Especially with a more evergreen topic, bringing your idea up to date is one of the easiest ways to return to something that you may have already written about.

If you were to return to that article on ten tricks to avoid a cold, you may be able to look at it in the light of the recent debates on health care reform or the news that some drug stores have added walkin clinics to their offerings.

Make a list of ten ideas hat you think you could revisit and read the day's news with them by your side. Look for news that is relevant to those ideas and see if you can find new idea within the context of current events.

Put Your Story into a New Context

Article 1.

Pick five topics that you've already written about and put them into the context of current events.

, whole it.
How do current events impact this story?
Article 2:
How do current events impact this story?
Article 3:
How do current events impact this story?
Article 4:
How do current events impact this story?
Article 5:
How do current events impact this story?

Talk to a New Expert

Every expert has opinions about her areas of interest that can help you jump start a new idea. A doctor may have very different ideas on tricks to avoid colds than an acupuncturist or even a school nurse. Just by finding someone new to talk to about the topic, you can find a whole new idea within the kernel of something you thought you already explored.

If you have a list of ten ideas that you've already written about, start with your own contacts and see who is in your address book with expertise relevant to your topic. If you feel like you've exhausted your own contacts, you can post a query on Help A Reporter Out (http://www.helpareporterout.com), browse through LinkedIn profiles of individuals with specific job titles and check with your network on social networking sites for referrals. You just have to find one person for each idea with an interesting (and hopefully new) point of view.

Find a New Expert in the Field

Idea 1:

Pick the first five ideas that you've already covered and find a new expert in the field who you haven't interviewed.

Who can provide new insights to this topic?
ldea 2:
Who can provide new insights to this topic?
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Who can provide new insights to this topic?
Inlant. At
ldea 4:
Who can provide new insights to this topic?
ldea 5:
Who can provide new insights to this topic?

Reading with Ideas in Mind

Most of our best ideas are given to us: we find a twist on something that we've seen, heard or read. That means that one of the simplest ways to up the number of ideas we have is to read a little more. We can improve on just reading anything that comes along if we read with finding ideas in mind.

How Do You Read a Book?

If you're a professional writer, you've hopefully nailed the art of sitting down with a good book. Just the same, there are a few suggestions I'd like to offer.

Read with a pen in your hand: When you're reading, it's easy to have one exciting thought after another. Each new idea, though, knocks an old one out of the way. If you write down your ideas as you have them, you can make sure that you aren't losing out on anything good. Furthermore, don't write your notes in your books — aside from irritating every librarian you know, there's no guarantee that you're going to go back to a book. Rather, write down your ideas on a note card or a separate pad of paper, with enough information to act upon without your needing to reread the whole book.

Follow up on questions: If something you read sparks questions, make notes of those too — and actually find out the answer. If there's something you're wondering about, the chances are surprisingly good that someone else has similar questions. That means that you might be able to develop an idea out of sharing the answer to that question.

Schedule reading time: When you've got plenty of writing and other projects on your plate, reading can often fall to the wayside. You may pick up a book in spurts (making it harder to continue a train of thought) or when you're already tired. Put some reading time on the calendar, no matter what you want to read.

Going Beyond Books

There are, of course, plenty of other reading materials out there beyond books. There are a wealth of blogs, magazines, ebooks and even cereal boxes with words printed and ready for you to read. Make use of them!

Many topics are covered very differently in full-length book projects and in shorter articles, making it imperative that you get a feeling for the different lengths — no matter what styles you normally write in. Different approaches to the same topic may just as easily spark an idea as anything else.

Questions to Keep in Mind as You Read

As you read (whether it's for work or for pleasure), you may come across ideas, phrases and questions worth writing down. Here are a couple of questions to keep in mind as you're reading, so that you get as much out of the time you spend reading as possible.

- 1. Are there any particularly well-written turns of phrase that you'd like to add to your swipe file?
- 2. Are there any questions you have from reading the material? Any context or phrase that doesn't make sense?
- 3. Is there any idea you'd like to follow up on?
- 4. Are there any experts or further reading materials mentioned that you'd like to check out?
- 5. Would reviewing this material (or something related) be a useful idea for any of the publications you write for?

Read Outside of Your Niche

It's so easy to get caught up with reading just those websites, magazines and books that directly relate to the topic you're writing about at this point. That's a good way to find books to review, but there will always be points when you feel like the only thing crossing your desk is yet another re-hashing of the same topic.

Breaking out of your niche can be truly helpful in inspiring ideas. When reading non-fiction, you can often think about how a particular concept you're reading up about impacts your specialty and — bam! — have another idea to pursue. A real estate writer can get just as many ideas from reading design blogs (what types of design will people be looking for in a house next year?) and economic books (how does our economy change what people need to do to sell their houses?) as from reading the sales listings, if not more.

Fiction reading can also provide some inspiration. It may seem like a fluff piece, but I've actually seen an article on the topic of 'What Copy Writers can Learn from Winnie the Pooh' — and it did very well. You can also find more subtle ideas in the stories you read.

If you're at a loss of where to go outside of your niche, start with one of the many lists out there. Check out the New York Times' Bestsellers list or start working your way through the list of Pulitzer Prize winners. You may not have to stick to your list very long before you start finding topics you want to read more about and ideas worth writing about.

Skip the Writing Books

It may sound strange, but with only a few exceptions, reading writing books on a regular basis isn't going to help you come up with writing ideas. Many books include brainstorming exercises or worksheets that you can go through — but you don't have to read the whole book. In fact, you shouldn't, because you're likely to wind up with far too many meta-topics (writing about writing about your niche, for instance). There are other reasons to read writing books, of course, but if you're actively looking for ideas, they shouldn't be your first choice.

The exception, for many writers, seems to be very personal tales of writing, such as Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* or Michael Chabon's *Maps and Legends*. My working hypothesis is not that these books in and of themselves provide ideas, but they tend to make their readers better able to accept ideas from outside their own niche.

Following Experts in the Field

If you write regularly about a particular topic, you're an expert on that topic. But how did you get to be an expert? Most likely, it was by reading up on what the experts who came before you had to say. Returning to those experts can keep new ideas coming. It's a matter of following the experts in question and bringing together the information they are discussing in a place where you can systematically check through it for anything that sparks an idea for you. At the very least, you'll be easily able to find books and new products to review — and you'll usually be able to see new developments in your field quickly.

Choosing Your Experts

If you've been involved in your field for more than a few weeks, a few names will always come to mind as experts. Just who those big names are depends on your field, of course — if you write about Southern cooking, Paula Deen is likely to come to mind, and if you write about skateboarding, Tony Hawk is likely to come to mind. Make a list of three of these big names — three is almost always enough, due to the fact that anything an A-lister puts out has been through a vetting process (marketing research, legal approval and so on). That makes it harder to catch a new trend or concept in your niche if you only read those big names. At the same time, though, if something makes it through that process, it's big enough that you likely need to take notice.

You'll also want to make a list of around five B-listers and perhaps even add a C-lister or two. When you work your way down a ladder, you're likely to find a lot more new takes on your topic. Some will be absolute junk, of course, but if you've spotted a few of the diamonds in the rough, you can get insights into what's coming next before it hits the A-listers. This holds just as true in neuropsychology as fashion. No matter your topic, the biggest names don't move as quickly as people further down the hierarchy — they don't move as quickly as people still trying to climb the ladder. An A-lister may have a bigger audience, but a B-lister has a bigger drive to succeed. Take advantage of that fact.

When you have a list of ten experts in total, you've got a good starting point for getting new ideas. More than ten can simply become difficult to manage: you can wind up with a bad case of information overload, making it tough to search through the noise and find those new ideas worth writing about.

Choosing Experts to Follow

Pick a set o experts to follow to help you find new ideas in your niche.

Pick three A-listers (big names that even someone

Getting the Right Information

Before we dive into how to collect updates on what your expert list is up to, it's worth looking at infrastructure. Most of the sources of information listed below can be read as either emails or RSS updates. It's a matter of preference which tool you use, but it is important to pick one. It's generally a good idea to separate the account (whether a RSS reader or email account) from what you use normally, just because it's easy for this sort of set up to have a ton of information in it. Considering that you'll most likely be skimming through articles and updates, looking for something new, that's not necessarily a problem — but your reading will go significantly faster if it isn't mixed in with other things you need to take care of.

Once you have your preferred reading method picked out, it's time to go get updates on just about everything your experts do:

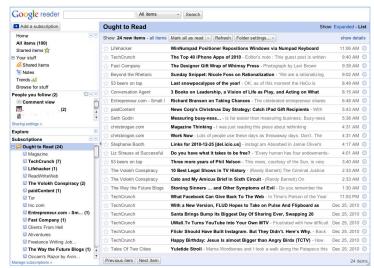
- Sign up for updates of their blogs, websites and newsletters
- Create a Google Alert (http://google.com/alerts) for their names
- Follow them on social networking sites, such as Twitter

Bring everything into one place and, on a regular basis, skim through all of it. You don't have to read for depth. Rather, you're looking for something that catches your attention: considering you're already familiar with your topic, new points of view are likely to catch your attention even if you aren't reading every word of a blog post.

You need to recognize that we are talking about a lot of information here. Never be afraid to mark all of it read and clean the slate. Anything particularly important will show up several times, assuming that you're following ten experts, giving you multiple opportunities to catch it. If you've fallen behind on your reading or it just seems a little much, remember that you don't have to read every item in your email or RSS reader. It's often possible to read only headlines and still get the majority of what you're looking for.

Revisiting Your Expert List

Don't be afraid to go back and change up your list as time goes on. People change jobs, get interested in new things or even get set in their ways. None of those things are good for your ability to find new ideas by looking at your experts, at least as time goes on. That makes it necessary to return to the question of who is on your list every so often. Unless there's a dramatic change, once a year is likely often enough. If you notice yourself avoiding reading through information about a particular expert — maybe it feels repetitive or simply boring — go ahead and drop him from your list. If you don't want to read someone's stuff, it makes it a lot harder to find new ideas within it. Add someone who excites you and interests you.



Google Reader, a popular RSS reader.

Brainstorming Strategies for Writers

There may be days when you find yourself facing a blank page with no ideas stashed away in your files. That means that it's time to pull out a couple of brainstorming techniques out and see what you can come up with. There are a variety of different options for brainstorming out there, but the bottom line is coming up with as many ideas as possible in one go — whether or not they're good ideas. You just need to get a ton of potential topics down on paper in one go. Save going through and refining them (or throwing out the bad ideas entirely) for later.

Brainstorming in its Purest Form

For many writers, simply sitting down with a pad of paper can be enough to start brainstorming. Some people can just stare at a blank page and start writing down ideas as they come in. Not everyone is so lucky, of course, so having a few backup techniques you can turn to when that blank page is overbearing can be useful.

Free writing is the idea of just starting to write about a topic. Perhaps you have a small prompt, like 'write about when you first encountered the broader topic you're writing about.' You can also just focus on your broader topic and just start writing whatever comes to mind. You're unlikely to actually get an article out of a free writing session, but you'll often get several ideas that grow out of the associations you make with your topic as you write about it.

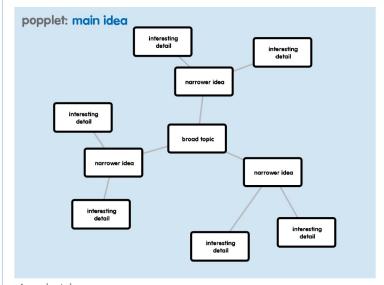
Mind mapping is another useful approach to getting something on that blank page. You write the key phrase of broader topic in the center of the page and draw lines shooting of from it, connecting the main idea to related topics. Personally, I tend to create a mind-map of the whole topic, thinking about what I've already written or read about a given area. After I've exhausted my existing knowledge, I tend to find questions or connections I want to explore.

Just about every brainstorming technique amounts to getting ideas on paper without judgement. The details in exactly how you interact with that paper aren't really that important, as long as you're writing ideas down.

Questions to Spark Ideas

Having a few questions to think about can make the process of free writing easier, if not speed up the brainstorming process as a whole. Here are a few questions to give you a starting point.

- 1. Why am I passionate about my niche?
- 2. What happened in today's news that impacts my niche?
- 3. How has being interested in this niche changed my life?
- 4. Where would I start if I met someone who wanted to learn about my niche?
- 5. If I could only tell the world about one part of this niche, what would I say?



A sample mindmap.

Brainstorming with a Partner

It can be tough to just get yourself to come up with ideas: after you've been writing about the same topic for a long time, your mind may often go down the same paths over and over again. That can make bringing in a partner very worthwhile. There are two opportunities when choosing a brainstorming partner: you can find someone who knows nothing about your niche and can bring an entirely fresh set of eyes to the problem or you can choose an expert in the field who can direct your brainstorming. While both options can be helpful, it's usually easier to come by a less knowledgable brainstorming partner. You can do something as simple as team up with another writer and take turns talking about your different specialties.

Just like when you're brainstorming on your own, it's crucial to write down all of the ideas that come along and sort them out later. Your partner probably won't have a clear idea of what you've written about before — and if she isn't an expert in the field, she probably isn't aware of potential problems, either. And you never know: maybe your partner in brainstorming will come at something from a new angle that will allow you to revisit it.

There are plenty of sources for finding a partner — another writer who also needs someone to brainstorm with can be a particularly good option, but anyone who has the time to sit down with you can be a fresh pair of eyes. If you are specifically looking for someone working in your niche, consider asking one of your sources to brainstorm with you. There's a good chance suggestions from such a brainstorming partner will focus on topics he can be quoted on, though.

Getting Out of Your Current Patterns

In many cases, **brainstorming goes a little easier if you shake things up**. Getting away from your computer and your usual work environment can be a step in the right direction. Try taking a walk or heading to a coffee shop — just go somewhere new. A little visual stimulus can go along way, as can just the physical act of getting out of your chair. Take a look at your work habits and do something entirely out of the ordinary. Personally, I don't even have to leave the house to get a change of scenery: when I'm stumped for ideas, I go work out. It's a little awkward to stop in the middle to write down ideas, but it's worth it for me.

It's rare that there is absolutely no way to change your scenery, but if you find yourself feeling stuck, maybe a change of internal scenery will help. Meditating can be very useful for clearing your mind enough to let yourself focus on the topic you're trying to brainstorm ideas for. Stretching can be similarly beneficial. While it isn't a favorite, even pacing around the room can be better than staying at your desk and trying to force the brainstorming process.

Your Ideas Are Just the Starting Point

Hopefully, this ebook has made it easier for you to find the ideas you need to move your writing business forward and I would encourage you to try to incorporate just one of these activities into your routine. If you're feeling overwhelmed, just try one. See how it goes — you may be surprised!

I've made a personal commitment to helping build resources that make running a writing business easier and I hope you'll sign up for my email list so that I can keep you updated on what new resources I'm coming up with. You can sign up for the newsletter here (http://www.thursdaybram.com/ebooknewsletter).

Thursday Bram is ...

I am a full-time writer, and have been (with a two-week exception) since graduating from college. I've written for CNET, GigaOm and quite a few other websites. One of my passions is writing about writing, mostly because I like knowing why what I do works. I've even managed to write articles about writing for publications as diverse as the *Novel and Short Story Writers' Market* and *Home Education Magazine*. You can hear all about my writing experiences on my site (http://www.thursdaybram.com).



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