

THE SCIENCE (AND MAGIC) OF WRITING RETREATS



KEVIN T. JOHNS

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For Kim, Shari, Lorraine, Philly, Stephen, and Lacie.

Foreword

When I hosted my first writers' retreat, it changed everything.

I'd been running writing groups, coaching programs, and online courses for over a decade.

I'd helped hundreds of writers finish drafts, beat burnout, and fall back in love with their stories.

But something was missing.

Not from the writers or from my teaching, but from the process and from the environment.

I kept hearing the same thing from clients:

"I just wish I had time to focus."

"If I could get away from the chaos for even a few days..."

"I need a break from everything just to write."

"If only I could have a cabin in the woods or a room of my own..."

After hearing these sentiments enough times, I decided to host my first retreat.

It was such an incredibly successful experience that I then decided to host another and another.

And to help people understand why I believed in writers' retreats so deeply, I wrote a few articles.

(Okay, more than a few.)

I explored the neuroscience, the creative rituals, Mary Shelley's gloomy summer, and the rise of Victor Hugo's "No Clothes Method."

I made my case. Again and again.

And then I realized... I'd written a short book.

There is a lot to say about writing retreats when you realize they are more than just a vacation with a notebook and a laptop.

They're a lifeline. A creative jumpstart. A reawakening.

In these pages, you'll find reflections, research, and a lot of practical

magic. Whether you're curious about attending a retreat, dreaming of hosting one, or just wondering if there's a better way to nurture your writing life, this book is for you.

It's for the exhausted novelist who's been revising the same three chapters for six months.

It's for the poet who hasn't written since their last real vacation.

It's for the screenwriter who forgot why they even started this project in the first place.

It's for YOU.

Because writing isn't just about hitting word counts. It's about becoming the kind of writer who *wants* to keep writing.

And retreats—when they're designed *right*—can help you finish a draft, but they can also help you remember who you are: a writer.

So grab a pen and your Thanksgiving Pants and let's get to it.

CHAPTER ONE

How a Teenager Named 'Mary' Invented Science Fiction at a Writing Retreat

Picture this: it's the summer of 1816, and a group of friends are hanging out in a villa in Switzerland.

Earlier that year, Mount Tambora in Indonesia had erupted, plunging much of Europe into a cold and dark summer.

Forced indoors by the resulting unseasonably wet and gloomy weather, the group sat around reading ghost stories.

Inspired by the stories—and being writers themselves—they decided to take on the challenge of writing supernatural tales of their own.

One of the writers, an 18-year-old woman named Mary, decided her story would explore the possibility of reanimating a corpse through scientific means.

Two years later, she published the story she started writing in that villa.

It was called *Frankenstein*.

Blending Gothic horror with recently emerging scientific exploration, Mary Shelley created what is widely regarded as the first true science fiction novel.

Today, *Frankenstein* remains one of the most influential works of literature, and its creation happened at a writing retreat, where Mary Shelley, her future husband Percy Shelley, and Lord Byron (mad, bad, and dangerous to know) challenged themselves to create something unique.

You see... that's what happens when writers come together, isolate themselves from the world's distractions, and support one another in

their creative efforts.

If Mary and Percy had never visited their friend in Switzerland, or if the weather in Europe had been better that summer, *Frankenstein* might never have been written.

What is your *Frankenstein*?

What book could you write if only you had the time, location, and support to make it happen?

These days, at a modern writers' retreat, the attendees do the same thing writers have been doing since 1816: get away from the distractions of everyday life, isolate themselves in a relaxing and creatively supportive environment, and make major progress on their manuscripts and author businesses.

CHAPTER TWO

The Nature Cure for Writers: Why Attention Restoration Theory Works

What if the key to better writing wasn't another online course, writing prompt, or productivity app... but a tree?

No, seriously.

There's a reason why the best writing retreats aren't held in office towers or strip mall conference rooms. They're tucked away in cottages, forests, mountains, and oceanside inns.

That's not just a vibe thing. It's science.

Specifically, it's something called "Attention Restoration Theory", and it's one of the biggest reasons writers return from retreats recharged, refocused, and wildly productive.

Let's dig into what this theory is, how it works, and why the natural setting of a retreat might just be the creative supercharge your writing has been craving.

Your Brain is Tired (and Your Writing is Paying the Price)

Modern life is a firehose of information. Notifications. Chores. Emails. School drop-offs. Deadlines. Cat hair. (Is there *anything* more relentless than cat hair?)

All of it drains your mental energy and, more specifically, your *directed attention*. That's the kind of focus you use when you sit down to write, plot a story arc, or fix that one line of dialogue that's been

bugging you for two chapters.

According to *Attention Restoration Theory* (ART), developed by psychologists Rachel and Stephen Kaplan, your brain needs downtime to recover that kind of focused attention. Not “doomscrolling-on-the-couch” downtime, but time spent in environments that are *fascinating without being demanding*.

Natural environments are particularly effective because they engage your brain gently through birdsong, the rustle of trees, or the play of light on water without asking you to do anything.

In short?

Nature gives your brain a break.

And a rested brain is a more creative brain.

Why a Writing Retreat is the Perfect Prescription

Here’s the cool part: you don’t need to go on a month-long sabbatical in the Alps to get these benefits.

At a well-designed writing retreat, nature is baked right into the experience. You’re not just getting writing workshops and one-on-one coaching (though you often *do* get those). You’re stepping out of your day-to-day chaos and into a setting designed to restore you: mentally, emotionally, and creatively.

You wake up to birds instead of buzzing alarms.

You walk through trees instead of traffic.

You take a deep breath, and for the first time in ages, it doesn’t feel like your to-do list is sitting on your chest.

That’s when the good stuff starts happening. The mental noise fades, and the ideas return. Scenes unfold with more clarity. Your characters get louder. The page stops fighting back.

But I Could Just Go to a Park, Right?

Yes! Absolutely.

But also... *no*, not really.

Going for a walk in the woods is *great* for resetting your nervous system. But the power of a retreat is in the *immersion*.

You’re not taking a break from your real life for an hour. You’re

stepping into a new one for several days. One where writing is the main event, nature is your co-conspirator, and every element is designed to help you succeed.

This is about more than relaxing; it's about reprogramming.

By the time you leave a retreat, you don't just *feel* better. You *write* better. And you take those patterns (mental clarity, focused work, daily writing practice) back home with you.

Creative Magic, Backed by Science

I've seen this firsthand as a writing coach.

Writers come to retreats frazzled and burned out. A few days into the retreat, they're practically glowing, and it's not just the healthy meals or good sleep. It's because their mental resources are no longer being drained by the noise of daily life. They're being restored by the forest outside, the stillness inside, and the sacred permission to focus on their work.

A productive writing life isn't about cramming more into your calendar. It's about creating the right *conditions* for your creativity to flourish.

And those conditions? They start with a pine tree and a promise to yourself.

CHAPTER THREE

Boring Book Show Spawns Podcasting Career

Shortly after my first novel, *The Page Turners*, was published, *The Ottawa Citizen* newspaper gave the book a glowing review.

A review of Catherine Brunel's novel *Claire Never-Ending* appeared in that same issue, indeed on the very same newspaper page.

Noting that we were both debut novelists, Catherine contacted me and asked if I wanted to meet up.

At that point in my life, I didn't know any other published authors, so I jumped at the chance to get to know Catherine.

She and I instantly hit it off, and what was supposed to be a quick coffee together ended up being an afternoon-long discussion about art, publishing, writing, and life.

A few weeks later, Catherine and I attended a book convention. We each had a table on opposite sides of the convention space, where we sold our literary wares.

By the early afternoon of the convention, attendance had dropped significantly.

Killing time by chatting, Catherine and I discovered we were both interested in creating a podcast about writing someday.

"Why not start right now?" suggested Catherine.

With access to a room full of bored authors, and using the voice recording app on our phones, we interviewed half a dozen authors about their publishing journey.

With that, *Ottawa Writes*, my first podcast, was born.

If Catherine hadn't put in the effort to introduce herself to me, if I hadn't been willing to meet her in person, if we both hadn't attended that book convention and been willing to ask the authors there for interviews, my podcast career might never have started.

But that's the magic of leaving the house and meeting new people.

It's the magic of attending live events and connecting with other artists.

Let's face it: the pandemic made many of us way too comfortable staying inside our little bubbles.

But humans are social creatures.

We need our tribes to thrive.

Yes, even introverted writers can benefit from attending live events and experiencing social interaction.

Because that's where the magic happens.

Not on the screen in front of you, but out there in the world.

It's your chance to get out of the house and open yourself up to the unpredictable magic of live events.

CHAPTER FOUR

We're Better Together: Why Writing in Community Makes You Better

There's a persistent myth in the writing world that it's a solo journey.

Picture the stereotype of a writer hunched over a desk in a dark room in isolation, wrestling with the muse and muttering about adverbs.

Romantic? Maybe.

Accurate? Hardly.

In reality, the best writing happens in a *community*.

And yes, I know many writers (especially the introverted among us) hear the word “community” and immediately picture awkward networking events, crowded conferences, or (gasp!) small talk.

But writing in a supportive group setting is something else entirely. It's powerful. It's motivating.

And—this is the important part: it's *scientifically proven* to make you a better writer.

Social Learning Theory: Why Group Work Isn't Just for Kindergarten

Back in the 1970s, psychologist Albert Bandura introduced Social Learning Theory, which suggests that we learn new behaviours, skills, and perspectives best by observing and interacting with others.

This means that simply *being around* other writers (watching their process, hearing their struggles, celebrating their wins) can profoundly

shape your own creative development.

We absorb ideas. We pick up habits. We stretch toward new possibilities because we see others doing it.

In other words, creativity is *contagious*.

Retreats: The Ideal Petri Dish for Creative Growth

This is why writing retreats aren't just about quiet writing time. They're about community. They're about surrounding yourself with people who *get it*.

Because let's face it: most people don't understand what it's like to spend 40 minutes agonizing over a single paragraph.

Or what it means to be rejected (yet again).

Or how exhilarating it feels to finally nail a scene after three failed attempts.

But other writers do!

And when you're in a group of people who understand your particular brand of joy and suffering?

Magic happens.

The Unexpected Benefits of Writing with Others

When you write in a community, you gain:

- **Perspective:** Someone else might instantly solve the plot issue you've been stuck on for weeks.
- **Inspiration:** Seeing someone else's breakthrough sparks ideas for your own work.
- **Accountability:** It's a lot harder to procrastinate when the person across from you is typing away like a maniac.
- **Confidence:** Positive feedback, encouragement, and a shared sense of purpose boost your belief in yourself.
- **Motivation:** We rise to the level of those around us. Being around other committed writers pushes you to show up more fully.

And don't worry, you don't need to be a social butterfly to benefit.

The best retreats strike a perfect balance between quiet solitude and meaningful connection.

Think fireside chats, shared meals, and relaxed group discussions that never feel forced.

For the Introverts Thinking, “Nope. Not for Me.”

I get it.

I’m not saying you have to sing campfire songs or share your soul with strangers on Day One.

But at a well-designed retreat, you’re not just dumped into a crowd. You’re placed in a small, intentional group of writers who are serious about their work... just like you.

The atmosphere is safe, supportive, and low-pressure.

You’ll have time to go off on your own when you need it, and structured opportunities to connect when you’re ready.

Some of the deepest connections I’ve seen at retreats have come from the quietest writers.

Just being in the same room (sharing energy and intention) creates a bond that often lasts long after the retreat ends.

Writing is Personal. But It Doesn’t Have to Be Lonely.

One of the biggest surprises writers report to me after attending a retreat?

“I didn’t realize how much I needed this.”

Because so many of us have been writing alone for so long, we don’t even realize what we’re missing.

The encouragement.

The validation.

The sense that *you’re not the only one* chasing this dream.

It’s about collaboration, showing up, together, and saying, *We’re doing this. Let’s go.*

CHAPTER FIVE

Thanksgiving Pants

Each year at Thanksgiving, people all across North America gather with family and friends to give thanks for their blessings.

This gathering is nearly always accompanied by the consumption of a ridiculous amount of absolutely delicious food.

There is no shame in going 'Joey from *Friends* style' and pulling on your 'Thanksgiving Pants' with their expandable elastic waist so that you can get that extra serving of mashed potatoes, turkey, and gravy. After all, food and Thanksgiving are closely related. The fall harvest is complete, so we treat ourselves to a hearty meal before a long, cold winter.

Food is actually associated with gatherings of all kinds, not just Thanksgiving.

Sharing food is one of the most ancient and universal ways people worldwide have come together to connect, share wisdom, and build and strengthen relationships.

Eating together creates a shared experience, which then fosters a sense of unity and togetherness.

And that's why writer's retreats can be particularly powerful.

Sure, there is focused writing time, craft instruction, and career strategizing... but there is also food.

Delicious food!

At a writer's retreat, you won't just be writing together and learning with other writers... you will also be EATING with them.

If you want to experience something beyond just a workshop, class, or online course food is a big part of it!.

I once heard someone say the only thing people remember about a wedding is the food. It just might be the same with a writing retreat.

If you want to experience something transformative and unforgettable... first check the menu!

CHAPTER SIX

Flow State, Deep Work, and Why You Need a Retreat to Get There

You've been there: that magical moment when the words are pouring out, the story is unfolding before your eyes, and for once, the writing feels *easy*. You look up and two hours have vanished. You were in the zone. In the groove. In the... *flow*.

It's wonderful!

But let's be honest, how often does that really happen?

If you're like most writers, the answer is: *not often enough*.

That's where the concept of deep work comes in.

And more importantly, that's where writing retreats become your not-so-secret weapon.

Let's unpack what deep work and flow state actually are, why they matter for your writing life, and how a retreat helps you tap into both on demand.

Deep Work: The Secret Ingredient of Serious Writing

The term "deep work" was coined by productivity expert and computer science professor Cal Newport in his book *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*.

Newport describes deep work as: "Professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive capabilities to their limit."

In other words: exactly what writing demands.

When you're deeply focused, you're not just typing words. You're making real progress. Structuring scenes. Solving story problems. Building complex emotional arcs. Doing all the stuff that separates casual dabblers from serious writers.

But here's the problem: most of us rarely get the uninterrupted time we need to sink into that kind of work.

Kids. Jobs. Laundry. The never-ending ping of our phones.

Every time we sit down to write, we're pulled in ten different directions.

And yet, deep work is the *only* way to actually access flow.

Flow State: Where the Magic Happens

Flow is that elusive, beautiful state where time dissolves and creativity takes the wheel.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (say that three times fast!) spent decades researching this phenomenon and found that people in flow are happier, more productive, and more creatively fulfilled.

Here's the formula: Focus + Challenge + Meaning = Flow

Flow is a *measurably* more effective state for producing creative work.

And yet, we almost never give ourselves the time or space to get there.

Flow doesn't live in 20-minute writing sprints between errands.

It lives in the long, quiet hours of uninterrupted thought. In the calm. In the stillness.

That's why writing retreats exist. They remove the noise and hand you the conditions required for serious creative breakthroughs.

What Happens at a Retreat? Deep Work Happens

At a retreat, you won't be juggling emails or emptying the dishwasher between writing sessions, and you won't be trying to solve plot holes while on hold with the vet.

You will be immersed in creativity.

Mornings might start with coffee and quiet writing time.

Afternoons could include coaching, craft training, and group sessions.

Evenings may offer a mix of relaxation and reflection (or more writing, if you're in the groove).

It's a rhythm designed to maximize your ability to focus so that flow doesn't just happen once in a blue moon... it happens *every day*.

What You Take With You

Here's the best part: the deep work you access at a retreat doesn't vanish when you go home.

Writers consistently tell me that the structure, mindset, and momentum they build during a retreat helps them stay in flow longer, even after they're back in the real world.

It's like your brain remembers: *Oh right. I can do this.*

You rewire your habits.

You reset your expectations.

You stop settling for distracted scraps of writing time and start carving out the kind of focus that leads to real progress.

Why Deep Work is a Non-Negotiable for Writers

If you want to write serious books, you need serious time, and a writing retreat can provide that.

A retreat is a *strategic reset* designed to help you reach your creative potential.

Because you don't need to "work harder" on your novel, you need to work *deeper*. And you need a space where that kind of work is possible.

CHAPTER SEVEN

3 Critical Pieces of Writing Advice

Brian Michael Bendis is one of the most successful comic book writers of the last twenty years.

I once saw him give a talk about writing at a comic book convention, where Bendis shared two pieces of advice that have always stuck with me:

- **When writing a scene, come in late and leave early.**
- **It's our job as writers to make the lives of our characters as difficult as possible.**

At that same convention, Brian K. Vaughan, another comic book writer who would go on to write for television shows like *Lost* and *Under the Dome*, shared this little ditty:

- **Specificity is the key to universality.**

It must have been almost twenty years ago that I heard those three pieces of advice. In the years since then, I've read dozens and dozens of writers' craft books and continue to build my craft tool kit to this day.

Yet despite all the craft books I've read, those three pieces of advice continue to stick with me, even as dozens of other tips fade from memory.

Why is that?

It is almost certainly because I heard Bendis and Vaughan share that advice at a live event.

It wasn't in a YouTube video or midway through chapter twelve of a craft book. I was there in the room with them, breathing the same air and experiencing the moment with them.

And so I remember what they said.

Studies consistently demonstrate that live events encourage more

robust listener engagement.

When we attend a workshop, learn in a classroom, or attend a lecture live, we remove the distractions of other environments.

As a result, we're more likely to stay attentive and actively participate in the discussion, improving long-term knowledge retention.

A writing retreat, like the comic book conventions, is the type of live event where you'll be remembering advice from it twenty years down the road.

What you learn at a writing retreat sticks.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Write Like a Pro: How Coaching Accelerates Your Writing Success

You wouldn't expect a world-class athlete to train without a coach.

Michael Jordan had one. So did Serena Williams. So did Sidney Crosby.

But for some reason, when it comes to writing, a nuanced and demanding art form, many writers feel like they're supposed to go it alone.

Spoiler alert: you don't have to.

In fact, you *shouldn't*.

If you're serious about going pro with your writing, coaching and community are the fastest, most powerful ways to accelerate your progress.

The Lone Wolf Lie

Many writers buy into the myth that "real" artists suffer in solitude.

They believe their novel should emerge from the depths of their tortured soul, fully formed, with zero outside help.

But that's not how professional writers work.

In fact, that's how people burn out, get stuck, and shelve promising manuscripts for *years*.

The truth is every writer needs a second set of eyes (and a third, and a fourth...).

We need feedback. We need guidance.

We need someone to remind us, “You’re not crazy. This is *hard*. But you’re doing great.”

The Science Behind Support

Research backs this up. Studies show that mentorship:

- Accelerates skill acquisition
- Boosts self-efficacy and confidence
- Improves creative output
- Shortens the learning curve for complex skills

That last bullet is key because writing a novel isn’t just about “having a story.” It’s about learning how to handle structure, pacing, character development, world-building, voice, style, and emotional resonance.

Given the complexity involved in drafting a novel, why *wouldn’t* you want a guide?

Confidence: The Hidden Gift of Mentorship

Here is something I’ve learned over the years: writers often think they’re lacking talent when what they’re really missing is *confidence*.

And confidence is one of the biggest things a coach at a retreat can give you.

When someone with real experience says, “This works,” or “You’re on the right track,” it quiets the doubt monster that just loves to live in your head rent-free.

Working with a coach at a retreat won’t just help you with progress on the page, but also with *belief* in your voice and the confidence to keep going.

Don’t Wait Until You’re “Ready”

Many writers delay seeking coaching because they don’t think they’re “far enough along.”

But here's the kicker: that's *exactly* when you need it most.

Mentorship doesn't just polish your final draft. It helps you *get there* in the first place.

It helps you avoid rookie mistakes, recognize dead ends, and build good habits before the bad ones harden into routine.

Writing Retreats Make Mentorship Personal

At a writing retreat, mentorship isn't some abstract idea. It's built into the experience.

Mentorship doesn't mean handing you a quick fix formula. Rather, it means helping *you* find *your* way and your *creative* voice.

CHAPTER NINE

People Like Us Do Things Like This

Like many teenagers, I devoured *On the Road*.

But my favourite of Jack Kerouac's books was a lesser-known one called *The Dharma Bums*. For whatever reason, that novel really resonated with the disenfranchised punk rocker I was as a teen.

Like most successful writers, Kerouac surrounded himself with a community of novelists and poets who supported and challenged his artistic output.

Friends like Allen Ginsberg and Neal Cassady often gathered with Kerouac on writing retreats (and visits to William S. Burroughs' home) to draft generation-defining books and poems exploring themes of nonconformity, spiritual exploration, and personal freedom.

This was similar to how, a generation earlier, writers of the 'Lost Generation' (including Earnest Hemingway, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ezra Pound), gathered at Gertrude Stein's Paris saloons to talk, drink, and shape the future of modernist literature and art.

For hundreds of years now, the world's greatest authors have made an effort to get away from everyday life, seclude themselves in a unique location, and challenge one another to create something extraordinary.

Writing retreats aren't a new idea; they have long served as a catalyst for creative innovation in art.

Attending retreats is, quite frankly, just what successful writers have always done.

Author Seth Godin has a great saying: "People like us do things like this."

So, if you want to continue in the tradition of the greatest novel writers

of all time, do things like they did . . . and attend a retreat.

CHAPTER TEN

Stillness Sparks Stories: The Link Between Mindfulness and Creative Breakthroughs

When was the last time you sat in stillness with no distractions, no notifications, and no guilt? No multitasking. No doomscrolling. No background noise. Just you, your thoughts, and a pen (or keyboard).

If your honest answer is “Uhhh... never?” then you’re not alone.

And you’re also missing out on one of the most powerful, proven tools for creative productivity: *mindfulness*.

In this chapter, we’ll explore what the research says about mindfulness and creativity, why so many great writers credit silence as a secret weapon, and how to access the kind of clarity your story’s been waiting for.

Writers Need Mindfulness, Not Just Deadlines

We live in a world that treats being busy as a badge of honour. The more tabs you have open, the more “productive” you’re supposed to feel.

But when you’re a writer, someone whose job it is to observe, reflect, and imagine, that frantic pace is the *enemy* of creativity.

Writing requires mental spaciousness, the kind of slow, curious awareness that allows ideas to emerge naturally rather than be yanked out by brute force. And that’s exactly what mindfulness provides.

According to research, mindfulness (defined as non-judgmental awareness of the present moment) can improve:

- Cognitive flexibility
- Working memory
- Emotional regulation
- Creative problem solving

As such, mindfulness is a powerful *creative strategy*.

“But Kevin, I Can’t Meditate. I Have a Squirrel Brain.”

Same.

The good news? Mindfulness doesn’t have to mean sitting cross-legged on a mountain for 90 minutes or attending a six-day silent retreat.

Mindfulness can be as simple as:

- Taking a slow, intentional walk through nature
- Journaling without judgment
- Drinking your coffee while *just* drinking your coffee
- Writing with all distractions turned off and no agenda beyond presence

What’s important is giving your mind *space* to breathe—not to solve, achieve, or output, but just... to be.

Because, from that quiet place, is where the good stuff bubbles up.

Filmmaker David Lynch wrote all about this in his great book *Catching the Big Fish: Meditation, Consciousness, and Creativity*, and Cal Newport’s latest release also explores the benefits of what he calls “slow productivity”.

The Surprising Creative Power of Doing Less

Let’s talk about *cortisol*, aka the hormone that wakes you up in the morning (yaaaay!) and keeps you up in the evening when you are feeling stressed out (boooo!).

High cortisol levels are linked to decreased creative problem-solving, whereas mindfulness practices help lower cortisol and increase *cognitive flexibility*.

“Cognitive flexibility” is just a fancy way of saying “thinking outside the box.”

Put simply: if you're stressed out, your writing suffers.

But when you slow down and relax, your brain lights up.

Have you ever noticed how many of your breakthrough ideas happen in the shower, on a walk, or while staring out a window?

It's because you're *not trying too hard*. You've finally made room for your subconscious to step forward and do its magic.

Mindfulness Isn't New Age 'Woo' . . . It's Old School Writing Strategy

I know "mindfulness" can sound like something a yoga influencer says while selling essential oils, but in the context of writing, it's a game-changer!

- Mindfulness makes your writing more focused.
- Mindfulness makes your ideas more original.
- Mindfulness makes *you* more resilient when the process gets hard

Writing Retreats Are Mindfulness Magnets

A writing retreat serves as a pressure valve for your nervous system. You step away from the noise and enter a setting designed for stillness, focus, and reflection.

You'll breathe.

And in that breathing, something beautiful happens:

The story you've been forcing suddenly flows.

The idea that you couldn't access shows up fully formed.

You stop fighting the page and start listening to it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

How My Gal, Virginia, Got It Done

As my clients well know, *Star Wars* and Virginia Woolf are two topics I could talk about for hours.

In my opinion, *Mrs. Dalloway* is the most beautifully written book ever created.

And as you might have guessed by now, Woolf did not craft her masterpiece in isolation.

Rather, she was part of The Bloomsbury Group, a collective of writers, artists, and philosophers who would gather at a Charleston Farmhouse in Sussex, England.

Together, they would discuss art, literature, and philosophy.

Woolf's journals from this period note how much she enjoyed Charleston as an escape from the pressures of life in London and how the environment of collaboration, discussion, and freedom fueled her creativity.

As much as we might put Woolf on a literary pedestal, those feelings feel pretty darn relatable, don't you think?

Do you ever feel overwhelmed by the pressures of day-to-day life?

Do you fantasize about getting away from it all to a cozy and isolated location where you can just focus on your writing?

Do you wish you had a group of artists and writers to bounce ideas off or chat with after a long day of creative work?

If so, a retreat is your opportunity to make that happen.

Create your own little Bloomsbury Group. Take time to get away from it all and focus on your writing, just like my gal Virginia Woolf did.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Burnout is NOT a Badge of Honour

Writers are passionate people. We pour ourselves into our stories, our characters, and our sentences. We write until our fingers hurt and eyes blur, edit until we hate our own voice, and push through deadlines, family life, and existential doubt with pure grit and determination.

And then (surprise!) we eventually crash.

Burnout is everywhere in the writing world.

But what if I told you it doesn't have to be this way?

What if your best work could actually come *after* the nap, not in spite of it?

Let's dig into the science behind stress and creativity.

Your Hormones Are Killing Your Writing

It's time to talk hormones.

Specifically, *cortisol*.

That *darn* stress hormone. It's helpful for waking you up in the morning, but not so great the rest of the time.

When cortisol is high (from deadlines, burnout, sleep deprivation, day job work problems, or your plot falling apart at chapter 18), your brain shifts into survival mode. It prioritizes safety and efficiency, not creativity or innovation.

High cortisol levels reduce cognitive flexibility, working memory, and mood regulation.

In other words, stressed writers don't write well. (Or at all.)

Self-Care Isn't Selfish

There's a dangerous mindset in the writing world that says rest is earned, that unless you're producing word count like a machine, you don't deserve the break.

But that's not how real creativity works.

Creativity isn't a factory line.

It needs nourishment. It needs recovery.

And if you want to write consistently over the long haul (NOT just during a caffeine-fueled NaNoWriMo sprint), then you *must* treat your well-being like the asset it is.

Taking care of your body, your mind, and your emotions is a HUGE part of it.

Here's what happens when you slow down:

- Your brain chemistry rebalances
- Your nervous system resets
- You gain perspective on your work and your life
- New ideas surface from places you didn't even know were blocked

Self-care is about creating the kind of *internal conditions* where creativity can thrive.

Let's retire the idea that you should be running on empty to prove how much you care about your book, and that burnout is some kind of badge of honour.

It's not.

Some of the most prolific, impactful authors in history had strict boundaries, long walks, regular rest, and non-writing hobbies.

When you take care of the artist first, the art itself can then happen.

Write More by Doing Less

If you've been running on fumes (creatively, emotionally, and physically), it might be time to hit reset and consider attending a retreat.

Retreat experiences should be designed with one goal in mind: sustainable creative success.

Yes, you'll write.

Yes, you'll get expert coaching and community support.

But you'll also eat nourishing food, sleep deeply, walk in the woods, and *breathe*.

This is your time to:

- Step away from burnout culture
- Reconnect with your creative self
- Create *without* the constant pressure to produce

Time spent at a retreat is time *invested* in ensuring that you can continue to reach them for the long term.

A retreat won't just help you write more; it will enable you to write smarter, sustainably, and in a way that doesn't cost you your health, your peace, or your love for the craft.

Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) might be the latest technological craze . . . but guess what? YOU aren't a machine. You're a human being. And when you treat yourself like one, the writing gets better.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Secret to Finishing a Draft

Let me tell you a quick little story about Douglas Adams, the legendary author of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

Adams was brilliant, hilarious, and wildly imaginative, but he had one massive problem... he couldn't finish a first draft to save his life.

When it came time to write *So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish*, his publisher knew they had a problem, given that Adams was notorious for missing deadlines.

So what did they do?

They locked him in a hotel room with his editor.

Literally.

No distractions.

No excuses.

No running off to chase new ideas.

Just him and the keyboard.

And guess what?

With structure, support, and accountability, he actually finished the book.

Unfortunately, most writers don't have a publisher who will lock them in a room until they get their first draft done.

But if you're struggling to finish your book—getting stuck endlessly revising early scenes, losing motivation, or constantly getting distracted—then you do need a system that actually works.

And that's what a writers' retreat can provide you with.

Sure you **COULD** lock yourself in a crappy hotel room until the work is done.

Or... you could take a few days to pamper yourself, rest, reset, relax, make friends, **AND** hit your deadline without stress or a mad sprint to

the finish.

The choice is yours.

Book that hotel room with your editor, or find a writers' retreat that is write for you.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Most Powerful Writing Tool You Have...is YOU

It's easy to think of something like joining a writing program, hiring a private writing coach, or going to a writing retreat as indulgent little breaks from "real life."

You spend a bit of time focused on your writing, and then it's back to the drudgery of everyday life, right?

Wrong, actually.

Investing in yourself as a writer doesn't just give you time away from the stresses of your regular life.

It actually offers a way *back to your truest self*.

The 'Writer Glow' Is Real

If you've ever returned from a writers' retreat, finished a writer's craft training course, or ended a coaching call feeling like your writing life has been reborn, you're *not* imagining things.

Immersive creative experiences create measurable, lasting transformation not just in your writing, but in how you approach your craft, your career, and yourself as an artist.

Studies on intensive learning experiences show that they produce:

- Improved cognitive performance
- Increased creative output
- Greater emotional satisfaction
- Higher motivation and long-term goal completion

When you step away from your day-to-day chaos and immerse yourself in intentional, supportive, and creatively charged activities

like writing, your brain resets.

New habits form. Mental blocks dissolve. Identity shifts.

You stop seeing yourself as “trying to be a writer” and start embodying:

I am a writer.

From Stuck to Flowing. From Drifting to Directed.

Writers often reach out to me because they are feeling blocked, burnt out, or unsure of what comes next.

But once we start to work together, something incredible happens:

- The plot problem that haunted them clicks into place
- They finally make peace with their messy first draft
- They fall back in love with their characters (and sometimes themselves)

Working with a writing coach, be it in a group program, one-on-one, or at a retreat, will give you a clearer sense of direction for your writing, and, just as importantly, the *permission* to pursue it.

That’s not a temporary high.

That’s transformation.

Don’t Just Work on Your Book, Work on Yourself

If that sort of transformation is what you are looking for, you should consider attending a retreat.

Yes, you’ll get: focused writing time, craft training, and personalized feedback.

But also get: clarity, confidence, connection, and creative momentum.

You’ll reconnect with your “why,” rediscover your voice, and leave with new words on the page and a new *relationship* to your writing life.

Here’s the best part: a retreat doesn’t end when you pack your bags to head home.

Writers tell me repeatedly that they carry the retreat experience home in their bones. They write more consistently, treat their work more seriously, hold boundaries, and trust their voice.

The habits you build at a retreat become part of your creative operating system. And the connections you make (with other writers, with mentors, with yourself) continue to fuel you long after the last meal is shared and the final word is written.

Writing retreats are a creative reawakening.

Because the most powerful writing tool you have... is *you*.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Victor Hugo No Clothes Method

Struggling to finish a draft? Turns out, you're in good company. Even literary legends like Victor Hugo had next-level procrastination skills.

And when I say next-level, I mean his publisher had to stage an intervention.

Back in 1830, Hugo was supposed to be writing *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*.

Instead of, you know, *actually writing*, he was out partying, schmoozing, and generally doing anything except putting words on the page.

His publisher, sick of waiting, dropped the hammer: the book needed to be done ASAP.

Faced with a swiftly approaching deadline, Hugo did what any rational human being would do: he locked away all of his clothes.

I'm not kidding.

He literally had his servant hide his entire wardrobe, leaving him with nothing but a giant gray shawl.

No fancy suits.

No dapper evening attire.

Just a toga of shame.

The idea?

If he had nothing to wear, he physically couldn't leave the house—so he'd have no choice but to sit his butt down and write.

And guess what?

It worked!

Six months later, *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* was finished, and the world got one of the most iconic novels ever written—all thanks to one man's extreme anti-procrastination life hack.

If you're struggling to make progress on your manuscript, maybe it's time to try the Victor Hugo No Clothes Method™. (Just, you know, maybe give your roommates a heads-up first!)

That said, if the toga of shame doesn't sound quite right for your writing life, perhaps you might want to check out an alternative: a well-designed writing retreat.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Introverted Writers Rejoice: Why Quiet Creators Thrive at Retreats

If the words “group coaching program” make your inner introvert picture awkward trust falls and nonstop socializing... take a deep breath. You’re safe here.

In fact, if you’re someone who *dreads* the idea of big conferences, crowded workshops, or being “on” 24/7, I’ve got good news: a well-designed writing retreat won’t drain you.

In fact, introverted writers are the ones who often get the *most* out of group experiences.

But Aren’t Group Programs for Extroverts?

A lot of writers associate group learning with horrific networking events.

You picture yourself surrounded by loud, enthusiastic strangers in a group writing circle, being asked to “go around the room and share.”

(Ugh. No, thank you!)

The best writing retreat experiences, however, are built with introverts in mind.

They’re about focused energy, creative solitude, and deep connection, but not *constant* connection.

Why Introverts Actually Thrive at Writing Retreats

1. **You get to protect your energy:** In a well-designed group writing program, you can engage when you want, but also recharge when you need to.
2. **No small talk required:** You're surrounded by people who *get* you. You don't need to explain why you're passionate about your weird story idea or why a well-placed semicolon made your day. The conversations you *do* have tend to be deep, thoughtful, and energizing.
3. **Retreats are a Filter:** Only serious, like-minded writers tend to sign up for higher-end retreats.
That means you're not wading through surface-level chitchat. You're immediately dropped into a space of trust, mutual respect, and shared passion.
4. **You don't have to "perform":** There's no stage. No spotlight. No requirement to be anything other than *yourself*. Retreats should adapt to you, not the other way around.

What I've Learned as a Writing Coach

As a writing coach with over a decade of experience working with writers, I've seen introverts start retreats tense and hesitant, only to become glowing artists.

It appears they have magically "come out of their shell."

But what has really happened is they finally have a space where their natural way of being was *respected*, even *celebrated*.

They're given the time, quiet, and permission to focus on what matters: their writing.

That shift?

It sticks.

Introverted but NOT Isolated

Just because you're introverted doesn't mean you want to go it alone forever.

You still crave connection.

You still need feedback.

You still want to be seen and supported.

BUT... you want it in a way that honours your nature.

A Writing Retreat Should Be Designed for Your Rhythm

The world wasn't built for quiet people.

But group writing experiences should be.

All the group work I do with writers is designed to balance *solitude* and *support*.

It's about experiencing the benefits of mentorship and community, but NEVER at the expense of your energy or autonomy.

If you've been longing for a space to reset, focus, and feel creatively recharged, without the noise and hustle of traditional writing events, a writing retreat is for you.

You don't have to be the loudest voice in the room to have something powerful to say.

You just need a space where you can finally hear *yourself* think.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

How Terry Pratchett Fought Back with Fiction

When legendary fantasy author Terry Pratchett was diagnosed with a rare form of early-onset Alzheimer's, most people assumed he'd put down his pen.

Instead, he hit the gas pedal.

Even as his memory faded and his speech became a challenge, he kept writing.

Novel after novel, still funny, still sharp.

He wrote because writing connected him to who he was, to his voice, to his story.

Pratchett once described writing as "both a shield and a sword".

And honestly? That's exactly what writing becomes when life gets hard.

When we're struggling, grieving, healing, or just trying to make sense of a messy world.

None of us knows how long we have on this earth, but we do know that while we are here, we want to get our words on the page.

Because we are writers and that's what writers do.

We face adversity, exude creativity, fight through the worst of times, and then step away for a little while.

We do this so that we can recharge, process, digest, and reconfigure.

So that we can take challenges and turn them into stories.

So that we can share our wisdom with others, and in doing so, make the world a little better.

And the best place to make that happen?

It's at writers' retreat that we have the time, space, and support to take the negativity of our lives and transform it using the amazing alchemy of art into something positive, and maybe even beautiful.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Unlock Your Writing Potential With These 3 Key Pillars

Writing is no longer just about writing.

In today's publishing landscape, writers are expected to master story structure and social media, balance prose with platform, and juggle the solitary work of creation with the very public work of connection.

It can be overwhelming, especially if you're trying to figure it all out alone.

The good news is that you don't have to do it all alone.

And more importantly, you don't have to do it *all at once*.

In my experience working with writers for the last decade as a writing coach, the authors who thrive (not just for one book, but over the long haul) focus on three foundational pillars:

- Writer's Craft
- Community
- Career

Let's break these pillars down and explore why building the first two might be the smartest move you can make this yera.

1. Writer's Craft: The Core of It All

At the heart of every successful writing life is the *work* itself: your voice, vision and ability to put scenes, characters, and emotions on the page in a way that captivates readers.

Craft is not something you master and move on from. It's a lifelong learning journey.

And the deeper you go into your craft, the more joy, clarity, and momentum you unlock in your writing practice.

You learn to trust your instincts, solve story problems faster, and write with purpose, not just passion.

2. Community: Your Secret Writing Weapon

Writing might happen in solitude, but growth happens in community.

There's a reason writers light up at retreats and in group coaching programs: they're finally surrounded by people who *get it*.

Other writers know the thrill of a new idea, the terror of a blank page, and the weird joy of rearranging one sentence for an hour until you finally get it *right*.

3. Career: The Piece You Can Grow Into

Every writer eventually has to think about their career.

Whether that means querying agents, self-publishing, building a platform, or just figuring out *what's next*, the "what do I do with this book?" question eventually arrives.

The best way to learn is from people who have already been there, whether that means other veteran writers, coaches, or marketing experts who can help guide your brand-building and book promotions.

But, of course, the book itself **MUST** come first.

Your Next Chapter Starts Here

I often return to these three foundational pillars for writing success when designing my programs and events.

And that includes the upcoming *Ottawa Writers' Retreat*.

Retreat Pillar 1: Writer's Craft

If you've been craving uninterrupted time to focus *just* on the writing, the *Ottawa Writers' Retreat* was designed with you in mind.

You'll work daily on your manuscript or project.

You'll receive coaching and feedback designed to help you write better, faster, and more confidently.

You'll explore genre-specific strategies, advanced storytelling tools, and methods for getting unblocked.

Most importantly, you'll write. A lot.

If you've been stuck in a cycle of distraction, burnout, or just too many competing priorities, this writing retreat is the creative reset you need.

Retreat Pillar 2: Community

At a small, focused retreat like the *Ottawa Writers' Retreat*, you'll meet fellow writers who share your goals and your challenges.

You'll trade ideas, stories, encouragement, and maybe even manuscript pages.

You'll feel seen and supported in ways the outside world rarely offers.

And for the introverts? The retreat balances quiet, creative time with meaningful, optional connection. You decide when and how to engage.

The relationships you build at a retreat like this often last far beyond the retreat itself and become one of the most valuable assets in your writing life.

Retreat Pillar 3: Career

At the *Ottawa Writers' Retreat*, our focus is *not* on marketing strategies, ad tech, or launch plans.

There are other programs (including some of mine) that go deep into those areas.

Instead, we'll help lay the groundwork for your future career by:

- Helping you get closer to *finishing* a strong manuscript
- Building your creative confidence so you can pursue your publishing goals with less fear and more clarity
- Creating space to reflect on your personal definition of success, because not every writer's path looks the same

In other words, I'm not going to throw you into a whirlwind of business training when what you need right now is to WRITE.

But I *will* help you move toward a sustainable writing life that supports your long-term goals, whatever they may be.

You'll leave with more words on the page, more clarity in your process, and more belief in your ability to build the writing life you truly want.

Visit www.kevintjohns.com and book a call with me.

Because a thriving writing life isn't about doing everything at once.

It's about focusing on the right things, at the right time, with the right people by your side.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

About the Author



Kevin T. Johns is the author of over half a dozen books and one of Canada's top writing coaches. He has dedicated the last decade to helping thousands of authors worldwide write better stories.

He is the founder of *The Writer's Craft Summit*, holds a Master's degree in English Literature, and has hosted over 200 episodes of *The Writing Coach* podcast.

Kevin works with everyone from CEOs writing leadership books to memoirists telling intimately personal tales to self-help gurus crafting manuals for a better life, but his passion is for commercial genre fiction—the types of books that get made into Hollywood Blockbusters, spawn trilogies or become long-running series.

The Science (and Magic) of Writing Retreats

If you aim to write page-turners that readers just can't put down or resist telling all their friends about, Kevin is the coach for you.

Learn more at www.kevintjohns.com.