



# Which TYPE of writer are you?

A writing coach describes the four main personalities she sees and advises how to overcome what might be holding you back

By Jill Dearman

**W**HEN I FIRST became a writing coach, I was determined to be a model writer myself. I was rigid in my daily writing routine and never missed a deadline. I was a diligent writer, but also a dictatorial one.

Then one day I brought in Brooke Berman, an award-winning playwright friend and colleague, as a guest speaker

in my writing class at New York University. One student asked Brooke what she does when she is working on a play and the material is just not coming. Does she push through regardless? Knowing how dedicated Brooke was, I expected her to say “Absolutely!” Instead she replied immediately: “No. I don’t push through! I work on something else. I trust that what I need will appear later.”

That weekend I put aside the serious essay I’d been struggling over and

allowed myself to write a wild short story. I went back to the essay soon after, and within months both pieces were accepted at prestigious literary magazines. Now I guess you could say I’m a reformed “dictator.”

In my five years as a writing coach with a large private clientele in New York City, including top-tier writers and editors, I’ve noticed that almost all of my clients fall into four distinct categories—including The Dictator. I’ve

*Illustrations by Gary Markstein*

described them below to help you identify what kind of writer you are. I've also blended in some insights from Charles B. Strozier, a therapist and Pulitzer Prize-nominated author of *Heinz Kohut: The Making of a Psychoanalyst*.

If you recognize yourself in this article, don't throw in the towel yet! (Or, if you're a perfectionist, at least fold it neatly.) For every self-sabotaging habit, I've offered some constructive solutions. By using the strengths of other kinds of writers, you can discover practical ways to break frustrating work patterns.

### The Distractionist

**Defined:** This quick-thinking fellow is never at a loss for great ideas, but somehow loses interest by the second draft ... or sometimes the second graf.

**Insights:** He is the story. The story is his being, and thus highly invested. To have it read and admired touches his grandiosity. But to have it denigrated is experienced as a profound loss of self.

**Tips:** The Distractionist can learn from The Dictator (see below) by imposing strict deadlines upon himself. My novelist client Jonathan Hayes says, "I've never worked so efficiently as I did when I rented a tiny cabin on a tiny lake in the middle of nowhere in rural Ontario. No phone, no Internet, no TV, just peace and quiet, hour after hour of empty writing time and the constant threat of bear attacks. I can't achieve the same degree of isolation in Manhattan, but deadlines keep me honest. As they loom ever larger, my focus becomes increasingly sharp. The week before a deadline, I'm a marvel of efficiency."

Beth Greenfield, a *New York Times* travel writer and a memoirist, concurs: "Let's be honest—we wouldn't do anything if we didn't have deadlines."

### The Dictator

**Defined:** She knows how to keep her eye on the prize and her butt in the chair. Yet her unwillingness to change her original vision as her discovery process evolves makes her inflexible, stiff and often frustrated, as the needs of readers and the marketplace evolve while she refuses to.

**Insights:** The Dictator is dealing with underlying anxiety and trauma.

She can't afford to let go, because any relaxation of her fortress of defense will bring the walls down. But the protective barriers make it difficult to tap into the full range of her creativity.

**Tips:** Since being too tightly wound is the problem, why not warm up by doing a little journaling to release some anxiety before you begin your writing day? Practice the art of stretching by literally stretching. A little yoga could put you in a more relaxed physical state, allowing you to get in touch with a looser writer style. Take a page from The Commitment-phobe's book (see below) and work on what gives you pleasure for a while. As I did, ask yourself, "What do I *want* to write?" And finally, mix it up: Write at different times of the day, in different places.

### The Perfectionist

**Defined:** She had us at hello, or whatever her first fabulous sentence was. Yet, she cannot move on to the next brilliant line because she is still agonizing over the punctuation in the first.

**Insights:** Obsessive-compulsive. The dishes on the rack must be exactly ordered, the shoes under the bed just so. The precise forms of her writing matter more than the content because their purpose is to ward off the intrusive thoughts, impulses or images that so threaten the self.

**Tips:** The many high-end magazine and book editors I coach make their living by perfecting other people's copy. No wonder it is so torturous for them to tolerate a misplaced comma or a slack phrase. These perfectionists find it hard to move forward because they are always going back to improve their prose. One option: Take a page from The Distractionist's book and write as if you are avoiding work by sending e-mails. Write 1,000 words quickly, then send them to a writing coach or fellow writer. Once you've pressed "Send," you can't change that draft. Move forward, and only revise this section when your entire manuscript is done.

"The best flowers are fertilized by crap," observes Cecil Castellucci, an author of young-adult fiction. "You have to write that crappy first draft sometimes and just let it be."

My client Judith Pinsker, a winner of multiple Emmy awards for her work on *General Hospital*, agrees: "You just have to write badly and let things happen from there. If you're lucky it will begin to flow eventually, and you can either go back and lop off the beginning or fix it. If you're less lucky and it's not flowing, you have to keep writing anyway. Working on soap scripts taught me this. It is a relentlessly demanding job because, as a colleague of mine once said, 'In soap opera there is no third act. It just keeps going.' If you expect to keep your job, you had better turn in your work on time. There's nothing like fear of losing your contract to break a writer's block."

### The Commitment-phobe

**Defined:** It takes him a while to settle on one project, and when he does, he inexplicably becomes obsessed with "the one that got away."

**Insights:** A hybrid. What lies beneath his ambiguous relationship to writing could be any or all of what is true of the other three types. What is generally going on is an unproductive self-involvement. As with people, he flits from one story to another.

**Tips:** Author Castellucci also understands The Commitment-phobe. "No one gets to read the book if you don't finish it," she says. "This happens to me all the time. I tell myself that if I finish what I already started, as a special treat I'll get to work on that new delicious idea. It's my reward for doing my work."

The Commitment-phobe can learn something from The Perfectionist's focus: Use an egg timer to force yourself to work on just one project for an hour. The more you get to know your project, the more likely you'll fall in love with it and want to say "I do" ... or even better: Get to the final page and say "The End."

Just as many sitcoms have an episode in which the characters give up their bad habits by trading them with a buddy, you, too, can make good use of other writers' vices. For one week, why not put on a different *typeface*?

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