

The Right Food for Writers, and Writer's Block!

By Chellesie B. Dancer

Since I've studied the relation between food and the body for almost 20 years, I thought I'd share some insights. Although writer's block can be a combination of stress, exhaustion, and story issues, I know that food has a lot to do with mood!

I think the biggest flaw in our 'enlightened' American approach is thinking of our body as merely a **container**, and measuring exactly how much we put in, like grams of fat or vitamins, as if it just stays there. Instead, we are an amazing **system**, a smart, complicated machine.

Counting grams, or calories, can be a useful starting point—I read nutritional value labels all the time—but what the body can utilize is entirely different. For instance, 10 grams of a 'good' fat can be used by joints and sensory organs¹, while 10 grams of a 'bad' fat may be eliminated, or more often stored, usually on women's hips, waist, thighs, etc. Then you'll **crave more fat** since the body couldn't use the other! Why can't the body use these fats? Some, like hydrogenated oils, have hydrogen added to the molecules to improve their texture, making them foreign to our bodies. Although butter is not as ideal as flaxseed, or many vegetable and fish oils, it's still more useful than hydrogenated margarine. Animal fats are no longer as healthy as fish oils because humans modified the diet of domesticated animals a century ago, for our convenience, much to the detriment of both. The bottom line is that healthy oils help maintain healthy body weight², and are critical to the optimal functioning of the brain¹.

Most people know that different types of food can be acidic or alkaline. They also have many other properties. Some can be warming, like cinnamon, or cooling, like mint.

The critical factor for us writers can be called expansive and contractive. This loosely translates to the Yin and Yang of eastern medicine: Yin = cool and expansive; Yang = warm and contractive. Food that is expansive in energy, like fruits, sweets, coffee and tea, tends to support activity and artistic expression, but in excess can make you feel spacey, confused, or unable to concentrate. Food that is contractive, like fish, meat, and especially eggs and salty dishes, will help keep you grounded and improve concentration, but in excess can leave you passive, rigid, and stuck. (The same principle works for headaches. No matter what the cause—alcohol, stress, or medical problem—the blood vessels in the brain become too expanded, or too contracted, causing pain.)

So if you just stuck in your writing and can't get moving, try fruit or a light salad. But if your writer's block is because you're all over the place and can't focus, try protein food, even beans and whole grains.

I'd also recommend against eating much canned goods when you're writing. Mix in something fresh, like vegetables. On a subtle level, it seems that food that still has the essence of life in it gives us some of that quality.

It's all about balance, and everyone is different. So, while there's no one magic substance (okay, sometimes chocolate), if you make the effort to listen to your body, you can discover the best food for every mood, to keep your writing focused and productive!

1. Journal of Nutrition, Health & Aging. 2004;8(3):163-74.

2. International Journal of Obesity, August 1997, Volume 21, Number 8, Pages 637-643