

TWELVE TIPS TO HELP YOU  
**HANG IN THERE & FINISH YOUR BOOK**

by

C.M. MAYO

Adapted from a guestblog post for  
Work-in-Progress, First Person Plural, A Writer's Life,  
and other blogs, 2009.

**# 1. Before you begin, state your intentions**

It's important to write them down, stating them specifically, and in present tense. For example, I write a novel that... you fill in the blanks. I don't mean, write down what your novel is about; you might have to fiddle around for a few hundred pages before you figure that out. But ask yourself, do you want to write a novel that places you among the immortal literary stars? Or achieve a modest success that might help you get a teaching job? Or, do you just watch to check "publish book" off your "to-do" list? And how much time and effort are you willing to put into the enterprise of finding a publisher? It might be lickety-split easy to find one, or it might take a few years, a bundle of postage, and a mountain of paperwork. Not to mention heartbreak. Whatever your path may be, it will be more difficult if you have not clearly identified and acknowledged your intentions.

**# 2. Be here now**

If you are regretting the past (I should have started sooner) or worrying about the future (will they laugh at me?), you are not writing. And if you are waxing nostalgic about the past (how wonderful that they liked my short story!) or daydreaming about the future (my agent will sell it to the movies for a million dollars!!), you are not writing. Now is the only time you have to write.

**# 3. Treat yourself kindly**

If you do, your artist self will show up more frequently, and play more freely. If you bully and criticize yourself, you can sure, you'll end up blocked.

**# 4. Keep a pen and something to write on with you at all times**

When you're out and about, driving, at the dentist's, walking the dog, you just might capture the perfect fragment of dialogue, or hear the opening line of the next chapter in your head... I don't recommend those lovely bound "writer's" journals because they are too big to carry around easily. I use Moleskines, index cards and sometimes even a small pack of Post-Its.

#### **# 5. When you are writing, always keep your pen resting lightly on the page (if at the computer, keep your fingers on the keyboard)**

If you sit back in your chair and lift your hand to your chin, as so many people do, your body is signaling to your writing self, no, I am not ready. This can contribute to a bad case of block. It's such a simple thing to always keep your pen on the page, yet very effective.

#### **# 6. Music helps**

I find that drifty, new agey music in a minor key works best for bringing on the Muses. There is a large literature about music and creativity. I recommend getting started with Don Campbell's excellent 4 CD set "The Wisdom and Power of Music," which you can find at his website, [www.mozarteffect.com](http://www.mozarteffect.com).

#### **# 7. Mise-en-place**

This is a French term chefs use that means, more or less, everything in its place. Briefly: start clean, then assemble utensils and equipment; then assemble all ingredients; then wash, cut, chop; then cook. Doing things out of order makes the whole process take longer, the product often come out mediocre (or ruined), and can cause needless stress for the cook and the diners.

This explains why many of the most productive writers write in coffee shops and the rest of them do a lot of housecleaning, *n'est-ce pas*? It's not the easiest thing to write a novel when your desk is cluttered with phone bills and stacks of unanswered letters, the dog needs to be walked in five minutes, and, by the way, you've left the phone on and your facebook page tab open. There are people who can work amongst piles and general chaos, but I am not one of them, and I cannot recommend it.

#### **# 8. Learn from other books in the same genre**

The books you have already read and love can be your best teachers. But don't read them passively, for entertainment; neither should you read as an English major might, ferreting out "interpretations." Read them as a craftsperson. How does Chekhov handle dialogue? How does Austen handle transitions? How does Hemingway describe food and clothing? Any question you have about your writing conundrums is probably answered, right there, in the books you already have on your shelf. And continue to read, and read actively, with a notebook and pen.

### **# 9. Learn from books on creativity**

Why reinvent the wheel? Whatever your problem (block, confusion, utter despair), you can be sure another writer (or artist) has wrestled with it and has something helpful to say about it in a book. The cost of a book is lentils compared to that of needlessly painful experiences. I maintain a frequently updated list of recommended titles on my workshop page at [www.cmmayo.com](http://www.cmmayo.com)

### **# 10. Get feedback on your writing**

From a writers group, a writing teacher, a freelance editor, workshop participants. You'll find my 10 tips to get the most out of your writing workshop here. And of course there is The Writer's Center, which offers a cornucopia of workshops. [www.writer.org](http://www.writer.org) If you can afford it, hiring a freelance editor is another good option.

### **# 11. Get to know other writers**

This is how I found my writers group (thanks, Richard Peabody!), my publisher (thanks, Nancy Zafris!), and my agent (thanks, Dawn Marano!). Network with a spirit of generosity. You never know who will help you, and you might be more helpful to someone else than you realize. So go to readings (they are almost all free!); take workshops, attend conferences, join writers associations, join the e-mail discussion groups, and stay in touch.

### **# 12. Consistent Resilient Action**

Again, why reinvent the wheel? Writers are not the only ones who grapple with their emotions in the face of rejection, failure, criticism, and indifference. There is a large literature on sports psychology. The book I recommend most highly is *The Mental Edge* by Kenneth Baum. Consistent Resilient Action (CRA) is what sports champions do: Dropped the ball? Well, pick it up. So, your first draft is crap? Write a new one. An agent rejected you? Send your manuscript to the next one. Take a workshop, get feedback, re-read Proust, go write a poem--- and so on. In response to anything negative, instead of wasting your energy in anger, resentment, or self-pity, it is crucial to take a positive step, however small, and immediately.

Many more resources for you at [www.cmmayo.com](http://www.cmmayo.com) click on ‘workshop’

TWELVE TIPS TO HELP YOU  
GET THE MOST OUT OF  
**YOUR VISIT TO A LIBRARY / ARCHIVE**

by  
C.M. MAYO

Adapted from a post at “Madam Mayo” blog.

**1. First visit the website**

Familiarize yourself with their procedures, hours, requirements, etc.

**2. E-mail the librarian with your intentions and questions**

**3. If possible, make an appointment**

Some will want to give you a special credential; you may need to budget extra time for this. If notified in advance, many libraries / archives will have your materials waiting for you upon your arrival. This saves you valuable waiting time. In some libraries, oftentimes the wait for materials can stretch into hours. Also, be aware of cut-off times for requesting materials.

**4. Make sure you understand their policies about making copies**

Some will allow you to scan and/or photograph documents. Almost all have some restrictions on their use. Make sure you understand permissions.

**5. Bring what you need for your research**

ID, pencils, paper, any notes. You may be required to park everything other than blank paper and a pencil in a locker; nonetheless, your notes may be helpful to have nearby. If permitted, bring a scanner, camera and tripod. The tripod is especially helpful. Don't forget any and all cords and extra batteries. Some also permit you to bring in your laptop. Some libraries will give you a key for a locker, others send you to coin-operated lockers, so make sure you also have a supply of quarters.

**6. Wear comfortable clothing**

In some archives you cannot bring in a coat; during the summer months sometimes the air-conditioning can be powerful, so, whatever the season, you might wear a long-sleeved shirt. Tight clothing can become uncomfortable after long periods seated at a desk.

**7. Pack a power snack and a bottle of water**

You won't be able to bring these inside, however, you can leave them in your car or the locker the library provides for you. If you are on a tight schedule, it's a shame to spend an hour of valuable research time hunting down a mediocre cafeteria or vending machine lunch. On the other hand, it's no fun to work on an empty stomach. Better to eat something healthy and quick in the lobby, and then, after you've finished

with your research, and the library has closed, go for a proper meal. Make sure the snack has both carbohydrates and protein. My favorite is a Lara Bar (nuts, dates, etc.)

#### **8. Always, always ask the librarian**

That's what they're there for! Librarians are a species of angel. I am not kidding. Always say thank you, so they will keep on helping you!

#### **9. Respect their rules**

If you don't, the angels may bar the doors.

#### **10. Scrupulously note sources**

Always make sure you note what you need in order to retrace your path to a source. This is key for footnotes.

#### **11. Scrupulously note verbatim quotes**

This will help you avoid unintentional plagiarism, something that has embarrassed many an historian, alas. When quoting directly, I always use quotation marks. When noting something in my own words I often insert in brackets [mine].

#### **12. Allow ample time in your schedule, the following day, if possible, for follow-up processing, filing, and etc.**

The key to making the most out of your research is to keep it organized. Label, label, label and file, file, file. Big unprocessed piles are invitations to procrastination and confusion.

TEN TIPS FOR  
**ORGANIZING A BOOK-IN-PROGRESS**

by

C.M. MAYO

Adapted from a guest-blog post for  
ForeWord Magazine's Publishing Insider Blog  
March 2009.

**1. A small (purse-sized) notebook and / or 1/4" stack of blank index cards**

I always carry these with me to jot down ideas, words, overheard dialogue, and sometimes even drafts of paragraphs or outlines of plots. By writing things down, I don't lose them and also— this is subtle, but crucial— by keeping pen and paper with me at all times, I signal to my "artist self," I'm ready to write.

**2. Post-Its**

I buy the canary-yellow 1 / 12" x 2 " blocks in bulk. I use them for the same purpose as the notebook and blank cards (and I sometimes carry these in my purse as well). Post-Its have the added advantage that I can stick them on drafts, other notes, and inside the covers of the books I'm reading, to note any vocabulary or syntax I'd like to use in my own writing.

**3. Paper, Paperclips, Staples, Stapler, Scissors, Tape, Rubberbands, Paperweights**

It's important to keep these organized and at hand. I keep mine on a tray— having them all together makes it easier to find them and easier move them for dusting.

**4. Pens, Colored Pens, and a Yellow Highlighter**

These require their own a special mug, the wackier the better.

**5. Files and a Filing Cabinet (or 10).**

Lest the piles of little cards and Post-Its start sprouting out there! The more filing cabinets the better, but if you don't have the room, filing tubs (plastic boxes with handles) and "banker's boxes," inexpensive

cardboard boxes for files, work well. Be sure you clearly label the boxes— best to use one of those blank index cards for that purpose.

### **6. Stack of Tabbed Folders and a Labeler**

The benefits of using tabbed folders I understood, but a labeler? What was wrong with neatly hand lettering a label, for heaven's sake? But when I finally took David Allen's advice in *Getting Things Done* and started using a labeler — mine is a Brother PT-18R— I realized what I had was— I'm not kidding— a mental health tool. Chapter 4? Labeled. Notes on Minor Characters? Labeled. Very Zen.

### **7. Stack of Large Manila Envelopes**

For any files that get too fat and filled with too many Post-Its and index cards. When I'm ready to sort through it all, there it is. Meanwhile, the envelope gets labeled.

### **8. Two Corkboards (as Large as Possible) and Plenty of Tacks**

I use the first cork board for blocking out whole chapters and the arc of the plot. Ideally, the cork board should hold a minimum of 20 pages of writing. The other cork board? That's for the usual stuff that ends up on a cork board like filings to a magnet: tickets, souvenirs, photos, take-out menus, drycleaners' receipts, etc.

### **9. Log Book**

This is your witness, your shoulder-to-cry-on, your champion, and if nothing else, once you've finished, an illuminating record.

### **10. Manuscript Box and Ribbon**

The ribbon— preferably a nice silky one— goes around the manuscript, not the box; this makes it easier to lift it out and keeps the pages from flying around.

### **For further reading:**

David Allen, *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity*

Regina Leeds, *Zen Organizing: Creating Order and Peace in Your Home, Career, and Life*

Julie Morgenstern, *Organizing from the Inside Out*