

# WALKING: THE WORD FACTORY

Sarah Davies says a walk is never wasted as a writer

Sitting down is one of the curses of modern life. Even before the pandemic many of us spent large amounts of time sitting down as we commuted to our desks, where we sat down for the working day, before sitting down on our journey home to sit down and eat before sitting down to watch TV and unwind from all the sitting down!

How long have you been sitting down today? Do you get twinges of lower back pain? Do you find your eyes straining after long sessions of staring at a computer screen or notebook page? While you are sitting down do you find yourself struggling to think clearly, and do the words drip from your brain to your fingers rather than flowing easily?

In this feature I'm going to suggest that you get up, leave your desk behind and go out for a long walk. You don't need to go anywhere special, just out of your front door and off you go.

Actually, just standing up will make a difference, so yes, there probably is something about those standing desks you might snigger at. It seems that just standing up changes our cognitive and neural functions and makes us better able to perform.

Walking gets blood pumping to our brains because we're on the move and experiencing lots of sensory stimulus, and we're also stretching and building muscle, helping our bodies to repair themselves and helping

the food we've eaten move through our system. Even just a slow potter will make us feel good and more lively.

I like to start most of my working days with a long walk. It energises me and allows me to roll things around in my head.

I very rarely listen to music or podcasts when I'm walking, because I like to be there in the moment to see what strikes me, either about a problem I've been trying to work through, or a bit of a story that's not quite coming out of my head as I would like, or completely new ideas for stories, features or things to explore.

## Generating ideas

Sitting at a desk staring at a computer screen or notebook focuses our mind on that one task: putting words on paper. We might be quiet, or have music playing, or hear our family in the rest of the house, but our brain is essentially given over to the task we have set ourselves – to write.

If we're lucky, we get into that flow state where the words come easily and whizz from our brains, through or fingers or pens on to the screen or paper, but all too often that just doesn't happen and we sit, staring at the white space, hoping that inspiration will appear.

Going for a walk on your own might strike you as potentially a waste of precious time when you could be writing. You may even be in a situation where carving a bit

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of time for yourself away from other work, family and home commitments is challenging. I'm lucky that I can go for a walk every day and have built time into my schedule to do it.

When we walk our minds are able to wander. We know we're putting one foot in front of the other and, if we choose a sensible pace, we know that we don't have to pay too much attention to getting along. So our minds float around looking for something to do.

In this more relaxed state, our minds can choose to focus or wander or flit between the two, allowing it to make weird and wonderful connections between past and present, experience and new ideas.

## Going over old ground

Familiar routes don't require us to pay much attention, until we come to road crossings or we have to negotiate around other pedestrians. How many times have you reached a destination and thought: 'How did I get here?'

Your mind can focus on a particularly knotty problem you might have encountered in your writing and work through a range of scenarios



that might solve it. Or it could relax enough to let some real blue-sky thinking go on. You could come up with several new story or poetry ideas.

It's entirely possible that whole pieces of work could come to you as you're apparently thinking about nothing at all.

### **Pastures new**

New routes are great if you want to be inspired by your environment, and this can be urban or country.

Consciously looking at the architecture, the street furniture, the landscape design can offer ideas. Using all your senses to think about the sounds, smells, textures, tastes of an area might suggest characters or scenes that would otherwise not come to you.

Walking a countryside route can add extra challenges like having to scramble up rocks or navigate slippery paths, but it will give you a sense of how characters will navigate the landscape and how the elements might change the scene and their mindset.

### **Ways to make notes**

Wordsworth famously wrote his poem 'Tintern Abbey' in his head on a week-long ramble and didn't write it down until he reached Bristol. My partner, on the other hand, runs upstairs after returning from his daily walk, switches on the computer and quickly dumps all his thoughts into a document that he can then cut and paste into the various project folders that he has.

I would not be able to do that. I am a voracious note-taker, I have a selection of A6 and A5 notebooks in bags and dotted around my workspace and next to my bed to capture dreams, thoughts and bits from books that I believe may one day come in useful.

When I'm walking, though, I don't want to stop and scribble notes. That would spoil the rhythm of the walk and the way my mind is operating. So I use the recording app on my

smartphone. I turn on the app and then walk along pretending to be on a phone call. No one gives me a second glance. I would feel a bit more exposed if I was using a dictaphone, but the important thing is I can get my thoughts and ideas down quickly without losing their flow or having to stop moving.

I do try to record ideas for separate projects into separate sound folders, but if my brain is in a particularly 'flitty' mood I would much rather get all the thoughts into one file and collate them once I've transcribed the sound files when I get home.

### **Take pictures**

I also use my smartphone to take photographs on my walks. Some of these I use to illustrate blog posts, some are because I see inspirational scenes or buildings that I feel I might like to use in a project someday.

I also take photographs of information boards in museums and galleries if I want to follow up on ideas or thoughts later.

### **How to use your notes**

I always transcribe the notes from my walks as soon as I am able to, ideally as soon as I get back home. If I leave it too long, there is a danger I'll forget some of the detail – and by acting quickly there's the added bonus that I may be able to capture thoughts that I didn't vocalise on the walk and ideas that spring from the recording and my memory of the walk itself.

I'm not saying that every recorded thought and picture is used, but a great deal of the material I collect does find its way into my writing.

I hope I've inspired you to look at your schedule and make walking part of your writing practice. Giving your mind the chance to wander is a great way to fill your cup of inspiration.

Use your legs to put more words on the page!

