

# HOW TO WRITE WITH APHANTASIA

A CREATIVE WRITING WORKSHOP  
BY DUSTIN GRINNELL



# COMPANY EXERCISE GONE WRONG

- My colleagues and I were asked to visualize where we'd be in 5 years.
- I said I wanted to be writing from a desk in a beach cottage.
- I admitted that I don't "see" this in my mind's eye, however.
- If I can't visualize, how can I write? I didn't know, so I went looking.



# PURPOSE OF WORKSHOP

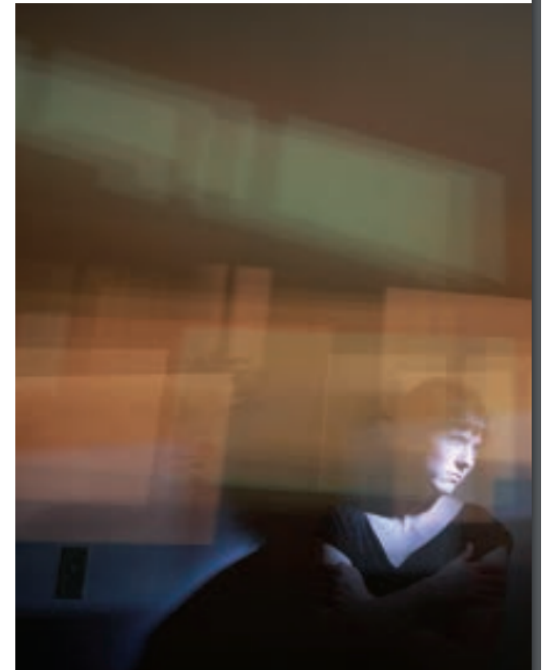
- **My writing experience**

- I have ten years of professional work writing for businesses in the US.
- Written freelance article for newspapers and magazines.
- In 2016, I wrote an article about aphantasia for *New Scientist*.
- I have written two science fiction novels.
- I currently write in the marketing department at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, MA.

- **Workshops goals**

- We will talk about how I approach the craft of writing.
- I want you to develop an idea for an original piece of writing.
- Hopefully you can leave the workshop with an idea for a story and how to go about writing it.

## BLIND IN THE MIND



I can't visualise things, says Dustin Grinnell. So what's going on in my head?

**L**ONG-DISTANCE relationships aren't easy at the best of times. But when my girlfriend and I had to move to opposite sides of the US for work, we faced an obstacle that few others do. I couldn't picture her face.

It is the same for landscapes and sunsets, parks and rivers: when it comes to mental imagery, I am blind. At the time, I didn't think anything of the fact that I couldn't conjure up a mental image of my girlfriend at will. I have never had that ability, so I didn't know what I was missing. And it wasn't as if I have trouble with tasks that you imagine might require such a "mind's eye", like navigating around town or recognising friends.

34 | NewScientist | 23 April 2016

So I got a shock when I saw a TV interview with Craig Venter, the biologist who created the first synthetic organism. He spoke then of how he attributed his academic success to an unusual way of thinking, using purely concepts with no mental imagery whatsoever. And he says the same thing now: "It's like having a computer store the information, but you don't have a screen attached to the computer." That's exactly how I feel too – and so my questions began. Why am I different? How do I navigate life without a mind's eye? Could I ever train my mind to see – and would I want to?

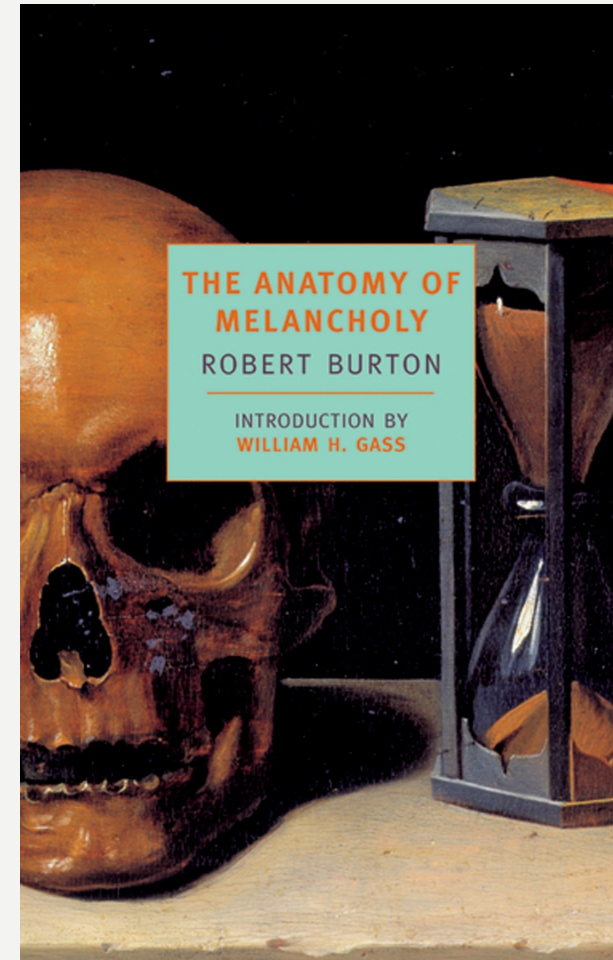
I began to investigate and soon discovered that science is starting to find answers. And

ironically, studying people like me is helping to reveal a lot about how our brains process the things we see around us.

We have known of the existence of people with no mind's eye for more than a century. In 1880, Francis Galton conducted an experiment in which people had to imagine themselves sitting at their breakfast table, and to rate the illumination, definition and colouring of the table and the objects on it. Some found it easy to imagine the table, including Galton's cousin, Charles Darwin, for whom the scene was "as distinct as if I had photos before me". But a few individuals drew a total blank.

Today there is a standard way to probe the acuity of the mind's eye: the Vividness of

# WRITING BY PATCHWORK



# FIND A SUBJECT YOU'RE PASSIONATE ABOUT

- What topics or subjects interest you most?
- What genre most interests you? Memoir? Poetry? Journalism? Fiction? Do you want to write a movie?
- If fiction, do you like thrillers or romances? The short story or the novel?
- If you wrote a book, where might it sit in the bookstore?
- If your story appeared on the cover of a magazine, what would the title be? The subtitle? The artwork?
- What's not being written about that you think should be?

# FILLING THE WELL

- Use Google to find articles, books, movies, and documentaries that relate to your topic.
- Librarians can help you find and access books and articles.
- When you think about your topic, what nonfiction books come to mind? What novels? Movies?
- Who could you interview to get more perspective on your subject? Most people are eager to tell their stories.
- As you, underline sentences and passages and pull useful quotes into a note-taking software (we'll talk about this later).
- Throughout this process, capture information about the sources of the quotes (titles, page numbers or web addresses).

**ALLOW  
IDEAS TO  
PERCOLATE  
WHILE  
YOU'RE  
ABSORBED  
IN  
RESEARCH**



**CREATE THE  
RELAXED  
CONDITIONS  
FOR IDEAS TO  
VISIT YOU**





# USE A NOTE-TAKING PROGRAM TO CAPTURE AND WORK ON YOUR IDEAS

To store ideas and connections, I use a note-taking software called Evernote, which I can access on my phone and work and home computers.



# BEGIN THE ACTUAL “WRITING”

- When a note has reached a critical mass, drag your notes into a Word document and build a detailed outline.
- Where does the material wants to go? Try establish a narrative logic.
- Ask yourself:
  - “What’s the story?”
  - “What’s most compelling about your material?”
  - “Who cares?”
- Shuffle sentences around and improvise new ones.



# ARRANGE EVERYTHING AROUND YOUR CENTRAL IDEA

- Develop a one-line statement that represents what the piece is about.
- When you think about your own writing project, consider these questions:
  - Can you sum up your piece in one or two sentences?
  - What's your thesis statement?
  - Can you develop a short synopsis of your idea?

# **KILL YOUR DARLINGS**

- You want to remove what isn't relevant to the core of your project's message.
- Put these killed darlings in an "outtakes" Word document.
- This document has a useful psychological effect. It's a repository of ideas that didn't fit, but it feels like you never really deleted them.

# PUT YOUR WORK ON ICE

- You want to let your project sit for a while.
- Stephen King calls this “the ice box.”
- Start another project.
- Capture new ideas and incorporate them later.



# EDIT WITH A VENGEANCE

- After the project comes out of the ice box, return to it in full editing mode
- Be cruel to your work
- Take out anything that doesn't belong
- Remove anything that's not relevant to your thesis
- Fiddle with every sentence
- “Omit needless words,” as per *Elements of Style*
- Remove clichés

# FIND AN EDITOR

- A good editor will help you
  - Check facts
  - Tighten-up sentences
  - Reveal flaws in logic
  - Help you find your thesis
- A great editor is a coach
  - Pushes you to try again
  - Encourages you to see your work from a broader perspective



# **EMBRACE UNCERTAINTY**







**THANK YOU**

**ANY QUESTIONS?**