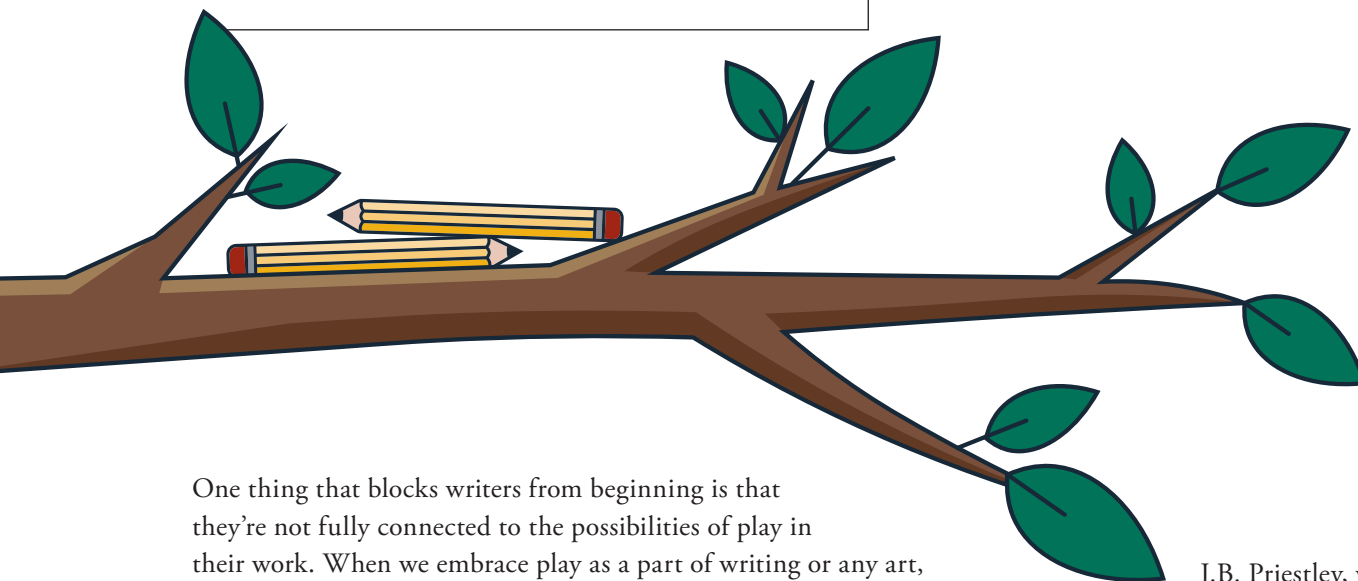


PLAY IS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF CREATIVE WRITING

BY DANNY HEITMAN



One thing that blocks writers from beginning is that they're not fully connected to the possibilities of play in their work. When we embrace play as a part of writing or any art, we see it more easily as something we get to do rather than something we have to do.

All forms of creativity involve a spirit of play, even or especially when the job is hard and also requires seriousness of purpose. Gardeners, for example, often refer to their hours outdoors as “playing in the dirt.” Musicians indulge a similar impulse when they just noodle around, seeing where a tune might take them. Artists doodle, and craftsmen tinker. They are all, in some fashion, playing.

Even when a creative artist explores a solemn subject, he can wrestle with its seriousness through play. Think of a bluesman improvising a ballad of loss or a composer charting out a dark symphony by scribbling out variations, giving himself permission to roam, to ramble, to savor the odyssey.

Play is easy to overlook when writing, but I can think of three ways to cultivate it:

First, keep your tools close by wherever you go, poised for possibility. Birdwatchers perch their binoculars by the window or in the car, and I know of a painter who kept brushes, oils, paper, and an easel in his trunk in case he came across a choice sunset or a beautiful barn on a Sunday drive. When your tools are quickly available, moments of creative flow can evolve seamlessly, without fuss. Poet Mary Oliver walked the same woods each morning around her New England home, and she was fond of placing pencils in the trees so they'd be there if inspiration struck. I keep a pocket journal in my jeans or coat. Some folks write with the notes app on their phones, which is fine.

Another way to cultivate play in your writing is to use tools that you really enjoy. I change the colors of my journals when I need new ones, and I might get a frivolous shade of red or blue to suit the season. I don't splurge on pricey pens and paper, but within practical limits, I go for what feels good. The English writer

J.B. Priestley, writing about having what he needed at hand to write his prose, called this practice being “cozy with work.” That's a good ideal to keep in mind.

Play of any kind needs time. Try to give a small measure of that time to yourself each day – some moments alone outside, or on a walk, or just daydreaming in a chair. A wise person once said that a writer does his best work while staring out a window. Even a teaspoon of time can be a sweet and nourishing treat.

When we bring play to our writing, we open ourselves to wonder, the wellspring from which all good writing flows.



Forum editor **DANNY HEITMAN** has written about the writing craft for numerous publications, including *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, and he's taught writing

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