

Advice from Nikky Finney



Nikky Finney, poet and 2011 National Book Award Winner for her most recent collection, [*Head Off and Split*](#), shares her insights into the writing process.

Q: What is your method for overcoming writer's block?

A: If you believe there is such a thing as "writer's block" then it will exist and it will find you. Of course there are times when the writing is not smooth, cute, or memorable. But I like to remind myself that my hand still works and therefore writing work of some kind can be done. It took me awhile to totally invest in this truth but once I did it changed everything about my writing. My writing muscles got a lot stronger.

Q: What are your favorite or most helpful writing prompts?

A: I love music and I really like the act of zeroing in on a favorite line from a song and looking at it closer and more cleanly without the "baggage" of the rest of the song. When I do this I learn a lot about what I like and what I don't -- what I'm drawn to and what I feel lyrically responsive to. I also like looking deeply at words that are usually seen in one way -- with one main definition -- and finding a new way in to that word -- coming at it from another angle. I did for a poem called "Charm." I remember thinking about the word for several days and then lingering around the question of what moment in my life would I wear around my neck -- like a charm -- if I could. Several poems appeared in that moment.

Q: What is the most valuable advice you received as a young writer?

A: The great American writer John Oliver Killens told me when I was 18 that "writing was like sitting in the saddle of a good race horse. The rider's (writer's) job was to hold on tight to the reins and not get out of that seat, no matter how bumpy the ride, no matter how glorious, not until the ride was absolutely over, the horse exhausted and trotting back to her stall." You have to write often in order to learn when the ride is a short one, a longer one, and when the ride is done for the day. A writer who learns how to not get up from her writing chair is the equivalent of a human being learning how to walk.

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