

Story Tethers and Developmental Daydreams: Staying Connected to Our Stories

By Jenai May

Writing breaks happen. They may consume extended periods of our time due to illness, major life changes, increased workloads with our day jobs, or seasonal depression. An out-of-town holiday or houseguests might force a brief writing break. Even routine daily errands and housework can be challenging interruptions to recover from.

Due to major life upheavals, health challenges, and work distractions, I've had to tackle three full rewrites on my current project, and it's taken me several years to write it. With each rewrite, I struggled to bounce back and resume writing, and the associated discouragement I experienced really restricted my creative flow.

About 6 years ago, I grew tired of reconnecting to my story the hard way. That's when I developed a system to proactively forge and maintain permanent connections to my stories and the characters living within them. I call these connections Story Tethers. These tethers keep my fictional worlds alive and vivid in my mind, even when I'm not writing.

Before we begin, please remember to be kind to yourself. I urge you to resist transforming Story Tethers into guilt feeders. That's not their purpose or intent. Your muse isn't interested in shaming you either. It's important to remember that some pauses are a crucial part of the creative flow. They are necessary! So, turn those inner voices that moan "Ugh, I should be writing" into ones that cheer "Yay! I'm making progress!" Because thinking about our stories is writing — it's just a different form that some writers call "soft writing."

The primary purpose of Story Tethers is to trigger what I call Developmental Daydreams — moments where your mind drifts and explores your story's world, even when you're not writing at your desk. Developmental Daydreams are a form of soft writing. By regularly triggering them, you're still developing your story, even when you are on a long writing break.

Forging Your First Tethers

We're going to employ brain science via sensory cues and rituals to forge lasting connections between you, your characters, and your stories.

Tether #1: The Mood Shifting Tether in a Cup

This tether leverages your sense of taste and smell, which are closely tied to memory. It uses a simple daily routine to shift your mind into a creative, productive state. As such, this activity is more than a Tether Forger; it's also a Mood Shifter.

1. **Choose a beverage.** Pick a distinctive tea or coffee flavor—preferably hot, because the fragrance carries better. This needs to be a flavor you don't associate with anything else. If you'd rather choose something cold, just make sure you can smell it.
2. **Breathe and reflect.** Settle your body, relax your shoulders and jaw, and take three slow, deep breaths. Close your eyes and think about your story's characters, settings, and favorite moments — scenes that you've enjoyed writing so far and look forward to writing next.
3. **Engage your senses.** Pick up your beverage and breathe in its fragrance. Take a sip, allowing the scent and flavor to intermingle with the images in your mind.
4. **Connect.** Allow one character to shine brightest in your thoughts. Take another sip, keeping that character at the forefront of your mind.
5. **Write.** For the next five minutes or so, free-write about your story or your relationship with writing, pausing part-way through. You can describe a character, jot down story goals, or write a scene that might not even appear in your novel. This writing session is for you, not for the book.
6. **Pause.** After a couple minutes, pause writing, breathe in the fragrance of your beverage, take a long sip, and resume writing.
7. **Reflect.** As you finish, take another sip of your beverage, then you may finish sipping it freely.

The connection you just forged is a powerful Mood Shifter, which you can utilize whenever you need to shift into a creative state. Just be sure to use a

different beverage if you're not working on the same project. To reinforce the connection, repeat this ritual for about a week.

Gathering a Team of Tethers

The more senses you engage, the stronger your connection. Try to forge tethers with as many senses as possible.

2: The Scent Tether

Our olfactory centers are closely tied to memories. Scent, either worn on your body or diffused through a room, can be assigned to your stories and writing to help trigger Developmental Daydreams. I recommend assigning a fragrance to creativity in general, as well as to story-specific elements. Scent Story Tethers can also double as Mood Shifters.

For my character Mytta, I assigned the fragrance of almond soap. Now, whenever I smell almonds, I'm prompted to wonder: *When was the last time Mytta bathed? What mood was she in? Does she have any water-related fears or traumas? Are her baths cool or hot? Long or short? Does she only shower?*

3. The Flavor Tether

Closely related to scent, is flavor. Assign your characters favorite foods, drinks, and snacks. When you see or taste these foods, you'll be reminded of your characters. Be sure to choose things you can easily find or prepare, or else you'll rarely encounter these tethers! My character Mytta craves honey-roasted peanuts when she's stressed. When I snack on them, my Developmental Daydreams are triggered, and I may wonder: *What might have upset Mytta and stressed her to the point of grabbing her comfort snack? How many peanuts does she eat when she's anxious? Does she always keep some on hand?*

4. The Color Tether

Assign a character's favorite color. Ensure it isn't a color you already strongly associate with someone else. For instance, if your partner's favorite color is green, and so is your character's, you might only think about your partner when you see green. My character's favorite color is orange, so whenever I see it, I wonder: *Does Mytta wear orange clothing, or does she prefer orange on*

trinkets, furniture, and walls? Has orange always been her favorite? Do all her friends and family gift her orange things?

5. Animal Tethers

Assign a character's favorite wild animal, a pet they always wanted, or a creature that terrifies them. I'm fine with rats, but my character Mytta cannot stand them. So when I see a rat, I wonder: *What is the origin story of her phobia? Has her fear worsened over the years? Should she encounter rats in this story? When and where?*

6. Musical Tethers

Music is another Story Tether that can double as a Mood Shifter. Assign favorite and least favorite music to your characters and create playlists. You may also create playlists dedicated to the writing process itself.

7. The Scribbled Tether

Pull out a piece of paper and a pen or pencil. Draw something meaningful or representative of a character or a setting from your story. Examples may include your character's coffee mug, purse, nightstand, eyeglasses, a shoe, favorite chair, a pendant, or even the view out their front window.

Don't let perfectionism tangle itself in this tether — this drawing doesn't need to be good — so give yourself no longer than five minutes to doodle. Once you're done, fold up the sketch and tuck it in your pocket or purse to look at when you're stuck in traffic or waiting for an appointment.

8. Other Tethers: Hobbies, Collections, and Passions

Hobbies, collections, travel locations, art, and entertainment can all be assigned to characters. Are they obsessed with tennis? Do they love a movie you can't stand? You might even watch that horrible movie, then ask yourself why your character likes it so much.

Hoarding the Details

Recording ideas churned up by these tethers is going to be your biggest challenge. Keep a small notebook with you or make a habit of taking notes on your phone. You'll feel compelled to record everything but try not to fret over

the information that you forget. Many of the details revealed to you through Developmental Daydreams won't be pertinent to your actual story. Interacting with these tethers is the crucial part because they keep you emotionally and mentally invested in your stories while you're on a break from putting words down on paper.

A Ritual for Writing Time

When you're ready to actively write, you can tie some of these tethers together into a simple daily ritual that nourishes the connections you've just forged.

The ritual I recommend is ideal prior to sitting down to write because it uses similar methods recommended to people who work from home and struggle to shift in and out of a working state of mind.

First, put on a special writing uniform. This could be a dedicated hat, a pair of socks, a warm hoodie, or a flannel shirt that you only wear when you write. This act requires mindful attention as you put it on, training your mind to recognize that it's time to write.

Second, engage your senses in a consistent order. If you want to apply your character's cologne or diffuse an essential oil, do that just after changing into your writing uniform.

Then prepare the special beverage connected to your story or general writing.

Lastly, weave in at least two more Story Tethers. You might play the music playlist that you created for your character and light a colored candle. Then sit down, sip your special beverage, and begin writing.

Do this consistently for at least a week (it's okay to skip a day), and you will have trained your mind to recognize these patterns and begin easily shifting into a productively creative state of mind.