

PROWRITINGAID · WHITE PAPER · 17 AUGUST 2026

# The State of the Writer's Mind

Skill makes writing better. It doesn't make it easier. New research with 874 writers on the mindset barriers experience doesn't remove and how they overcome them.

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## FOREWORD

**Chris Banks**

Founder and CEO, ProWritingAid

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## WHITE PAPER

**Dr. Elizabeth Mateer**

Fellow of Neuropsychology, Harvard Medical School

**95%**

experience self-doubt at least occasionally

**47%**

selected perfectionism as a frequent writing challenge

**85%**

selected two or more mindset-related barriers

Based on 874 survey records collected by ProWritingAid and through partner-distributed links ·  
Question-level denominators are shown throughout · Associations are descriptive, not causal.

## FOREWORD

# Why the writer's mind deserves our attention

By Chris Banks, Founder and CEO of ProWritingAid

Over the past 13 years, I've had the privilege to work directly with hundreds of writers, and indirectly with millions. During that time, I've watched people from every background—from students, to aspiring novelists, to bestselling authors—wrestle with one question.

## “Am I good enough?”

We often talk about writing as though success is primarily a matter of talent, and thousands of books reinforce that by focusing on the craft of writing. But after more than a decade immersed in the writing world, I've come to believe the biggest barrier we face as writers isn't talent. It isn't technique. It's mindset.

The writers who thrive aren't necessarily the ones with the most natural talent. They're the ones who learn to navigate the mental challenges of the writing life: perfectionism, procrastination, imposter syndrome, fear of judgement, and the myriad other psychological obstacles that plague the creative process.

Yet despite how widespread these issues are, they've received very little attention. We spend enormous amounts of time focusing on the craft of writing, and very little understanding the intricacies of the mind that produces it.

I want to change that.

This white paper is the beginning of a much larger initiative to shine a light on the mental challenges of writing and help more writers build the resilience to bring their stories into the world. The findings in this research have reshaped the way I think about writing and highlighted the importance of identity, emotion and cognition within the writing process.

In April 2027, Hay House will publish my book, *The Writer's Mind*, which explores these ideas in depth and offers practical exercises for writers to work with their minds rather than against them. Until then, I wanted to make our initial research freely available in the hope that it fuels an important conversation.

I hope that this research will inspire others to do more original research into the psychology of writing, and help us develop a fuller and more nuanced understanding of why writing feels so challenging, why so many people struggle, and how we can develop better tools, practices and communities to support writers.

## Chris Banks

Founder and CEO, ProWritingAid

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This white paper is the beginning of a wider conversation about the psychology of writing. If you would like to follow the research and receive practical ideas as they develop, you are welcome to [join me here →](#)

## I. INTRODUCTION

# The misdiagnosis of writing difficulty

By Dr. Elizabeth Mateer. Fellow of Neuropsychology, Harvard Medical School

Writing is a strange skill because becoming more experienced does not necessarily make the experience any easier.

When writers struggle, common explanations are a lack of technical ability, consistency or time. This idea appears regularly in how writing is framed and discussed, but it misses something important: many capable, committed writers continue to struggle in ways that skill alone cannot explain.

In a survey of more than 800 writers, many with years of experience, the majority still reported psychological or mindset-related barriers. Perfectionism, self-doubt and overthinking were the most common challenges. The people struggling are not simply beginners who have not learned how to write. They are experienced writers facing challenges that technical skill alone cannot explain.

When we looked closer, these barriers followed a pattern. The common challenges began to look like difficulty managing different, competing mental processes at the same time. To write effectively, a person must generate ideas, evaluate them, express them in language and tolerate the possibility of judgement—all at once. These processes ask the mind to do very different things, and when they interfere with one another, writers stall and experience what is commonly known as “writer’s block.”

## II. THE WRITER'S MIND MODEL

# Writing requires coordination across three interacting systems

## Identity

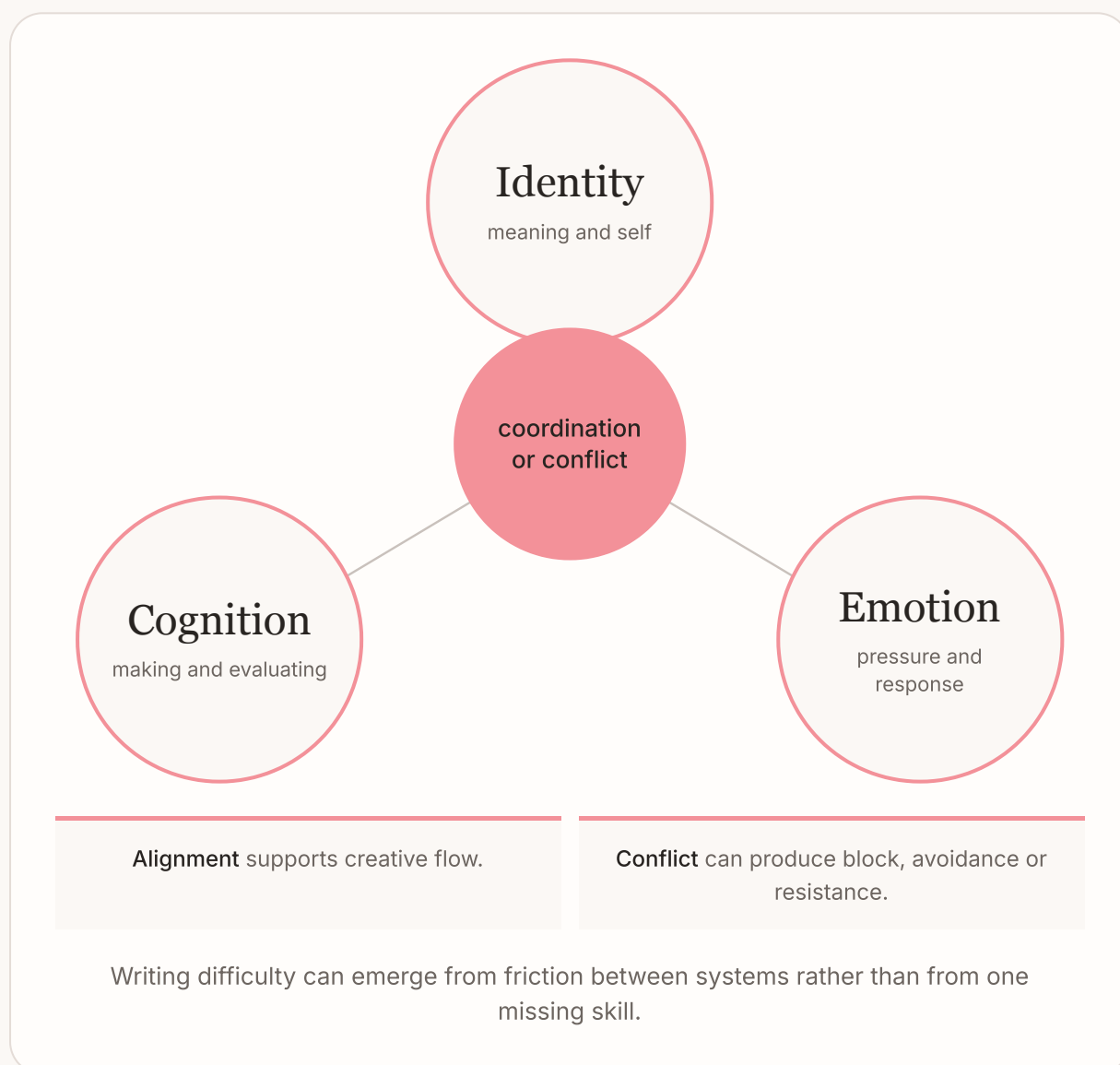
Shapes what the work means to the writer and how closely it is tied to self-concept.

## Cognition

Generates, organizes, expresses, revises and evaluates ideas and language.

## Emotion

Shapes the response to uncertainty, judgement and perceived failure.



When these systems are aligned, writing can feel fluid, creative and absorbing. When they come into conflict, the result is what writers describe as writer's block, avoidance or internal resistance. From this perspective, writing difficulty does not come from one weakness, but from friction between multiple psychological systems that must work together.

The framework presented in this paper—The Writer’s Mind—is an attempt to describe that interaction and offer a new way to understand the challenges writing creates, even after years of experience.

#### PRACTICAL COMPANION

### What’s creating friction in your writing?

The Writing Blocks Assessment helps you identify the mindset patterns most likely to be holding you back—and where to focus first.

[Discover your writing blocks → \(https://chrisbanksauthor.com/assessments/writing-blocks\)](https://chrisbanksauthor.com/assessments/writing-blocks)

### III. SURVEY FINDINGS

## What 874 writers told us

The following findings connect experience, writing habits, psychological barriers and mindset-tool use. Each percentage uses the number who answered that question.

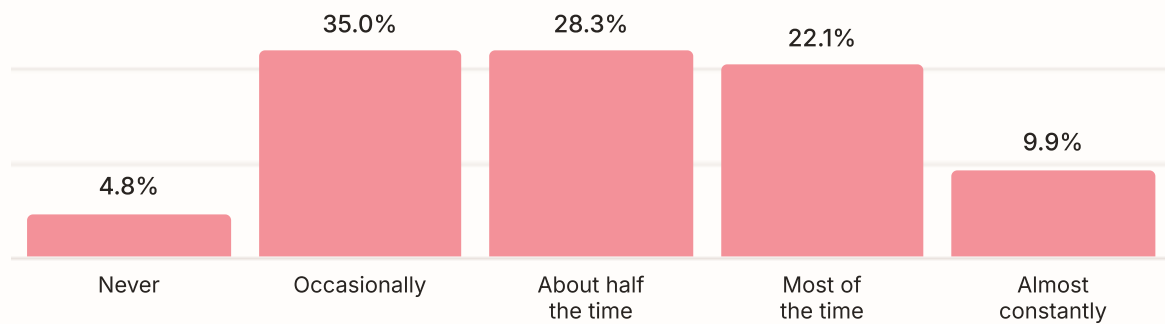
## INSIGHT 1

# Self-doubt is pervasive; experience only partly protects against it

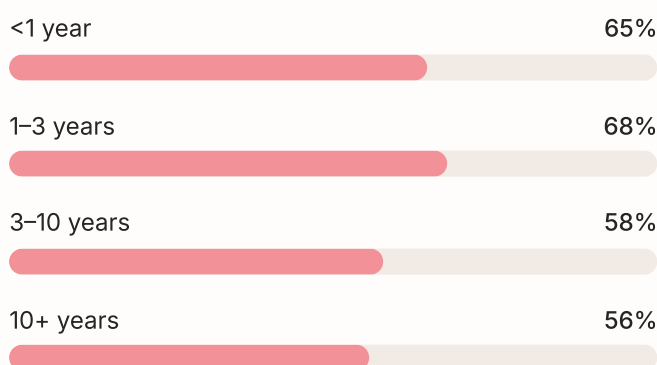
Only 4.8% of respondents said they never experience self-doubt. Sixty percent experience it at least half the time, including more than half of writers with over ten years' experience.

## How often writers experience self-doubt

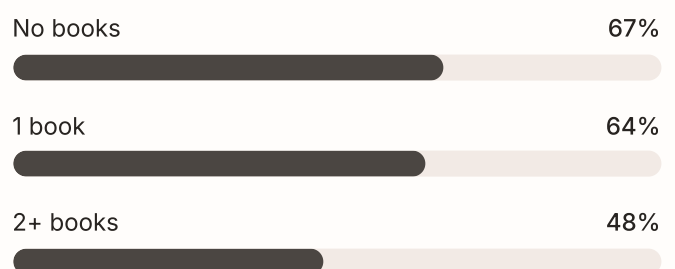
Share of respondents · n = 838



### AT LEAST HALF THE TIME, BY SERIOUS-WRITING EXPERIENCE



### AT LEAST HALF THE TIME, BY PUBLISHING EXPERIENCE



**Interpretation:** Experience writers experience self-doubt less than early-stage writers but still experience a substantial amount. Support in overcoming self-doubt is relevant at every career stage, with the greatest intensity among early-stage and unpublished writers. Further research is needed to establish whether publishing and years of experience reduces self-doubt or whether writers who suffer less from self-doubt are more likely to publish and persist.

Experience chart n = 838. Publishing chart n = 773 respondents who answered both questions.

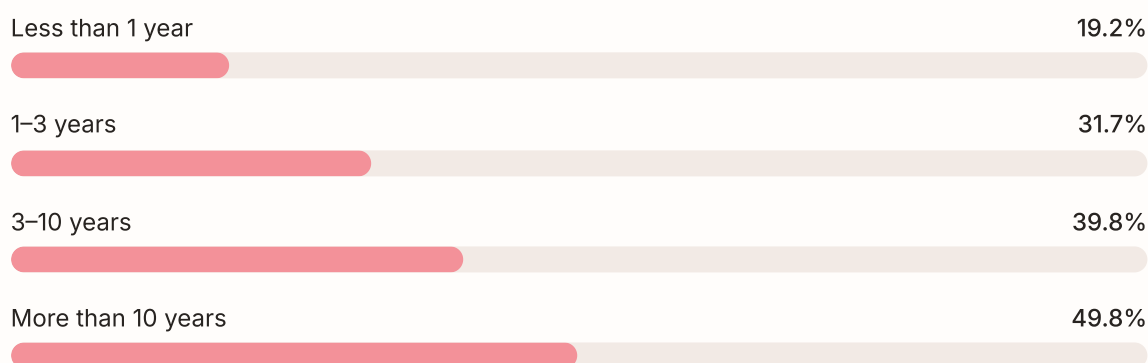
## INSIGHT 2

## Writing becomes more closely tied to identity over time

Overall, 39% said that stopping would feel like losing part of themselves, compared with 34% who chose enjoyment and 27% who described feeling compelled to write.

### “Stopping would feel like losing part of myself”

Share selecting this statement, by serious-writing experience



**Interpretation:** Writing is not merely an activity for many long-tenured respondents; it is part of who they are. That helps explain why writing difficulties can carry disproportionate emotional weight.

n = 764. Respondents chose the single statement that felt most true.

## INSIGHT 3

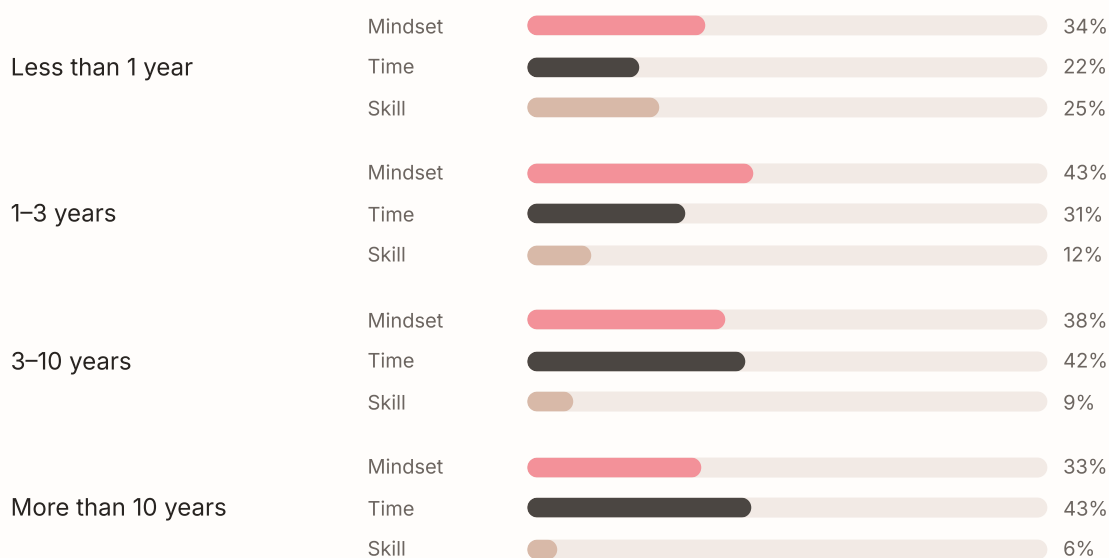
# The bottleneck changes with experience—it does not disappear

Perceived lack of skill falls sharply as experience accumulates, while time and life constraints become the dominant obstacle. Mindset and self-doubt peak in the 1–3 year stage, but unlike perceived skill deficits, they remain common even among the most experienced writers.

## Primary barrier, by writing experience

Share within each experience band

■ Mindset / self-doubt ■ Time / life ■ Lack of skill



**Interpretation:** Beginner support should combine craft confidence with mindset help. Later-stage support should focus on sustainable routines and competing demands while continuing to address self-belief, since mindset challenges remain common even after skill concerns decline.

n = 762. "Lack of discipline" is omitted from this comparison for clarity but remains included in the overall denominator.

## INSIGHT 4

## Frequent writing is associated with greater focus and less self-doubt

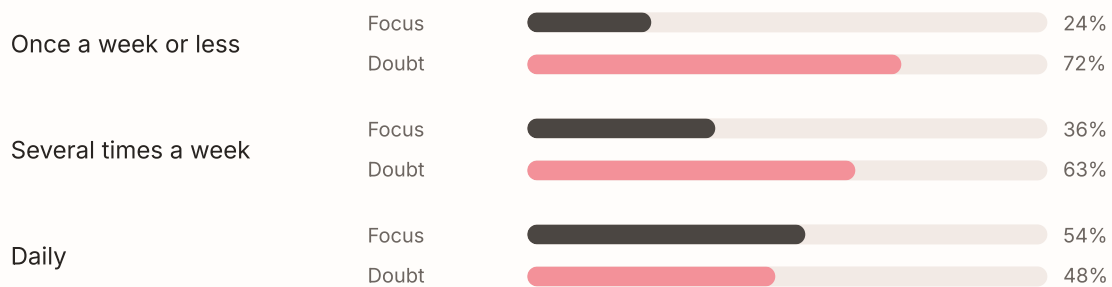
Daily writers are more than twice as likely as writers working weekly or less to give focus a 4–5 score, while their rate of frequent self-doubt is markedly lower.

### Writing frequency, focus and self-doubt

Percentage within each writing-frequency group

■ Focus score 4–5

■ Self-doubt at least half the time



**Interpretation:** Regular practice may help build focus and confidence—but the relationship may also run the other way, with focused, confident writers finding it easier to write frequently.

"Rarely" is omitted because its subgroup is small (33–35 usable responses depending on the question). This is a cross-sectional association, not evidence of causation.

## INSIGHT 5

## Perfectionism is the leading mindset barrier—and it rarely appears alone

407 of 859 respondents—47.4%—selected perfectionism. Of those writers, 387—95.1%—also selected at least one other challenge.

### 47.4%

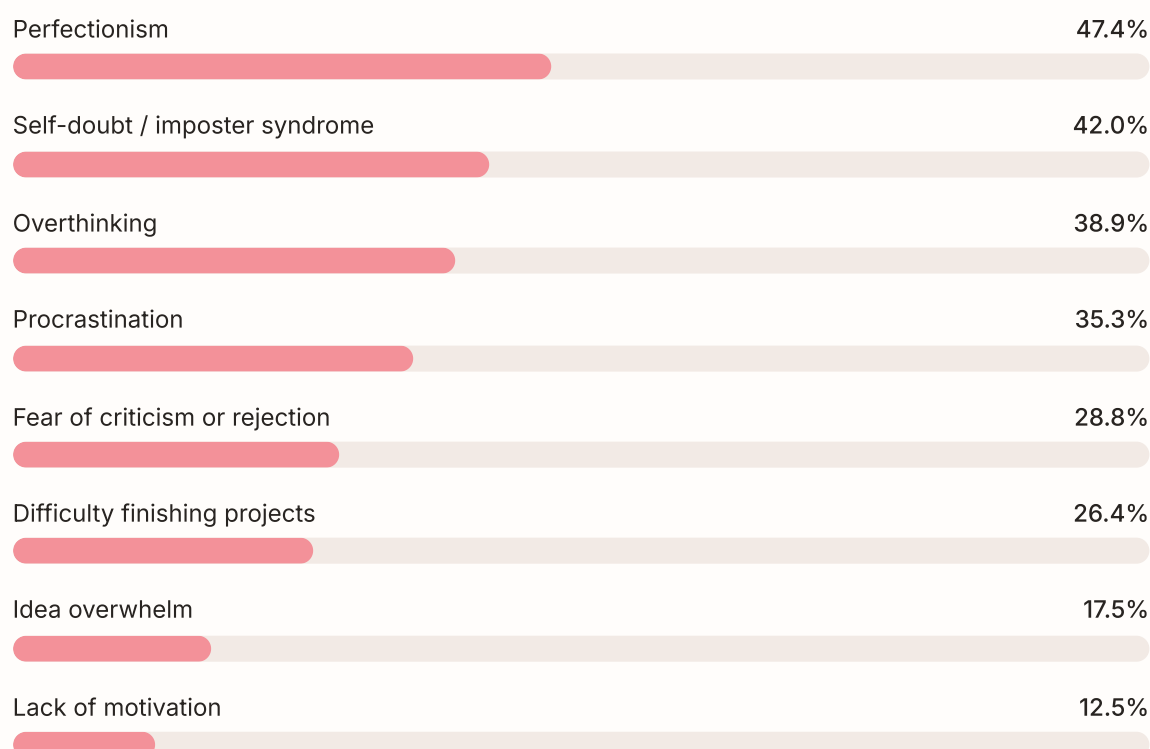
selected perfectionism  
407 of 859 respondents

### 95.1%

also selected another barrier  
387 of 407 perfectionists

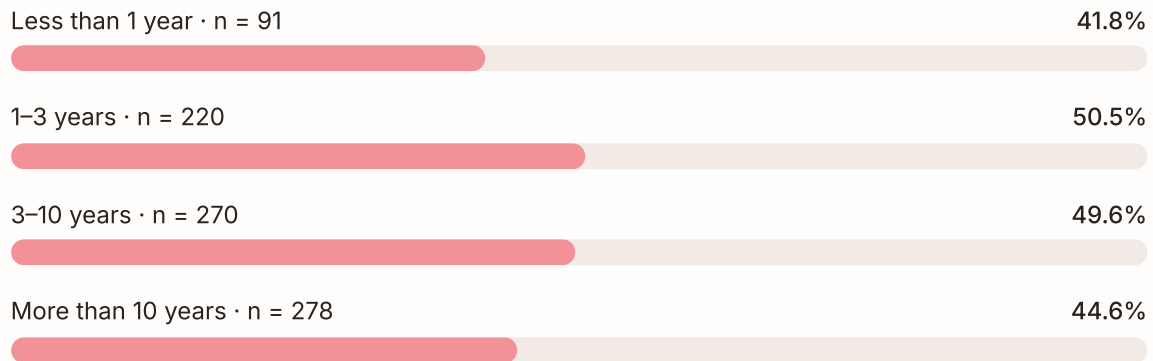
### Challenges experienced most often when writing

Multi-select · n = 859



## Perfectionism does not fade with experience

Share selecting perfectionism within each experience group



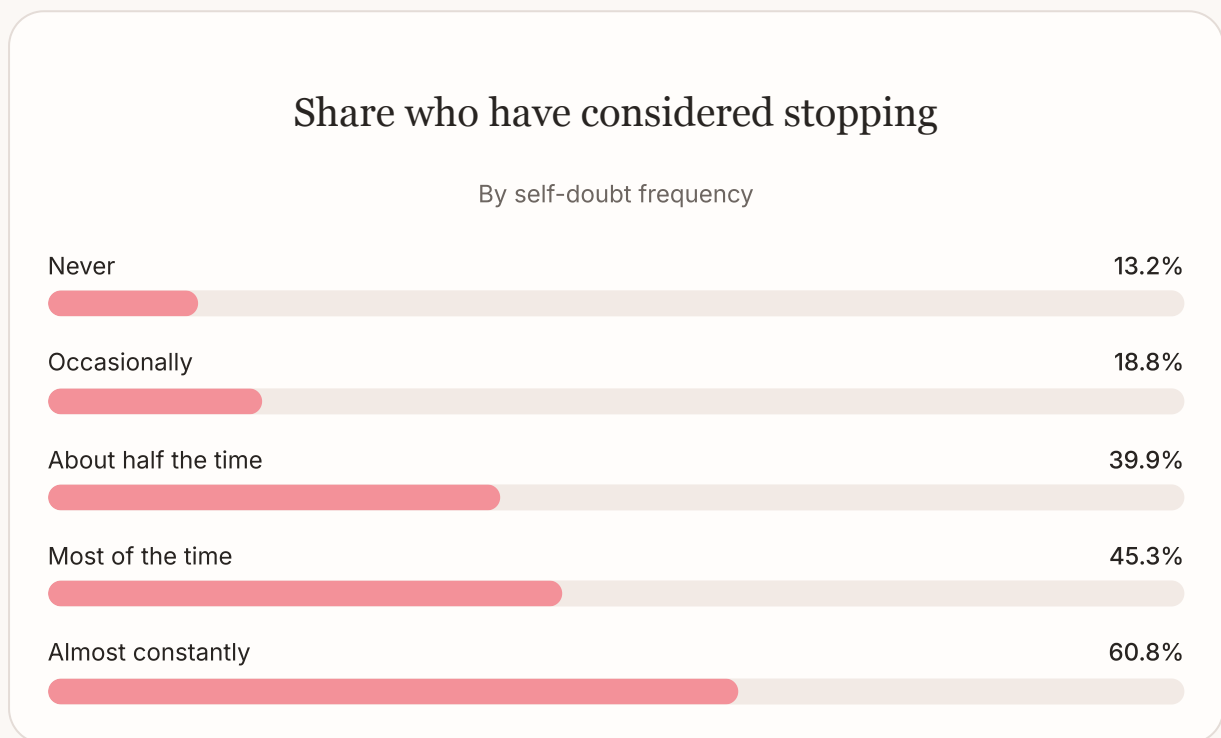
**Interpretation:** Perfectionism is not simply a novice problem. Its prevalence remains between 42% and 51% across every experience group, with no steady decline as writers gain years of practice. It also sits inside a wider system: **40.3%** of perfectionists selected overthinking and **39.3%** selected self-doubt or imposter syndrome. Support should therefore address the cycle rather than treating perfectionism as an isolated habit.

Respondents could select up to three options. 729 of 859 (84.9%) selected two or more, and 621 (72.3%) used all three available selections, so the observed clustering may be a lower bound. Percentages in the challenge chart sum to more than 100%.

## INSIGHT 6

## Self-doubt is closely associated with the risk of stopping

Overall, 291 of 831 respondents—35%—had considered stopping writing because of how it made them feel. The rate rises steadily with self-doubt frequency.



**Interpretation:** Self-doubt is not only uncomfortable; it is associated with creative attrition. Writers experiencing it almost constantly are more than four times as likely as those who never experience it to have considered stopping. These writers surveyed are the survivors, the ones who continue to write. More research is needed to understand the exact attrition rate of writers.

n = 800 respondents who answered both questions. The survey did not establish timing or causality.

## INSIGHT 7

## The first barrier to mindset tools is awareness, not resistance

In this report, a mindset tool or technique means a practice intended to help writers manage the thoughts, emotions, attention patterns or habits that interfere with writing. Examples include journaling, visualization, mindfulness, meditation and timed writing methods. Only 40% had tried a mindset technique. Among respondents explaining why they had not, more than half simply did not know that such tools existed.

### Have respondents tried a mindset technique?

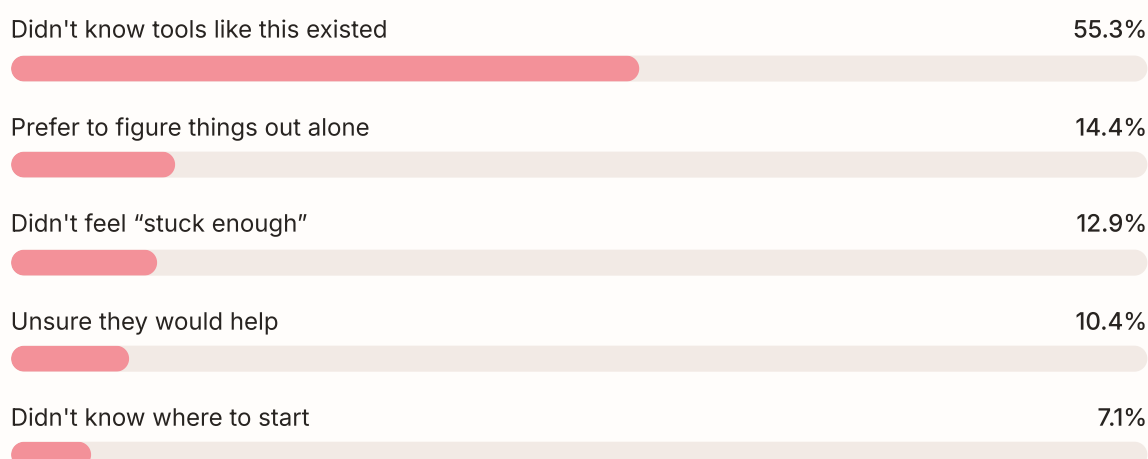
n = 821

40% tried

60% not tried

### Main reason for not trying tools

Single choice · n = 425



**Interpretation:** The largest adoption opportunity is educational: define what a mindset tool is, show a writing-specific use case and make the first step concrete. More research is needed to understand why awareness is so low given the high prevalence of mindset challenges with writers.

## INSIGHT 8

## Nearly all technique users report continuing with at least one tool

After reconciling the two detailed technique questions, 333 respondents had tried at least one mindset technique and 321 reported using at least one regularly. That is a 96.4% continued-use rate.

### From trial to regular use

Unique respondents · inferred trial base n = 333



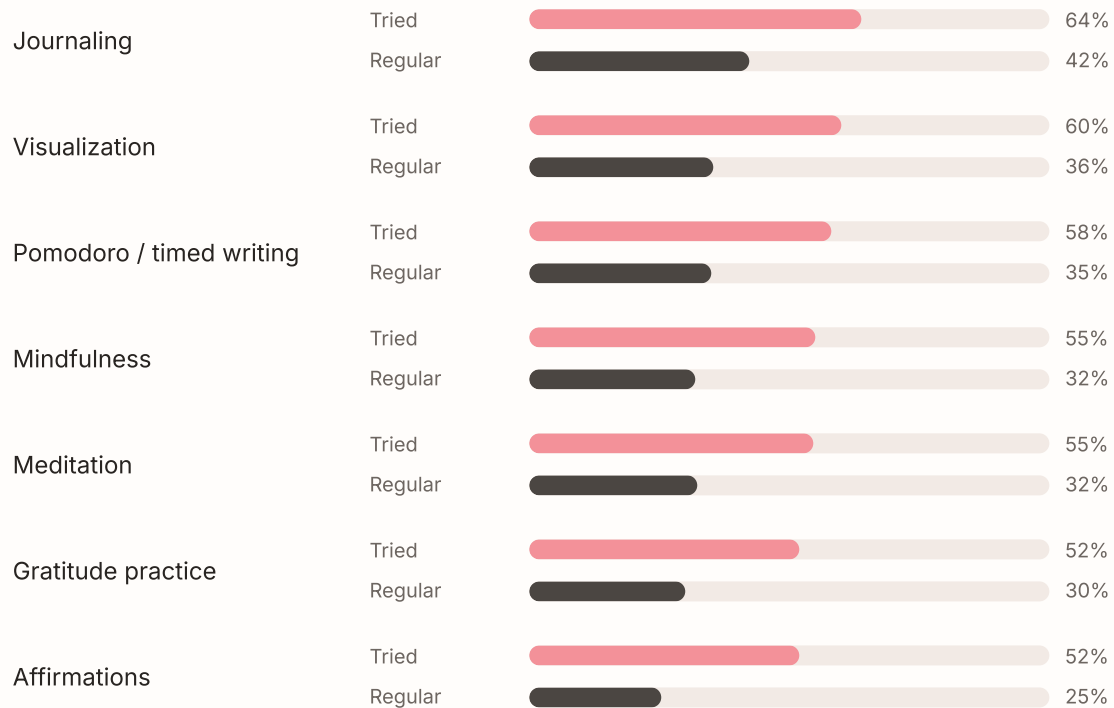
**Interpretation:** Regular use is the strongest behavioural signal in this survey that writers find a technique worth keeping. Once respondents had tried a mindset tool, nearly all reported retaining at least one in their practice. This is evidence of perceived usefulness, not proof of clinical effectiveness. Writers who use mindset tools genuinely seem to perceive them as useful, pointing to a need to increase awareness among writers of the existence of these tools.

**Reconciliation rule:** Selecting any technique in the regular-use question counts as evidence of prior trial, even if the earlier "ever tried" multi-select was left blank. This adds 30 respondents to the inferred trial group; 12 inferred triers did not report regular use.

## Which techniques are most often tried and used?

Share of respondents to each multi-select question

Ever tried · n = 303    Use regularly · n = 321



**Technique mix:** Journaling leads both trial and regular use, while visualization, timed writing, mindfulness and meditation form the next tier. Tools that can be folded directly into a writing session appear easiest to sustain.

The technique-level percentages use the separate respondent bases shown in the legend. Compare their broad rank order rather than treating each technique's percentage gap as a longitudinal retention rate.

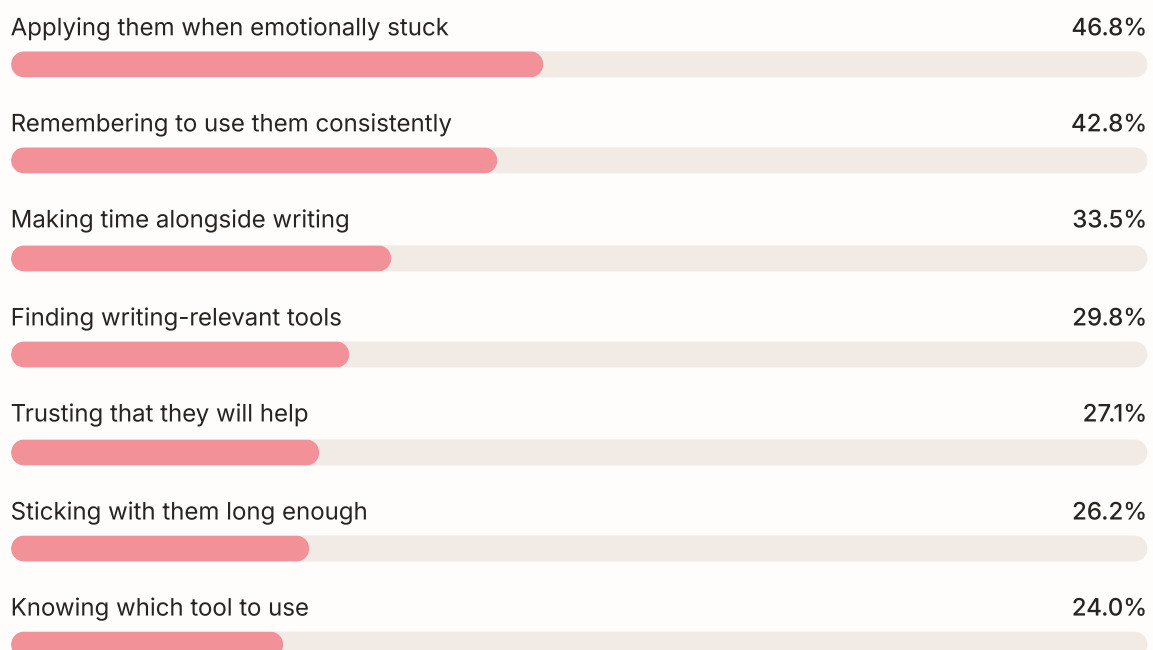
## INSIGHT 9

# The hard part is using a tool at the moment it is needed

The top difficulties are applying techniques while emotionally stuck and remembering to use them consistently—not a lack of available methods.

## What users find hardest

Multi-select · n = 325



**Interpretation:** Effective support should be brief, situation-specific and available inside the writing workflow—for example, a “stuck right now” decision tree rather than a generic library of techniques.

## INSIGHT 10

## Open responses reinforce the confidence–consistency–perfectionism cluster

When writers described the one mindset change they most wanted, confidence and self-doubt emerged most often, followed by consistency, perfectionism and focus.

### Desired mindset changes in respondents' own words

Conservative, non-exclusive keyword coding · n = 728



**Interpretation:** The open text independently points to the same interconnected needs as the closed questions: belief in the work, permission to be imperfect and routines that turn intention into action.

The coding is indicative, not exhaustive. It uses conservative keyword rules, allows a response to appear in more than one theme and excludes no responses from the denominator.

#### IV. SYSTEM-LEVEL INTERPRETATION

## From separate symptoms to an interacting model

The survey findings become more useful when they are read together: as evidence of friction between identity, cognition and emotion rather than as a list of isolated writer problems.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS CLUSTER

# Writer's block may be an interaction, not a single obstacle

### DATA

One of the clearest findings was that psychological barriers rarely exist alone. Eighty-five percent of respondents to the challenge question selected two or more difficulties. Among writers who selected perfectionism, 39% also selected self-doubt and 40% selected overthinking. These experiences tend to appear together rather than independently.

### INTERPRETATION

If these struggles were isolated, each might be addressed as its own issue. But the data points in a different direction. What writers experience as separate frustrations may be different expressions of the same underlying psychological system. Writers are not only managing the mechanics of writing; they are also managing internal standards and emotional responses in real time. What we usually call "writer's block" may be the interaction between how writers think, feel and relate to the work they produce.

## THE IDENTITY SYSTEM

# Writing can feel personal long before it is publicly validated

## DATA

Strong identification with writing was present even among writers who had never published. Defining strong identification as either feeling compelled to write or feeling that stopping would mean losing part of oneself, 67% of unpublished respondents met this definition. Among the small highest-output group—writers with 11 or more books—the figure was 84% (n = 25). Across the intermediate publication groups, it ranged from 59% to 68%.

Identity appears to shape how writing feels more than whether it happens. Writers in the strong-identity group selected perfectionism slightly more often than those motivated primarily by enjoyment (49% versus 46%), but did not report more procrastination (34% versus 37%). Identity may increase the psychological pressure of writing without necessarily pushing writers to disengage. These writers often keep writing, but the process can feel heavier.

## INTERPRETATION

Few skills feel as personal as writing. Unlike many skills, writing is something people often experience as a reflection of who they are; it takes what is internal and makes it visible. When we write, we shape our thoughts, choose our words and reveal how we see ourselves and the world. That is why criticism of writing so rarely feels like feedback on a technique. It can feel like a personal judgement because, in a meaningful sense, it is.

Psychologist Dan McAdams's Narrative Identity Theory suggests that each of us carries an inner life story—not a fixed story, but one we constantly revise—that connects past experience to present identity and future possibility. When we write, we are not simply expressing who we are; we are actively shaping that narrative. This is one reason the blank page can carry such psychological weight.

Self-Determination Theory, developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, maps a spectrum of motivation from external obligation to integrated regulation. At the deepest level, behaviour no longer feels like a choice, but like self-expression. For writers who reach this point, writing is not merely a task; it is closer to a compulsion. When writing is part of identity, a challenge to the work can feel like a challenge to the self.

Perfectionism, in this light, can be understood as an attempt to protect identity by preventing flawed work from being exposed. Self-doubt emerges when uncertainty about the work becomes uncertainty about the self. Identity gives writing its depth and staying power, but it also raises the stakes.

## THE COGNITIVE SYSTEM

# Generation and evaluation compete for control

### DATA

Overthinking was one of the most common barriers, and many writers also reported difficulty maintaining focus. This may reflect cognitive interference, in which the evaluative process arrives too early. An idea begins to form but is immediately judged. A sentence is started, then revised before it is finished. From this perspective, overthinking is not a character flaw but a structural problem: the wrong mental process arriving at the wrong stage of the task.

This also helps explain why experience does not fully fix the problem. Writers may develop technically over time, and some self-doubt may reduce, but the underlying cognitive conflict remains. Skill improves writing quality; it does not eliminate the need to manage competing cognitive demands.

### INTERPRETATION

If identity explains why writing matters so much, cognition helps explain why it often feels unstable. Writing is not one mental task; it is a set of different processes that do not always work well together. The tension between generation and evaluation sits at the centre of this. The mindset that supports idea production is not the same one that supports the critical eye required in editing.

Creativity depends on looseness, exploration and the capacity to follow thoughts before they are fully formed. Evaluation depends on precision, constraint and the ability to detect weakness. Writers are regularly pulled between these modes, yet the mind cannot easily generate freely and critique carefully at the same moment.

This tension can be understood in terms of large-scale brain networks. The Default Mode Network is associated with internally directed thought, imagination and spontaneous idea generation. Task-positive networks become more active during focused, goal-directed work. Writing requires both. The constant negotiation between them may be one reason writing feels mentally effortful even for experienced writers. Navigating it requires cognitive flexibility: the ability to shift between mental states while inhibiting what is not currently needed.

## THE EMOTIONAL SYSTEM

# What looks like avoidance may be emotional regulation

## DATA

Self-doubt appeared throughout the survey data. It was common, persistent and often accompanied perfectionism and overthinking. Importantly, this doubt was not confined to momentary discomfort: 35% of respondents to the relevant question had considered stopping writing because of how it made them feel. The emotional burden of writing is not merely frustrating; it can be destabilizing.

## INTERPRETATION

If cognition explains the conflict within the task, emotion explains why that conflict can feel so heavy. Writing takes what is internal and puts it in front of others. Thoughts that would otherwise remain private are translated into language, fixed on the page and opened to the public. Even before any reader appears, the prospect of future judgement can shape the writer's experience from within.

Emotion also helps explain why writers often mistake avoidance for laziness or lack of discipline. Procrastination can be a way to regulate emotion. Research finds a connection between perfectionism and procrastination: delaying the work also delays exposure to the feelings the work brings up—inadequacy, pressure and fear of criticism. Avoidance does not mean the writing does not matter. Often, it is evidence that it matters a great deal.

This is where identity and emotion meet. Identity explains why the work carries personal significance. Emotion explains what happens when that significance is threatened. The more writing becomes tied to the self, the harder it becomes to keep evaluation contained to the page. A weak paragraph can feel like a weak mind. Under those conditions, even ordinary setbacks carry significant emotional force.

## THE AWARENESS GAP

# Writers may recognize the struggle without having a framework for it

## DATA

One revealing finding is not only that writers struggle with mindset-related barriers, but that relatively few use tools specifically designed to address them. Among respondents who explained why they had not tried formal mindset techniques, more than half were unaware that such tools existed. Others preferred to work through difficulties independently, were uncertain whether tools would help or did not know where to begin.

Writers who had experimented with mindset tools most often selected journaling, visualization, timed writing, mindfulness and meditation. These practices also led the regular-use question, with journaling standing out most clearly. When writers find strategies that resonate and fit the writing process, they appear more likely to use them consistently.

## INTERPRETATION

Writers seem to recognize that their struggles are not purely technical, but many lack a clear framework for understanding what they are experiencing or how to respond. This is an awareness problem as much as a tools problem. Without language for psychological challenges, writers may blame the wrong causes and pursue the wrong solutions.

A writer who is overwhelmed may conclude they are undisciplined. A writer who is perfectionistic may believe they simply need to try harder. A writer who is emotionally avoiding the page may interpret that avoidance as laziness. If you cannot name the problem, it is almost impossible to solve it.

## V. THE WRITER'S MIND MODEL

# The centre of the model is conflict—not missing skill

Perfectionism, self-doubt, overthinking and procrastination can be understood as outcomes of interaction among identity, cognition and emotion.

Each system plays an essential role. Identity gives the work meaning. Cognition makes the work possible. Emotion shapes how the writer responds. Identity governs what the work means and how closely it is tied to self-concept. Cognition controls the operations required to generate, organize, revise and evaluate language. Emotion shapes the responses that appear as the writer anticipates judgement, tolerates uncertainty and encounters imperfections in the work.

The data supports this system-level view. Barriers clustered rather than appearing alone, suggesting interaction rather than independence. Experience reduced some difficulties but left others widespread, suggesting that skill alone does not account for the challenge. Identity was strong even among unpublished writers, showing that writing can feel personal long before it is publicly validated.

This does not mean every writer experiences each system in the same way, or that skill is irrelevant. Craft matters. But craft cannot fully explain why so many capable writers continue to feel stuck. The Writer's Mind Model reframes the problem: writing becomes difficult when the meaning of the work, the demands of the task and the emotional response to both come into conflict.

## VI. REFRAMING WRITING DIFFICULTY

# Struggle is not proof of a lack of commitment or capability

The core idea is simple: we often misunderstand writing difficulty. Many writers interpret struggle as evidence that they lack talent, discipline or the temperament for the work. The data suggests otherwise. Identity makes the work matter. Emotion responds to that significance with pressure, fear or self-doubt. Cognition must operate under those conditions while switching between competing demands. When these systems stop working together, the result is experienced as block, avoidance or internal resistance.

This reframing changes how we view writing difficulty. In many cases, struggle is evidence that writing is asking for something psychologically complex. How we define the problem shapes the solutions people seek. If writing is understood only as a technical skill, struggle will continue to be viewed as a failure of effort. If we also understand writing as a psychological process, writers can approach difficulty with greater clarity, direction and self-compassion.

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## VII. CONCLUSION

# Defining a new domain

The Writer's Mind is more than a metaphor for personality. It is a framework for naming the psychological processes that shape how writing actually unfolds. When we treat writing difficulty as more than a problem of craft, it reveals pressures that many writers already know intimately but have not always had language for.

The goal is not simply to help writers produce more, but to understand what the act of writing asks of the mind in the first place. As our understanding grows, the tools, systems and conversations designed to support writers must also develop—grounded not only in craft, but in the full psychological demands of writing.

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## THE RESEARCH CONTINUES

### Continue exploring the writer's mind

Follow the Writer's Mind for new findings, practical tools and occasional updates about the psychology of writing.

[Keep me updated → \(https://chrisbanksauthor.com/\)](https://chrisbanksauthor.com/)

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## RESEARCH SAMPLE

# Who answered the survey

89%

write fiction · 776 of 869 answering genre

64%

have written seriously for 3+ years · n = 874

78%

write several times a week or daily · n = 874

52%

have not yet published a book · n = 794

48%

are aged 55 or older · n = 767

64%

live in North America · n = 800

The sample is self-selected and is not weighted to represent all writers. See Methods for interpretation limits.

## APPENDIX A

# Methods

## Study design

Survey data was collected in March 2026. Questions explored psychological barriers, writer identity, writing experience and frequency, publication history, the emotional impact of writing, and the use of mindset tools.

## Participants and sample

The survey was sent to ProWritingAid's email list, a broad audience of writers and writing-focused users, and was also shared through partner-distributed links. Anyone who received the survey and chose to respond was eligible for inclusion. The combined dataset contains 874 records: 818 from the original export and 56 from partner links. Of the combined records, 819 were marked complete and 55 partial.

## Response rates

Response counts varied by question. Writing experience and writing frequency were answered by all 874 respondents. Other core counts included 859 for the challenge multi-select, 847 for focus, 838 for self-doubt, 831 for considering stopping, 821 for whether a mindset technique had been tried, and 794 for publication history. Percentages use the number answering each question unless stated otherwise.

## Measures

Participants reported years spent writing seriously, writing frequency and number of books published. Psychological measures included self-doubt frequency; challenges such as perfectionism, self-doubt, overthinking and procrastination; difficulty focusing and generating ideas on 0–5 scales; and whether the respondent had considered stopping because of the emotional impact of writing.

Writer identity was examined through the statement that best described the motivation to write: enjoyment, compulsion, or the sense that stopping would mean losing part of oneself. Mindset-tool questions covered awareness, prior trial, regular use and the practical difficulties of applying techniques.

## Analysis approach

The analysis uses descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations. Partner rows were aligned to the shared survey-question schema before being appended; no duplicate response IDs, submission timestamps or identical shared-answer records were found across the two exports. It identifies patterns in barriers, identity, focus, writing behaviour and tool use, and examines how these measures correspond with experience and publication history. Multi-select questions can sum above 100%. No weighting, imputation or population adjustment was applied.

## Interpretation limits

This is a self-selected, cross-sectional survey dominated by fiction writers, frequent writers, North American respondents and older age groups. Associations do not establish direction or causality, and small subgroups should be interpreted cautiously. Open-text themes use a conservative keyword scan and should be followed by human qualitative coding before being treated as definitive prevalence estimates.

## Privacy

This report contains aggregates only. Email addresses, response IDs and identifiable free-text excerpts are excluded.

## APPENDIX B

## References

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