

# On eliminating the noise



Author Mateo Askaripour discusses the importance of routine, how to find many different levers for inspiration, and acting with purpose.

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As told to Arriel Vinson, 4110 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Focus](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Success](#).

**You've told me that you're always writing. What does "always" look like?**

Not to be that guy who just quotes a bunch of people, but I'm about to quote an anecdote I heard about Kurt Vonnegut. I'm paraphrasing, but he ran into either a student or a former student in the street, I think in New York City, and the student invited Mr. Vonnegut to join them and a few other people at a bar or at a restaurant. And they asked Mr. Vonnegut, "When are you writing?" And he's like, "I'm always writing. I'm writing right now," even as he's sitting there at the table. When you become fully immersed in a project, the project is always going on in the background.

When I'm thinking about it all the time, not in a forced way, but in the way that I think about all the things and people that I love daily...it becomes an entity.

More concretely, I have my routine. I treat this like a job, though I am lucky that this is a job that I love and feels in line with my purpose and how I choose to spend my time on this planet. But when I'm sitting down to write, that's when I'm actually not thinking. That is when I get closest to this almost-communing with the work and the fullest state of immersion. All of the thinking goes on off the page. Part of my routine is to get me into a space where I am writing down what I see in an extremely intuitive way, in a flow state.

And not to say that every writing session is like that, but that is the goal. I'm writing down notes all the time, whether I'm on a walk, whether I'm watching something, whether I'm at a play, whether I'm in a movie, whether I'm in the park, whether I'm with friends and something comes to me about a certain work, I jot down the note. It might not even be for my current work in progress, but again, something, an idea that I have that's percolating in the background. And if I am continuing to write down notes and expand these documents over the course of months or even years, then I know that that is a novel or that is an idea that I have the stamina for.

**You mentioned you have a routine before you get into a writing session. What is your writing routine? Why do you feel like this method feels you and what has failed before?**

The goal of the routine is to make progress every day and finish the work that I'm working on. If I can work day in and day out toward completion and feel enthusiastic and happy and fulfilled, great. Of course, not every day is like that, but the routine is aimed, again, at quieting all of the noise and getting me into that space where I can create without judgment.

Again, to quote something else, one of my favorite movies is [Finding Forrester](#). It's about two writers, one young and Black, one older and white, and they come together. The old white guy, played by Sean Connery, is playing this JD Salinger type of character. He says, "You write your first draft with your heart and then you edit with your mind." And even though I watched this way before I ever began pursuing writing in a serious fashion, I've

internalized it. I've tattooed it on the inside of my soul and it is really a part of me and my routine allows me to do that. I have to also preface that this routine works for me and I am privileged in that I write full-time now.

And because of that, in some ways, some people would say it's even harder than writing when you have a job because I wrote my debut novel, *Black Buck*, when I was working and consulting. Those hours that I had to carve out in order to write the book forced me to be more productive. When you remove all of that structure, some people have a harder time. So that's why it was imperative for me when I began writing full-time and I no longer consulted to create this routine and to seriously view it as a job.

Sometimes I write six or seven days a week, depending on what type of projects I'm working on. When I wake up, the first thing I do is read a page of poetry. I work my way through a book of poetry, just however long it takes, months, a year, especially if it's the complete works of Langston Hughes or Nikki Giovanni. Read a page of that, drink my water, have my vitamins, meditate for 30 minutes. And this entire time, I haven't looked at my phone. Again, I'm saying that this is privileged. I don't have a spouse. I don't have children.

Meditating for 30 minutes and starting off in that deep silence puts me into a state where I'm not reacting to the world, but putting my stake in the ground that this is how I'm proactively choosing to start my day. It allows me to begin narrowing my focus.

After my meditation, I then look at a page of a photo book that I'm making my way through. And this could be one of those larger art books. It could be the work of Barkley L. Hendricks, Kehinde Wiley. Right now, I'm working my way through Jay-Z's *Decoded*. After that, you do the whole hygiene thing and then I make my breakfast. I make the same breakfast every day. Yes, I'm a Virgo, but this is what works for me.

Then I prepare my drink of choice, yerba mate, and that has a ceremonial aspect as well. And only then do I look at my phone. I give myself about like 10, 15 minutes to look and respond to emails and texts, and I turn my phone off and throw it behind me. This is when I start to get a little self-conscious because there are people who say you can't manufacture inspiration, and I disagree.

I think that you can work to put yourself in an inspired state if you understand what those levers are that you can pull. And if you understand that pulling the same levers all the time won't work and you have to have multiple levers of inspiration to pull in order to get you into that place to create and flow. I have so many levers throughout the day, whether it is going out for a long walk, going to the park, going to the gym, watching a documentary, watching specifically a sports documentary, listening to an album, listening to a new album, listening to a certain song, going to the movies, just speaking with my parents, looking at a certain photo. These levers are endless for me.

I'm not saying that every day what I write is great. It's not the point to write something great every day. The point is to get closer to completion and to flow with what I'm writing, especially because I'm not someone who is an outliner. And when it's completed, I put on my editor hat and start tearing it to shreds and trying to figure out what's what.

**In both *Black Buck* and *The Great Hemisphere*, your dedications make space for people who are invisible or deemed different in society. Why is that? And what do you feel like your duty is to those folks?**

I've discovered more and more of my work's aim as I publish more. The themes between *This Great Hemisphere* and *Black Buck* weren't immediately clear to me. Only after I completed it and I zoomed out, was I able to see that much of my work is committed to helping those who often feel unseen feel seen, and validating their humanity. Because no one is invisible to those they're close to, whether it's only one person or five people.

I'd like to think that by the end of reading one of my books, anyone can feel empowered, even in a small way, to be more of themselves and love themselves more and understand that if they are not hurting anyone, then they have nothing to apologize for. We can all grow and improve, but I think that people are constantly trying to contort themselves into this socially acceptable shape, when the shape of who they are right now is beautiful and whole,

all on its own. So I have these characters who sometimes, like Buck in *Black Buck*, serve as a cautionary tale because he contorts himself into this grotesque shape and hurts those who love him unconditionally.

Self-actualization and the self-actualization of others is important to me. And I'm doing what I can with my time here to empower people to be who they are to the fullest degree and to make the most of the time that they have in the same way that I try to.

**How do you plan to protect your selfhood during this publication cycle?**

Realizing what's for me and what isn't, what is generative for me living in my purpose and what isn't, what can help me show up as a better son, brother, partner, cousin, friend, and then what can inhibit that. More concretely, I'm going to ask my team not to send me any reviews, good or bad. It's not for me.

I haven't been on social media probably in over a year. So when we're getting ready to promote the book, I'll probably log on to post the cover and any events, but I'm not going to be looking at comments or doing the same types of back and forth that I used to do, even though sometimes I really enjoyed them. They were just another rabbit hole that I fell down in a way that sometimes felt good and sometimes didn't.

Maximizing my in-person interactions with people at events and being sure that I show up as fully and as present as possible will make not interacting with people via social media more acceptable to me. For *Black Buck*, I read the first 100 reviews on Goodreads, even though people told me not to. I was like, "You're not built like me." And then after 100, I was like, "I'm not built like me." But the good or the bad, that's not where I derive my inspiration from. It's not a lever, going back to that metaphor, that does anything good for me. So much of my routine is aimed at eliminating this noise so that I can do what I have to do, hopefully with joy and a sense of play.

For me, one of the most important things in the act of creation is a sense of play. And those are some things that I've identified over the last five years, since publishing my debut. I know that these books aren't going to write themselves. I got to do it and no one's going to do it for me. And not too many people, even though I've published some books and I have some readers, not too many people probably care if I don't publish another book because they're busy with their own lives. So I got to do this for me and the people that I want to serve with my art in this way.

**You occupy a space that's both literary and playful with genre. So what is your relationship to genre? Do you go into a novel knowing what genre it will veer toward or is that part of the play for you?**

It's funny because you and I spoke about this—this year, for me, is a year of turning over new stones. And we discussed how one of those stones that I'm turning over is more intentional teaching and a bit more formal teaching. Not completely in academia, but delving more into leading more workshops, instructing more writing courses, especially novel-writing courses.

A craft talk that I've given this year, at least twice, has been all about genre and how to bridge the gap from writing in one genre to writing in another. But spoiler alert, at the end of that talk, I tell people, despite having spent 30 minutes talking about genre, I actually don't care all that much about it. What's more important to me is to tell the stories that I want to tell with the time that I have to tell them. So I cite my first two books, *Black Buck* and *This Great Hemisphere*, as examples of novels that I can tell you the genres that they fall in. But when I was beginning to write them, I was not thinking of genre. I was just thinking about telling the story that I wanted to tell. With *Black Buck*, because that was my debut and the book that got me an agent, it was only when I was researching how to get through the slush pile that I figured out how to package it in a way that it made sense.

I find that the things that I'm most interested in writing about now, they're a mashup. Even *Black Buck*, the last third is almost like a thriller, but the things that I love writing are a mashup of many things. There are a handful of genres out there that I've included elements of in my work already, but if I want to write a book that's more so firmly entrenched in that genre, I do find that reading some books in that genre, long before I

ever want to actually write the book, is helpful.

**A lot of writers think they need an MFA to have a successful writing career. How did you learn to navigate publishing and the author life without one? What advice do you have for those who don't have an MFA?**

You don't need anything to write other than heart, will and patience, and something to write with, whether by hand or computer. That's all you need. You don't need Scrivener. You don't need a degree. You don't need someone's approval. And you don't need to have read all the "classics" or canon, especially if those people in that alleged canon don't look like you or didn't think about you and people like you when they were writing their books. All you need is something to say and enough passion and stamina to say it.

It's funny because after having written two books and not getting an agent or a book deal, I had to stare myself in the face and be like, "Who did you think you were? What made you think you could do this?" That I had to stare that doubt squarely in its face and make a decision. It was that decision that then led to me writing the book that helped me get on. This is a cliché at this point, but some people give up when they're so close to getting that thing that they want. And the thing that separates those who get the thing that they want and those who don't, it's just that bit of perseverance.

I did my own MFA. I read a couple crafts books, the most impactful and influential, a book called *Plot & Structure* by James Scott Bell. I got it because when an agent rejected the query for the first thing I ever wrote, she said that, "You have a strong voice, but you lack plot and structure." I bought it and I lucked out in that the book was exactly what I needed.

It was the right book at the right time and it helped me on so many different levels. It's not just a craft book. It's also about mindset. It's about the intangibles that I've brought into my practice and have continued to bring into my practice nine years later. In Stephen King's *On Writing*, he says, "I get my characters into these scenarios, then I figure out over the course of 100 pages how to get them out or not." And then he says, "The best way to become a better writer is to read more and write more." I said, "This is the simple, no nonsense, actionable advice that I needed."

In 2018, I did all of that. I read more, I wrote more, but beyond reading more, I started to consume a lot more art, whether film, TV, plays when I could, concerts, a bit more critically. Afterwards, asking, what did I like about that? What didn't I like? Why did I like that? Why didn't I like that? It was also at that time that I made the decision to write something that was so close to me that I didn't really see it with the first two books I was trying to write.

I have always looked at not having my MFA as my superpower. It's only because people can look at me who don't have their MFA, and be like, "Oh, damn he got in from the outside. Maybe I can too." That, for me, is very important, but these days, I don't wave around not having an MFA as some badge because that's corny to me too.

There are so many people who have their MFA who are incredible writers and who possess a certain level of technical expertise that I've had to work extra hard to get and I'm still working to sharpen. But to do my third quote of this interview, an editor once told me, "You know Mateo, the best thing about you not having your MFA is that you're not afraid to write. The worst thing about you not having your MFA is that you're undisciplined on the page." By that she meant that, especially for my last couple of books, my initial drafts were super long. But I am okay with that because it's my process.

**Mateo Askaripour recommends:**

**Getting off social media.** Wastes your time, drains your spirit, and makes it harder to create from a place of truth, vulnerability, and intention. If you feel as though you can't completely opt out, take a week or two off, as an experiment, and see how you feel. As with any detox, you may experience signs of withdrawal, but increased joy, confidence, and connection--with yourself and the world--will follow.

When my first two books came out, I was on social media hard, with a focus on Instagram. Responding to every comment, every DM (unless they were weird), posting, commenting, going live, and figuring out other ways, such as

via stories and Q&As, to engage with readers and support other writers. But after years of this, I developed an allergy to social media, and thought, "What if I just get off this?" and I did. Now, I only log on to post big book news, two or three times a year, which has freed up mental, emotional, even spiritual space for myself, my work, and my loved ones.

As I gear up to publish my third novel, I'm going to be strict with how, and how frequently, I use social media to promote it, instead looking to other channels, such as Zooms and in-person events, to meaningfully connect and engage with readers.

**Meditation.** Meditation intimidates some people, I get it. Or it seems so esoteric that you're not sure where to start. All you have to do is set a timer and sit quietly. Anything can be meditative, even washing the dishes, but carving out 10, 15, or 30 minutes to sit in silence in the morning allows you to start your day on your terms, setting a positive, nourishing tone that will help you weather the ups and downs that may come, as well as begin sharpening your focus before a dozen distractions attempt to fragment it.

When I meditate, the goal isn't to "not think." For me, it's to check in with myself, ground my mind and heart, and do my best, after 30 minutes, to move with more compassion, courage, creativity, and gratitude. Those are the things, among a few others, that I meditate on, reviewing where I've recently succeeded and failed, and giving myself the grace to do better with the new day that I, like you, have been given.

**Nature jaunts.** These days, the kids say "touch grass," and for good reason. Disconnecting from the digital and attuning yourself with the physical, even spiritual, will allow ideas to flow, open you up to inspiration, and aid you in ways both perceivable and more subtle. Whenever I'm stuck, I go for a walk in nature and emerge calmer, more grounded, and often, but not always, with something figured out. However, it's important for me to view my relationship with nature not as one of transaction, but of partnership, mutual respect. I enter without expectation.

This often manifests in long walks around Prospect Park, in Brooklyn. Exploring nature preserves on Long Island and trails in Upstate New York. Or, when the weather's warm, visiting a body of water, closing my eyes, and allowing the lapping of water to enter my ears, steady my breathing. There's something so beautiful and simple in that act that both makes me feel incredibly present, and also outside of my body, slowly crumbling any barriers I've erected between myself and the world, opening me up to its possibilities that then feed into my relationships and work, strengthening them.

**Live art nights.** Whether weekly, biweekly, or just monthly, taking the time to consume live art in your city—a comedy show, concert, play, even museum exhibit—is a great way to expand your creative sensibilities, or just turn your own writerly brain off and regain that childlike sense of wonder where you're not sure exactly what's going to happen, but you're excited to find out. As with all art, it'll be hit or miss, but leaving your home and engaging with work beyond a screen, witnessing the physicality of it, is valuable in maintaining that vital connection to people and places that brings our own work to life in a way that feels real and speaks to the minds and hearts of others. We can't move anyone with our art if we forget how it feels to be moved by art.

I was inspired to do this after listening to [J. Cole's "Inevitable"](#) podcast series. He said that he started going to comedy shows once a week to spark his creativity and get himself outside. I tried doing something like this once a week, reserving Wednesday night as my "art night," but it became hard to maintain because sometimes, after a long day, all I wanted to do was glue myself to the couch and veg out. Still, I do my best to make it to a jazz or comedy show once or twice a month, adding in a play, concert, or museum visit depending on what's going on.

**Saying "no" more.** We only have but so much time. That person you don't want to hang with but who is trying to grab coffee with you? Nah. That party or event that your friends say you have to go to in order to meet the who's who and do the what's what in the where's where at the when's when even though, deep down, you're not feeling it? Nah. Our inability and discomfort in saying "no," so as to avoid hurting someone's feelings or creating conflict, makes us more reactive to the world's whims—rather than moving from a place of purpose and intent—which hurts the soul. I know you know what I mean.

Telling someone "no," or one of its many variations, can be such an awkward thing. You don't know if they'll curse you out, attempt to assassinate your character, or put your face on a doll and start sticking it with pins. But saying "no" to that which doesn't serve us helps us more fully show up for ourselves, our work, and our loved ones.

Of course, "no" is sometimes a privilege, but every day I strive for balance and discernment so that I can know

when to hold firm and when to be flexible, doing my best to trust my gut while remaining open to revision.

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