



Writing Tip # 3: Word Puke

This is my very favorite tip of all. I've gotten the privilege of volunteering in my son's classes since he started school, and I love it when I get the chance to help the kids with their writing. But this tip isn't just for them—it's for all of us.

After the teacher explains the assignment and the kids have thrown out some ideas, there's often a silent moment where every pencil in the room is hovering above a clean sheet of notebook paper and I'm waiting for a hand to go up, but no one moves. It's the same thing that happens to me even after an idea has been bouncing around in my head for days. It's not writer's block because we know what we're supposed to do, what we *want* to do. I think the pathway from brain to pencil (or keyboard) gets clogged up by everything we've been taught about language arts: spelling, capitalization, verb agreement, sentence length, and so on. And even more than that, there's fear—fear that we'll make a mistake, and worse yet, that someone will see it. After all, we're writers and we should know all this stuff. But the thing about writing is that the first step is a creative process and that takes a different frame of mind than the editing and polishing processes do.

So, how do you capture and transfer all of those great ideas, images, and feelings going on

in your imagination? Word puke. Yep, it sounds gross, and it is because it can get messy. But it's a whole lot better to have something in front of you to clean up than a great idea trapped in your head and a blank page in front of you. Go ahead and forget about punctuation and grammar. Throw down sentence fragments and stick in quick notes about setting. Choose a symbol (I use an asterisk) and use it to mark items you need to come back to and research. This works really well because you can search your document for the symbol you used and work through each one later.

Whether you write spontaneously or outline every last detail before starting a manuscript, this is a great way to get started on building your story. Just let it flow, and once it does, it will begin to take shape and before long, come to life on the pages. Sure, it looks ridiculous and no one will understand it but you, but that's okay because you can switch to your editing frame of mind later and then polish those words until they gleam.

Here's my approach. I open my custom word template (see Writing Tip # 1) and add a few page breaks. These may or may not become chapters later, but for now, they represent different scenes in the story, keeping them in order, but separated. Pull out your notebook (see Writing Tip #2) and dig in. I rarely start at the beginning of a story, so I skip to a page break in the middle—or even the end—and build back and forth from there.

Here's an example from the book I'm currently writing. There were a couple of specific lines of dialogue that I knew I wanted to use, so those were easy. I didn't know how far Brett could've reasonably walked, or really how much time would've passed, so I marked that to research later. I also threw in a quick reminder to describe that the later part of the scene took place in the morning even though I didn't know how it started. My word puke looked like this:

My dad had gone too far helping Brett's pre basic training training.

Made up an excuse to borrow mom's minivan. Early hours of morning. Found him walking down the mountain on the edge of the highway. *how fast can a person walk?

"I don't have the energy to fight with you right now. I just need you to believe in me."

"I do believe in you."

After a few passes with my researching, describing, editing, and polishing frames of mind, it now looks like this.

One Saturday night, though, I realized my dad had gone too far. I waited for Brett's goodnight call, but it never came. I dialed his number while I was taking out the trash. Weirdly, I heard a phone ringing in the distance. I hung up without leaving a message and tried again. Same thing. It seemed to be coming from my dad's truck. I peered past the streetlight glare on the passenger side window, and not only was Brett's phone in there, but so was his jacket. I chucked the trash bag into the garbage can and slammed the lid.

It was late, but I dialed Nora's number anyway.

"Do you know where Brett is?" I asked her as soon as she answered.

"Not entirely."

"Is this another one of my dad's ideas for helping Brett prepare for basic training?"

"I know it sounds bad, Rylynn, but your dad told me what he was planning to do, and I agreed with him. He said that no matter how hard he is on Brett, he strives harder to succeed, no matter what he throws at him. So your dad promised me that he would make it so bad that this would be the end of it."

"What did he do?" I demanded.

She let out a conflicted sigh. "He kidnapped him and left him in the mountains."

"What? Why would he do that?"

"To treat him like a prisoner of war, to disorient him, make him vulnerable so that he'll realize how dangerous and serious things could get, and that he can't get himself out of everything."

"Please, Nora, do you have any idea where he is?"

"I don't know for sure. You know your dad and his maps, but he said something about an old logging road. But don't worry—he said he'll go back tomorrow and bring him home, and then we can all move on. Look, I trust your dad. You should, too."

I contained my anger and wished her a good night. I rooted around in my dad's truck and found a map under Brett's stuff. The area circled on the map was secluded and I knew there wasn't much I could do in the dark. I went into the house and asked my mom

if I could borrow her minivan first thing in the morning so that I could get in an early workout. The night dragged, but finally, I headed out into the hazy gray of predawn light.

As I navigated the steepening curves in the road, the houses and storefronts thinned into an occasional ranch house or riverside cabin. I couldn't believe it when I saw Brett walking down the gravelly edge of the mountain highway. He was miles from where my dad had left him up in the pine trees, but he still had a long way to descend among the brushy, rolling foothills. I passed him, made a three-point turn, and then pulled up next to him. He had a split lip and friction burns on both wrists.

My rescue was anything but well-received. When he didn't get in, I rolled the window down.

"What are you doing here, Ry?" he asked through gritted teeth.

"Get in. It's freezing."

"Go home," he said, continuing to walk.

"Get in and I will."

"I have to do this on my own."

"No, you don't. He is not your captain or your boss or whatever. There is absolutely no reason to do this. It is not normal; it's completely dysfunctional!"

"I don't have the energy to fight with you right now. I just need you to believe in me."

His hurt rolled over me like a wave. "I do believe in you."

There was a slight look of relief on his face. I continued to coast next to him, but he ignored me.

"Please, at least take your jacket" I said. "And I brought a bottle of water and a protein bar, too."

He slowed and started to reach out his hand but then pressed ahead again.

"You are making this harder," he said.

"I'm sorry, I"

That was never my intention. So I left him there and snuck his stuff back into my dad's truck. Instead of a grumble at the soft knock on the door that came a few hours later, I heard the chuckle my dad used in the rare moments he was pleased.

"Not bad, James," he whispered.

Ten minutes later, my dad returned and sat down to brunch as though it were perfectly normal to treat your daughter's boyfriend like a prisoner of war, and even more so that said prisoner could stroll back on into town like that.

This scene may yet change as the story grows, let alone with final editing, but you get the idea and you can do it, too. Just remember: pencils have erasers and keyboards have delete keys. After all, it's only word puke.

(And as always, thank you to my son for the awesome drawings he makes for me!)