

THE TOP 27 WAYS TO BOOST YOUR WRITING WILLPOWER

Productive Writers

Work Less ~ Earn More ~ Live More

A special report by John Soares of ProductiveWriters.com

How strong is your willpower? Do you do what you should, when you should, whether you feel like it or not — whether it's for your writing or any other task large or small in your life?

Do you have strong self-control?

The most important factor that determines whether or not you are a successful writer is the strength of your willpower. And that's why I've always been interested in this crucial characteristic of successful people.

This special report is based on peer-reviewed psychology studies of how the human mind actually works, not on pop psychology fads. In particular, I lean heavily on *The Willpower Instinct* by [Kelly McGonigal](http://KellyMcGonigal.com), a professor of psychology at Stanford University.

So stay strong, and read all the way to the end of the report! (OK, for you skimmers, the 27 suggestions are about halfway down.)

The Problem

Our brains evolved over many tens of thousands of years in an environment that rewarded short-term focus: eat a lot today, because who knows when you'll get more food. This was important 20,000 years ago, but it makes us overweight now. In general, we tend to think more about the short term rather than the long term, which usually means we choose pleasure over pain.

A constant struggle rages between our subconscious impulsive self and our conscious rational self. Willpower requires recognizing when we need to override our natural instincts, and this in turn requires being conscious of our choices and whether or not those choices are in accordance with our goals.

The Good News: Your Brain Can Change

Our [brains have plasticity](#), meaning that they change in response to what we think and do. **We can train our brains to improve in anything**, from math to dance to writing, and that includes increasing willpower.

Willpower is Like a Muscle

Why? Because **the more you use it, the stronger it gets**. Successes lead to even more successes. It's like increasing strength in your biceps. If you have a regular program of doing curls, over time you'll be able to do more curls, and with higher weights.

We have more willpower than we realize. Often when you think you can't do what you should do, you actually can. Just make yourself push through the barrier and frequently you'll find that you actually can do it. Making yourself write another 500 words even though you think you can't possibly write even one more word will increase your ability to get more writing done overall.

Like any muscle, though, willpower can be pushed too far. If it gets used too much, it won't be there when you really need it.

Bear in mind that many things require willpower, and doing too much of them can drain your reserves for the really important tasks. Here are some examples of daily activities that draw on your self-discipline resources:

- Conforming to subcultures that you don't share, such as those in work environments and social settings
- Making lots of small decisions, like choosing what book to read at the library, or which emails to answer in your inbox
- Navigating through rush-hour traffic to get to work or to get home

Desire Does Not Mean Happiness: The Reward Paradox

Our brains are wired to fulfill our desires, to give us rewards in the form of a rush of the neurotransmitter dopamine. This characteristic developed as a way to guide primitive humans to do the immediate things that were necessary for survival: eating food, finding shelter, engaging in sex.

However, in the modern world we too often seek dopamine boosts from activities that might seem pleasurable in the moment, but that in no way lead to our long-term happiness. We may think we desire to spend [just another 5 minutes online](#) (which often turns into an hour) in the hope we'll find something truly interesting or exciting; however, this does not bring us long-term happiness.

That's why modern technology is so insidious. It's always there, always on, and it's very difficult to resist the temptation to keep [checking the smartphone](#), tablet, or computer for something interesting, when instead we should be completing that writing project for our client, or going out for a run.

We chase the promise of a reward when we click on yet another video, or we buy yet another item that's advertised to taste delicious or make us sexy. This leads to wasting time and energy that should be spent on pursuing goals that will bring us long-term happiness.

The solution? **We need to turn away from the short-term and shallow rewards to focus on the long-term and significant rewards that come from striving for and accomplishing those important goals.**

High Stress Leads to Low Willpower

There is a direct correlation between [high levels of stress](#) and decreased willpower: decreasing your stress will make you happier and more productive in your writing career and other aspects of your life.

Many different things can stress you, and they all decrease your ability to say no when you should. Stressors can include everything from anxiety to loneliness to air pollution to noise pollution. It can also include unhappy relationships.

Whenever we have significant stress, our brains search for a quick reward, so we may find ourselves eating an entire chocolate bar while spending 45 minutes on Facebook. This obviously moves us further away from long-term goals like earning more money, losing some weight, or writing that book.

There are many good ways to relieve our stress that don't rely on seeking short-term gratification through bad-for-us rewards, including exercise, sports, gardening, walking, yoga, tai chi, meditation, and spending time with people we like.

The Danger of Unrealistic Optimism

We can easily get swept up in optimism when thinking about how great it will be to have accomplished a certain goal, or to have made a change in our behavior. But often we suffer reversals when it's more difficult than we thought, or we make some progress, but we still have many other challenges.

It's so easy to vow to make the change, but so difficult to follow through. This leads to cycles of vowing to change, failing to change, feeling miserable, and then getting another rush of unrealistic optimism when we renew our vow to change.

We need to find a balance between unrealistic optimism and finding the necessary motivation we need to meet goals. It's important to think about not only the outcomes, but also everything we'll have to do during the process of meeting those goals.

The Temptation of Instant Gratification

Since our brains evolved to focus on the short term, we frequently fall prey to the temptation of instant gratification at the expense of pursuing our long-term goals. We place a huge discount on the value of future achievements so we can get the quick payoff of watching a couple of hours of television or spending the day shopping at the mall.

Often the longer it takes to achieve a goal, the less value our brains place on that goal, even though it may be a goal that is crucial to our long-term financial success or happiness.

Whenever we're tempted to give in to instant gratification, we need to think about our long-term goals, why they are so important, and how giving in to the temptation decreases the chances we'll achieve those goals.

27 Ways to Boost Your Willpower

1. Forgive Yourself for Willpower Failures

It's natural to have willpower failures. Research shows that people who forgive themselves actually develop stronger self-control than people who criticize themselves. Self-criticism is also strongly associated with depression.

2. Start Small

You can build willpower for important aspects of your life by initially developing self-control in smaller areas. Here are some examples: going for a walk every day, reducing the amount of junk food you eat, or choosing to make your own coffee or tea in the morning rather than buy it at a coffee shop.

3. Determine When You're Strongest and When You're Weakest

Record your willpower successes and failures for a few days, or even a couple of weeks. Are there patterns? Many people do best in the mornings and are more likely to fail later in the day. Track what happens and also write down how you felt when your willpower gave out, and why you think it happened.

4. Do Your Most Difficult Tasks When You Are Strongest

If you are most able to muster self-control in the mornings, that's when you need to do what you least like to do. (Note: those things you least like to do are often the most important. For freelance writers like me, this is often marketing.)

5. Focus on the Future Consequences of Your Present Actions

Think about all your habits, large and small, good and bad. Now think about what your life will be like in five years if you continue with those exact same habits. Which habits will make your life better? How will you improve those habits? Which habits will make your life worse? How will you change those habits?

6. Ask Yourself Motivating Questions

[Questions](#) are often a great way to bust through barriers. Try these:

- What are the short-term payoffs of completing this task?
- What are the long-term payoffs?
- Who else will benefit?

7. Focus on Your Commitment, Not Your Progress

People often get started on a project, get a little bit of it done, congratulate themselves on the progress they've made, and then [procrastinate](#) about completing the rest of the project. It's OK to be happy you're making progress, but focus primarily on your commitment to actually finish the project. That's the way to truly get things done.

8. Know What Causes You To Fail

And decide what you will do about it. What are your most important willpower challenges? How will you successfully deal with them when they arise? You need to develop specific strategies ahead of time.

9. Don't Expect That You'll Be Better Tomorrow

It's common for someone to excuse poor choices today by saying "I'll make up for it tomorrow." "I'll have a huge bowl of ice cream tonight, but I'll burn off all those calories and more by doing a big workout at the gym in the morning." Often you won't even get to the gym, or if you do, you don't complete that big workout.

10. Minimize Self-Criticism

Self-criticism is strongly associated with lower willpower and increased depression.

11. Be Future Focused

Think about the long-term consequences of your actions. If you slack on your writing assignments and marketing now, you'll be poorer in the future and will have to delay retirement. If you don't pay your taxes when they're due, you'll have to deal with nasty consequences from the IRS later.

12. Learn to Recognize and Resist Temptations

What makes you lose sight of your goals and leads you down the path of wasted time and energy? Is it all those potentially interesting or funny pages and videos on the Internet? Smelling a food that is delicious but bad for you? Seeing an advertisement for a big sale at a store? Passing a casino on the freeway? Learn to resist these temptations by thinking about your goals and how these temptations will delay or prevent their attainment.

13. Wait 10 Minutes Before Giving in to a Temptation

Your brain often focuses on the very short term, especially when you see something interesting and distracting, or if you smell something tasty you'd love to eat. Make yourself wait for 10 minutes, and while you wait, think about your long-term goals and why this temptation is not in your best interest. Frequently you'll find that when the 10 minutes are up, so is your self-discipline—and you'll be able to say no.

14. Hang Out With People Who Have Strong Willpower

Studies show that we often mirror the habits and attitudes of the people around us. As much as possible, spend time around people who have characteristics that you want to emulate. Conversely, minimize time around people who have characteristics that you don't want to emulate.

15. Use Rewards to Motivate Yourself

We all have to do things we don't want to do. Give yourself a reward for finishing a smaller task, and use the thought of big reward down the road to keep you going on bigger projects.

16. Meditate

Studies show that a regular meditation practice of as little as five minutes a day improves powers of concentration and focus.

17. Get Enough Sleep at Night

A lack of sleep not only saps your ability to think well, it also saps your ability to do what you really should be doing. Studies show that we need [7-8 hours of quality sleep](#) a night.

18. Take a Nap

Related to the above. If you don't get enough sleep, or if you're just feeling sleepy, take a short snooze: 10-20 minutes can make a world of difference. Be sure to set an alarm so you can really let yourself go without worrying about sleeping too long. This really helps me get my afternoon writing done.

19. Take Deep, Slow Breaths

Slowing your respiration rate and breathing more deeply changes your physiology and takes your brain into a more focused and productive state.

20. Take a Short Walk

Even if it's just for a few minutes, getting outside into the open air where you can see some nature can make a big difference. Go to the local park, or visit a favorite tree grove or stream. Or just take a little time to look at the sky.

21. Find Good Role Models

Identify people you either know or know about that have strong self-discipline. Whenever you need a willpower boost, think about them and their ability to get the important things done.

22. Stop and Breathe

Whenever you feel stressed and are about to do something you know you shouldn't, make yourself stop, take a few breaths, and relax your body. Getting to a calmer physiological state helps you get to a better mental state, one where you have a much better chance of doing the right thing.

23. Eat Healthy

A diet of vegetables, whole grains, legumes, and other [good-for-you foods](#) puts your body in a better state to resist those temptations that can lead you astray. Conversely, fast food, heavily processed foods, candy, and other junk foods do the opposite.

24. Spend Time with People You Like

Hang out with your friends, or visit with family members (the ones who don't stress you). In a relationship? Spend quality time with your special someone doing activities you both really enjoy.

25. Avoid People You Don't Like

Of course, you don't have full control over this. But to the extent that you reasonably can, spend less time around people that increase your stress.

26. Find Religion

Studies show that people with strong faith and frequent attendance at religious services are less stressed, live longer, and have better self-control.

27. Get Some Exercise

Even small amounts of modest exercise, just 5-10 minutes, can make a big difference. Take a short walk around the block. Head outside and pull some weeds in the garden. Vacuum the living room rug. Longer periods of exercise are also quite good, of course, so go to a yoga class, or do some strength training, or go for a bike ride. Just keep in mind that studies show that it only takes a few minutes of modest exercise to make a substantial positive difference in your mental state. In fact, you're better off doing several short exercise sessions throughout the day than one long session at the gym.

Summing Up...

You now have 27 tools to increase your writing willpower. **Let's continue the journey...**

[On my ProductiveWriters.com blog](#) I share information to help you get your writing done faster, and I also discuss how to write better and how to find and keep clients that pay well.

If you want to earn more from your writing, you owe it to yourself to get my self-guided short course "[Find Your Freelance Writing Niches: Make More Money for Less Work.](#)"

I've also written an extensive ebook on one of my key niches: "[Writing College Textbook Supplements.](#)" This niche appeals to people with college degrees who love learning and want to help college students learn better and college instructors teach better.

I'm in the process of developing a simple yet powerful time management course for freelancers. Stay tuned on ProductiveWriters.com for details.