Can't Get Started Writing? Why the New Idea Keeps Winning

The new idea is not inspiration. It is the alarm looking for a way out. The move is one instruction on a strip of masking tape, small enough that the alarm does not bother negotiating.

THE SHORT VERSION

Spot the pattern on paper. Twenty minutes, one page. List what the avoidance loop has had you do over the last ninety days. Not the feelings. The behaviors.

Write one instruction on a strip of masking tape. The smallest possible action in the manuscript you are avoiding, such as *Describe the room before anyone speaks.* Stick it to the lid of your laptop. Next time you sit down, the only goal is the sentence on the tape.

Take the free 3-minute quiz. It tells you whether another mask is running underneath.

You opened a blank document at 6:10 this morning. You named it, picked a font, set the margins to 1.25 inches, and closed it at 6:52 with nothing on the page but the title.

You have told four people at four separate dinners that you are going to write a book. The book has a working title, a dedication, and an acknowledgments page. It does not have a first sentence.

You have eleven browser tabs open. Eight of them belong to projects you abandoned. The other three belong to the project you will abandon by Thursday — though you do not know that yet.

You searched online for "how long does it take to write a novel" three times this month. You did not write during any of the time you spent searching.

You keep a document called *Ideas.* It has ninety-three entries. You have not finished anything on the list. You added two more last Thursday.

You opened the manuscript yesterday. You got two paragraphs in before you remembered an idea you had at three in the morning that was definitely better. You opened a new document. The first manuscript is at the word *and.*

You have read the first chapters of four books on writing this year. You have not read the last chapter of any of them.

You have a folder on your desktop called *Drafts.* It contains seventeen subfolders. Each subfolder is a book. Two of the books are good.

© 2026 True Path Publishing. All rights reserved. · Circle 1 Living™ · Print it for yourself; please do not repost or resell it.

You wrote ninety-two thousand words of a romance novel that took ten months. The scene that finishes it is sitting on your screen right now. You opened a browser tab to "research" instead.

If your stomach just clenched, you are in the right room.

We know. We have done every one of these. If you can't get started writing — or you keep starting and never finishing — the alarm is the same. Different disguise. We have a *Drafts* folder with seventeen subfolders to prove it. So has Ashley, the writer in our book whose hard drive holds fourteen abandoned manuscripts and whose pattern this page is about.

The pattern of starting novels and not finishing them is the most common arc in the unfinished-writer landscape. It is also the most misnamed. The honest names you have probably given it — *I lack discipline. I get bored easily. I'm not a finisher. Maybe I have ADHD* — are all wrong. Some of them are insulting. None of them describe what is actually happening.

What is actually happening is your alarm.

What if you can't get the first sentence down?

Some of you aren't abandoning books in the middle. You aren't getting to the middle, or the first page, or the first sentence. Different spot. Same alarm.

When you can't get started writing, the alarm isn't running toward a new idea. It's freezing at the door of this one. That's usually one of two patterns: Reserved, which keeps the work where nobody can judge it, or Standard-Setter, which won't let the first sentence exist until it's already the right one. Either way, your nervous system reads the blank page as a test you haven't studied for, and the alarm's whole job is keeping you out of tests.

So the move isn't to start the book. It's smaller than that. Write one instruction on a strip of masking tape: *Describe the room before anyone speaks.* Stick it on the lid of your laptop. Tomorrow morning, the only job is that room, three sentences, written badly on purpose. You aren't starting a book. You're describing a room. The alarm has nothing to defend against a room.

Once the room exists, the rest of this page is about what comes next: the middle, where a starting problem turns into a finishing problem.

Why does the new idea always win?

We call this pattern **Adventurer**. Some writers freeze in place, some give the time away, some fight back. This one runs forward. Toward the next idea. The next outline. The next genre. The next *this is the book I was always meant to write.*

It is the most common mask among unfinished novelists.

It does not feel like running. It feels like inspiration. It feels like creative restlessness. It feels like *finally* finding the right idea after six months in the wrong one. The rush is real. The charge is real. The new idea genuinely glows the way every new idea glows. None of that is the diagnostic.

© 2026 True Path Publishing. All rights reserved. · Circle 1 Living™ · Print it for yourself; please do not repost or resell it.

The diagnostic is the timing.

The new idea always arrives in the same place. Not at the beginning of a manuscript. Not at the end. Somewhere between page 80 and page 150 — the stretch we call the drop-off in our work — when the project stops feeling like the book you imagined writing and starts feeling like the book you are actually writing. The gap between those two books is where the alarm fires.

Your nervous system reads that gap as failure. The thinking part of you catalogs it as *this idea is wrong* or *I've outgrown this story* or *the new one will be cleaner.* None of those are honest names for what is happening. The honest name is: *this is the part where the work gets hard, and the alarm has learned that escape feels like creativity.*

The new idea is always the door. It is not inspiration. It is escape.

What does nobody tell you about starting and not finishing?

The pattern is older than your manuscripts. If you trace it backward, you will find it before the writing. The hobby you abandoned at month three. The relationship that ended when it asked you to be known. The job you left the week after the honeymoon period ended. The pattern is not a writing pattern. It is a finishing pattern. The manuscript is just the most recent room it has run in.

The new idea is rarely the wrong one. It is usually on the wrong day. Most of the new ideas that pull writers out of their current manuscripts are real ideas. They are usable ideas. They could be good books. The lie is not in the idea. The lie is in the timing — the alarm convincing you *this one will be different,* when the only thing different about the new idea is that it has not yet asked you to face page eighty-seven.

The move is not "more discipline." Discipline is not a tool against the avoidance loop. Discipline is what the avoidance loop wears when it gets tired of being called undisciplined. Every writer in the 5%* who finished did not *discipline* themselves into the last hundred pages. They learned to recognize the alarm in the moment it offered them a new idea, name it by its honest name, and write the next paragraph of the old book anyway.

Where does your worth as a writer live?

Circle 1 Living teaches three circles, one inside the other. **The outer circle** is what you cannot control — what readers will think of the book, what reviewers will say, whether the algorithm will surface it. **The middle circle** is what you influence — the people you show up for and the energy you bring when you do. **Circle 1**, the center, is what you control — your effort, your attitude, your response when the alarm fires.

Worth lives in Circle 1. Nowhere else.

The new idea is a promise about things you cannot control — *the next book will be the one that finally proves you, that finally lands, that finally…* Worth has never lived in the next book any more than it lives in this one. Every writer who has ever finished a novel finished it because they stopped negotiating

© 2026 True Path Publishing. All rights reserved. · Circle 1 Living™ · Print it for yourself; please do not repost or resell it.

with the alarm about which book to write and started writing the one already in front of them.

The 5% are not braver than you. They are not more "creative" than you. They have just gotten faster at recognizing the new idea for what it is — *the door,* not the answer.

The full three-circle sort — and why the mind keeps reaching for what sits outside it — is here: **why you worry about things you can't control →**

What do you do this week?

Three moves, in order:

The first move is to spot the pattern on paper. Twenty minutes. One page. Surface the specific behaviors the avoidance loop has run for you over the last ninety days. Not the feelings. The behaviors. The Tuesday you opened a new document. The Thursday you abandoned a chapter outline. The morning you bought a planner instead of writing. Naming the behaviors is what makes the pattern interruptable. The alarm cannot survive being seen on the page next to its receipts.

The second move is the masking-tape micro-milestone. Pick the manuscript you are avoiding. Identify the smallest possible action you can take in it tomorrow morning. Not "write the chapter." Not even "write a page." Smaller than that. *Describe the room before anyone speaks. Sketch the protagonist's morning before the inciting event. Write one sentence of dialogue for the conversation you have been afraid to write.* Write that single instruction on a strip of masking tape. Stick the tape to the lid of your laptop. The next time you sit down to write, the only goal is the sentence on the tape. Not the chapter. The sentence.

This is the move Ashley made in our work. She had fourteen abandoned manuscripts. The masking tape on her romcom said *Describe the reception hall before anyone speaks.* That was the chapter she had been running from for three weeks. She wrote thirty-seven words. Three sentences about a wedding reception at 11 PM with a wine stain on the tablecloth and a child sliding in socks. Her shoulders dropped. Her breathing slowed. The book got finished.

A note on size: the micro-milestone has to be small enough that your alarm does not negotiate with it. *Three hundred words* is not a micro-milestone. That is a floor. Your alarm will look at three hundred words and calculate whether you can do it before the laundry gets folded — and the alarm will win that math, because the alarm always wins when the stair is too tall. Make the stair small enough that the alarm does not bother negotiating. *One paragraph. One image. The first sentence of the scene.* Ridiculous-feeling smallness is how you know you've got it right.

The third move is the free 3-minute quiz. It will tell you whether your avoidance loop runs on this pattern alone, or whether it is running another mask underneath. With Standard-Setter (you chase new starts and the ones you keep get strangled by perfectionism). With Reserved (you generate ideas in private and share none of them). With Provider (you start exciting projects and abandon them to help someone else's emergency). The combination matters. The mask underneath the mask is where the wiring lives.

© 2026 True Path Publishing. All rights reserved. · Circle 1 Living™ · Print it for yourself; please do not repost or resell it.

If the problem is drift more than surge — busy all week, manuscript unmoved — **this free one-page handout** → is the five-step check for exactly that.

Where else does this show up?

If the work you keep starting and not finishing is not a novel — a business, a degree, a relationship, a habit, a course you bought a few months ago — the same wiring is doing the same job. The universal version of this pattern, with scenarios from outside the writing life, is here: **Why I keep starting things and never finishing** →.

The closest cousin to the avoidance loop is the perfectionism trap — the writer who edits Chapter One eleven times instead of writing Chapter Two. Different mask, same alarm, same gap. Many writers run both at once. If both fire for you, **Read: I can't stop rewriting Chapter One** →.

Is the novel you keep almost finishing the wrong novel?

The novel you keep almost-finishing is not a wrong novel. It is the novel your alarm has run out of new ideas to escape into. The 5% who finish are the writers who stayed when the new idea arrived. They wrote the masking-tape sentence. They wrote the next sentence. They got to the end of the book that was already in their hands.

The fastest way to start that pattern in your own work is to name the alarm that keeps handing you the next idea.

Related: First time writer advice nobody gives you → · Why your writing resolution is gone by February →

If you'd rather surface the pattern in writing first, **the Pattern Spotter worksheet** → is one page, free, and takes twenty minutes of honest writing.

If you'd rather see the pattern in someone else first, **the opening of *Finish Writing the Book.* is free** →. Ashley's chapter — the one with the fourteen abandoned manuscripts — is one of the early ones.

*About the five percent. It is the rough share of people who start writing a book and finish it, and no single study pins it down. It is a composite of industry surveys and self-reported completion data from writing organizations, and estimates run from three to ten percent depending on how you define “started” and “finished.” We use it because it is directional, not definitive. The full note is in Appendix B of *Finish Writing the Book.*.

© 2026 True Path Publishing. All rights reserved. · Circle 1 Living™ · Print it for yourself; please do not repost or resell it.

CIRCLE 1 LIVING
Where worth lives.

Two doors, both open.

We wrote the guide because we kept opening a new document instead of the one with our name on it. The pages above name the alarm. These two ask for nothing up front.

Read the opening

Sarah sits in the parking garage for nine minutes. That is the time it would have taken to drive to the coffee shop. The opening of *Finish Writing the Book.* is on the site, with no form in front of it.

circle1living.com/writers/first-chapter

Founding Readers

150 seats, open until they fill. You read the full manuscript before it prints, and you can write to us while you do.

circle1living.com/founding-readers

Circle 1 for Writers · Brandon and Lorraine Cover · True Path Publishing

© 2026 True Path Publishing. All rights reserved. · Circle 1 Living™ · Print it for yourself; please do not repost or resell it.