

Zoe Chace

*This American Life, NPR, Planet Money*

1. Is there a part of the creative process that you are most likely to get stuck in -- reporting, structuring, writing, editing... how so?

Finding a good story is really hard. Structure is not that hard because you have to work with someone else. Writing is almost impossible. I think finding the story is the hardest part. You need to find an interesting situation. An actual plot. And then the right person? Like it's really hard to find those things -- to make it worth your time to make something, when all the other parts are also hard as fuck.

2. What is one strategy you have devised to pull yourself loose when you're spinning your wheels in particular part of your process?

Ummm.... call someone. Talk to people about the story. Talk to particular, smart people, not like, any asshole. Just never sit alone in your office. I never go through any part of the process alone, except actually doing the interviews (after scripting them out with someone else) and the writing, which is its own nightmare. In order to write I have to blast some kind of music, which is dumb, cause I have to keep pausing it to hear the tape.

3. If you've got it... one anecdote of a story/piece/show that had you on the ropes -- and how you got out of that jam.

I have several examples of this from every single story I've ever done. I don't have a good narrative of it, exactly. When I'm lost, which is almost every time, I write long emails to my editor and colleagues about what's happening in the story. I have other colleagues who I just call and cry to - that's what I did with Robyn Semien a lot this past year, it used to be Sonari, but he's gotten less sympathetic. I have long talks with Nancy. I mean, I don't think there is a magic bullet. you have to talk about it and cry about it, and then you have to pull the tape and then you have to play the tape for someone and then they have to tell you if they think it'll work or not. That's been true for me ever since WATC. Plan, report, cry, pull tape, play tape, write, cry, edit.

4. Any advice you have for people about keeping things moving. It doesn't have to be fancy... like I think the most meaningful advice I've received on this front is Ira frequently saying, "I think you're at a point where you have to just start making some choices and see how it goes." So simple, almost to the point it feels obvious. But I've so internalized the significance of recognizing that moment and how to operate when I'm there.

Ask for help. Just call someone or walk over to another office and talk it out.

Robyn Semien  
*This American Life*

1. Is there a part of the creative process that you are most likely to get stuck in -- reporting, structuring, writing, editing... how so?

Writing. I do it the least so I'm totally humiliated by how much I can wring my hands over a line or a paragraph. I'm even embarrassed admitting that because I hate thinking about how precious it all feels. I'd like it if writing were more physical like taking a bat to a plate glass window, but so far as I can tell it just isn't.

2. What is one strategy you have devised to pull yourself loose when you're spinning your wheels in particular part of your process?

So I'm much better at writing structures than I used to be, and solve a lot of story problems chewing on a structure. So it sucks so bad when I'm trying to get to a draft and get hung up on the writing. Like what happened to all the effort I sunk into the structure?!

Here's a little trick: I write my structures in all caps. It looks ridiculous, like I'm a shouty, ranting person. But it's handy because I can glance at the document and see what's waiting to be written and what's been scripted already just by seeing the sections that are still in all caps and the one's that aren't. So (friend and coworker fellow TAL person) Brian Reed mentioned to me that sometimes he'll notice that his structure ends up being pretty close to the language he'll use in a radio script. Sometimes. And ever since he mentioned that I kind of let myself off the hook if I'm stuck getting to a draft, and just switch the all caps to lowercase, and read it and see if the structure language is good enough.

Point being-- I think I can sometimes go about something the extra hard way without meaning or wanting to. So that little trick, changing the caps to lowercase, is sometimes the bit of relief I need to move forward.

3. If you've got it... one anecdote of a story/piece/show that had you on the ropes -- and how you got out of that jam.

I mean this sincerely: I can see no pattern of getting a story done and all of them rope-a-dope me. At least once. Often many times. I would kill to be one of those people with some expert story of how I skillfully can manage my way through any jam. But time after time I just get stuck, stress, lose sleep, tell some people about it, there's generally a cry in there somewhere (so embarrassing and so true). The last really hard thing I worked on was over the summer and at one point, exhausted and greying over some changes I had to make to a story, I got shitfaced and the changes seemed to make themselves. I want to clarify-- it wasn't my strategy to get shitfaced and work, I just accidentally drank a lot in a short period of time. Over dinner. Stressing out. And then realized I had to work, shitfaced or not. I'm not saying it was great work, I'm just saying.

4. Any advice you have for people about keeping things moving. It doesn't have to be fancy... like I think one of the most meaningful pieces experience I've received on this front is Ira frequently saying, "I think you're at a point where you have to just start making some choices and see how it goes." So simple, almost to be point of being silly. But I've so internalized the significance of recognizing those moments and paying attention to how to operate when I'm at such a point.

I guess. Again, this is about the importance of structure. I cling to the beginning or the mission of the piece like crazy. I find I'll work the most on the beginning with a thought about the end, right from the jump. Not just what's the tape, but what's the point. AND what's the tape. Sometimes the first piece of tape will help me find the mission, or the other way around. And then I'll just try to imagine some ending that I think might seem like a nice combination with the beginning. Like picking out a nice outfit. Does the end go with the beginning in some way I'm psyched about? I never totally write the end, but I'll structure the beginning a zillion times, fine tuning the mission of the piece. Again, it's not about the writing being perfect but the idea for the writing at the beginning being something that I'm truly excited about. That's a key thing for me. I cling to that. I think if you know whether to turn left or right when you leave your house, and you have some sense of the destination in mind, you can take a couple different routes to get there and be in pretty good shape.

Jonathan Goldstein  
*Heavyweight, Wiretap, This American Life*

1. Is there a part of the creative process that you are most likely to get stuck in -- reporting, structuring, writing, editing... how so?

Structure stuff, when you get it right, feels like locking in pieces of puzzle. It's satisfying and you can feel when it's working or not. But I'll write and rewrite up until the last minute. There's always a feeling that you can make it better. I'll also obsessively re-track even though it's all so minute. There's this feeling that I can somehow convey something nuanced and tip the scales towards a better piece of work with the right spin on a word. It can easily slide into magical thinking. Plus, to everyone else I just sound like the same old monotone Goldstein anyway.

2. What is one strategy you have devised to pull yourself loose when you're spinning your wheels in particular part of your process?

Pushing through. Faith in the process. Setting deadlines for edits with people whose time you don't want to waste. So I guess there's an element of fear. Of wanting to impress. All those base emotions.

3. If you've got it... one anecdote of a story/piece/show that had you on the ropes -- and how you got out of that jam.

A lot of times it's actually a matter of returning to the simple premise that drew you in initially, the thing you pitched to the editor you respect that made her go, 'that sounds amazing!' You can lose sight of that in all the redrafting and mission creep. It's so important in the end to return to the simplicity of the beginning to guide you.

4. Any advice you have for people about keeping things moving. It doesn't have to be fancy... like I think the most meaningful advice I've received on this front is Ira frequently saying, "I think you're at a point where you have to just start making some choices and see how it goes." So simple, almost to the point it feels obvious. But I've so internalized the significance of recognizing that moment and how to operate when I'm there.

Keep looking for that moment where you can read something aloud and it makes you feel satisfied without doubt or trepidation. And that's your true voice. Sometimes you hit it on the first try and sometimes it's the 100th. And neither is the rule. It's just about how it feels coming out of your mouth. And it can sometimes come as a gift, from someone else, and hopefully you'll be smart enough and secure enough to know it's right and accept it. I used to notice that, speaking of Ira, some of the best writers were the most receptive of his edits. Because they knew how good he is.

Chana Joffe-Walt

*This American Life*, NPR, *Planet Money*

I love the reporting and structuring, and always get the stuck in writing. I think the only reason I ever write anything is because I make radio, so writing can actually mostly be about structuring tape. I go through all the tape, pull what I want, put it in an order I want, then rearrange the order, then read the internet, then transcribe the tape cuts, then read the internet, fix spelling errors, then look at my notes. Once I can't do that any longer, it's usually not as hard to write, because I'm just getting from one place to another.

I guess the one other place I get stuck often is figuring out what the piece is about. When I don't know what the piece is about I get very scared of writing and don't get anything done. My go to is just....panicking. And talking! I talk to Lincoln and friends and grill them for what they find interesting in what I'm saying. And ask a million times "is that even interesting?" and "WHY?" A lot of the time that helps, if not immediately it gives me something to turn over for a bit.

Me

1. Is there a part of the creative process that you are most likely to get stuck in -- reporting, structuring, writing, editing... how so?

Structuring. I have to be super diligent and self-conscious of what structural decisions I'm making and when. I can spend forever resequencing tape without actually trying to execute transitions and turns between them, and positioning signposting and ideas around them.

2. What is one strategy you have devised to pull yourself loose when you're spinning your wheels in particular part of your process?

Elevate yourself above the story... so that you are working in its most abbreviated beats... but close enough that you're actually describing what happens. "Jack wakes up, realizes that he's left the box at the place. But he knows he can't go back. Panics for a while. No one else knows... but he realizes he has to call Jimmy and explain." Also: elevate yourself above the structure... start with a clean slate, and first put down the absolutely essential pieces in place. The place the stuff that you really really want. Then place the stuff that's you really want. Etc.

3. If you've got it... one anecdote of a story/piece/show that had you on the ropes -- and how you got out of that jam.

I did a story about Chasidim who had won a majority on a school board for a public school district they did not use -- but that they were somewhat at odds with because of property taxes they paid anyway. I did not have a main character, and struggled to elevate one. But eventually, I had to come to the realization that I was going to have to draft the whole thing with kind of "composite characters" -- Side A and Side B. I was very unsure it would work, but knew I had to actually build a lot of the story to find out.

4. Any advice you have for people about keeping things moving. It doesn't have to be fancy... like I think the most meaningful advice I've received on this front is Ira frequently saying, "I think you're at a point where you have to just start making some choices and see how it goes." So simple, almost to the point it feels obvious. But I've so internalized the significance of recognizing that moment and how to operate when I'm there.

That would be one -- realize when you can't answer things in the hypothetical. But you have to cut things, move things, and build things to see how they work. Zoom out, so the beats get as abbreviated as possible to view your structure. Always be structuring -- structure hypothetically as soon as you know you have an idea or story you think will work. Make it work as much as possible. Look back to that version when you're lost. Often that will remind you of what was making the thing tick... it will also show you where things are different than you thought they'd be, so you have to evolve your thinking. It will show you that in specific ways.

Call people. Call them for advice, and feedback. Call them for moral support. Maybe try to know if you're calling for one or the other... or for both... it'll help them give you what you need.