

# Writing & Ruminatation

Chris Aiken, MD, Editor in Chief, *The Carlat Psychiatry Report*

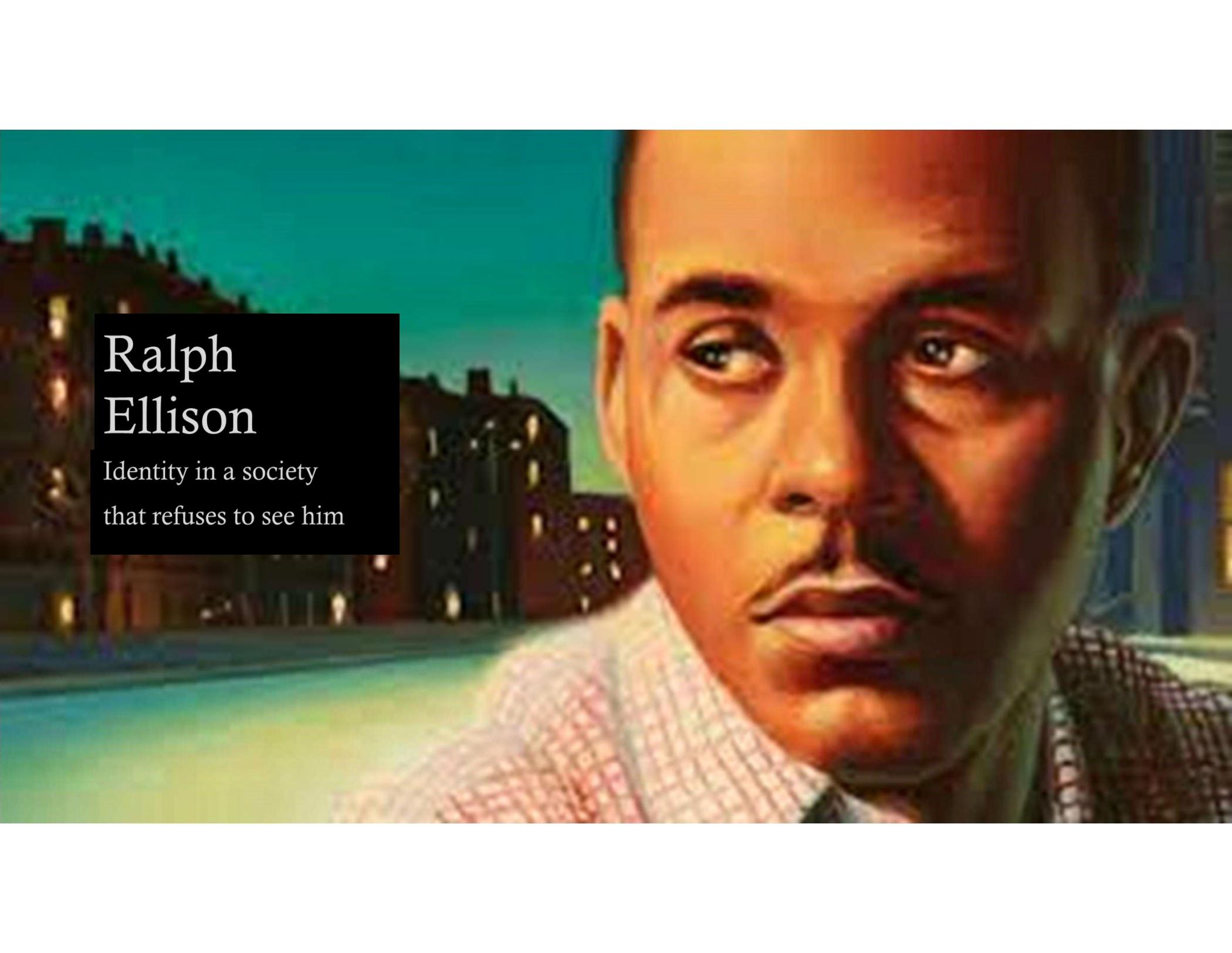
Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, *NYU School of Medicine*



# Fyodor Dostoevsky

Faith and doubt

Ideals and desires



# Ralph Ellison

Identity in a society  
that refuses to see him

Stephen Spielberg's  
**Scary Whispers**



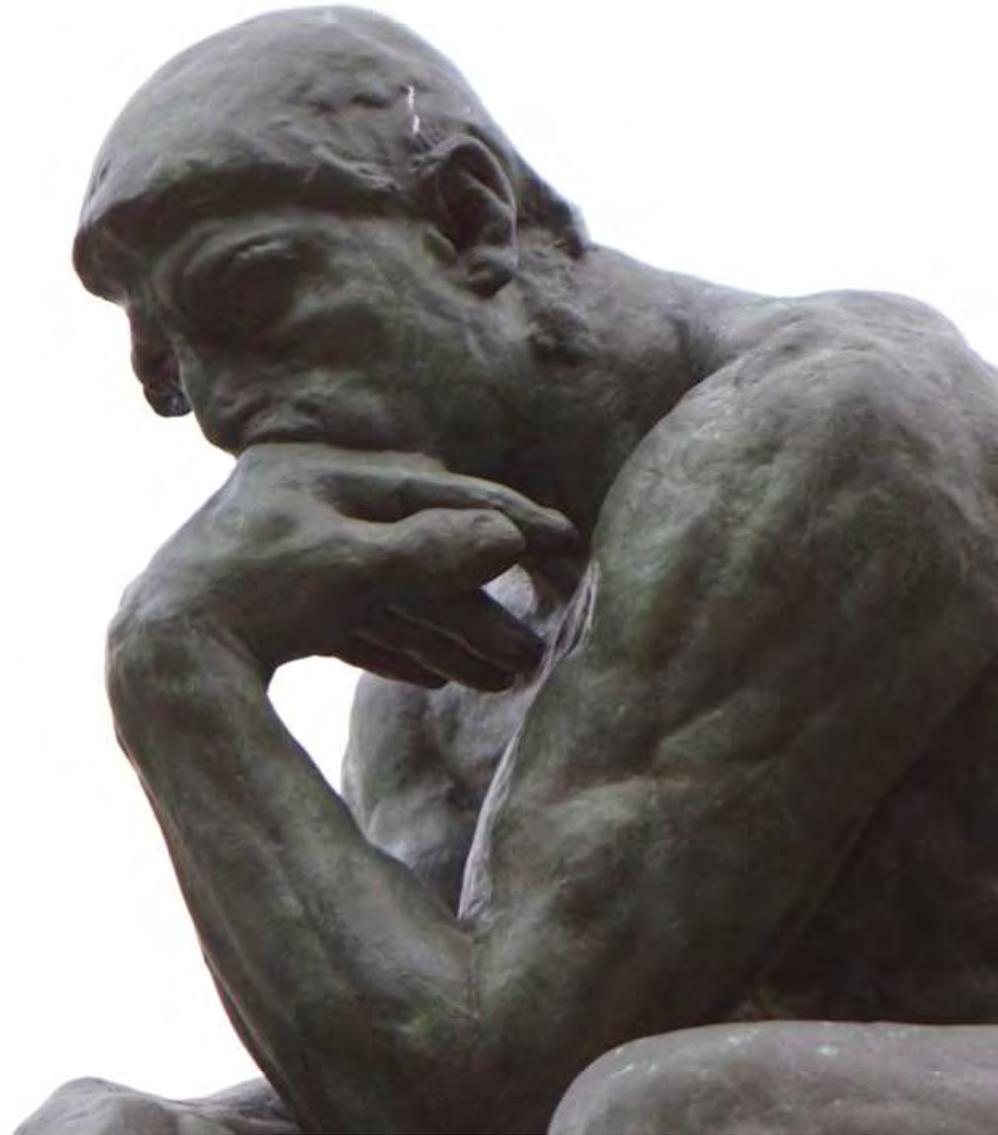


# Rumination

Problem-solving gone awry

Focuses on the self, or the causes, consequences, and meaning of a problem

Deals in abstractions and unanswerable, existential questions





Rumination-Focused  
Cognitive-Behavioral  
Therapy  
*for* DEPRESSION



RF-CBT

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WARD R. WATKINS

**Thoughts**

**The self:** mental and physical symptoms

**The past:** upsetting events, unresolved conflicts

**The future:** catastrophizing, worry

**Social:** other people's intentions

**Situations**

Early in the morning

Late at night

When alone, tired, bored, or unoccupied

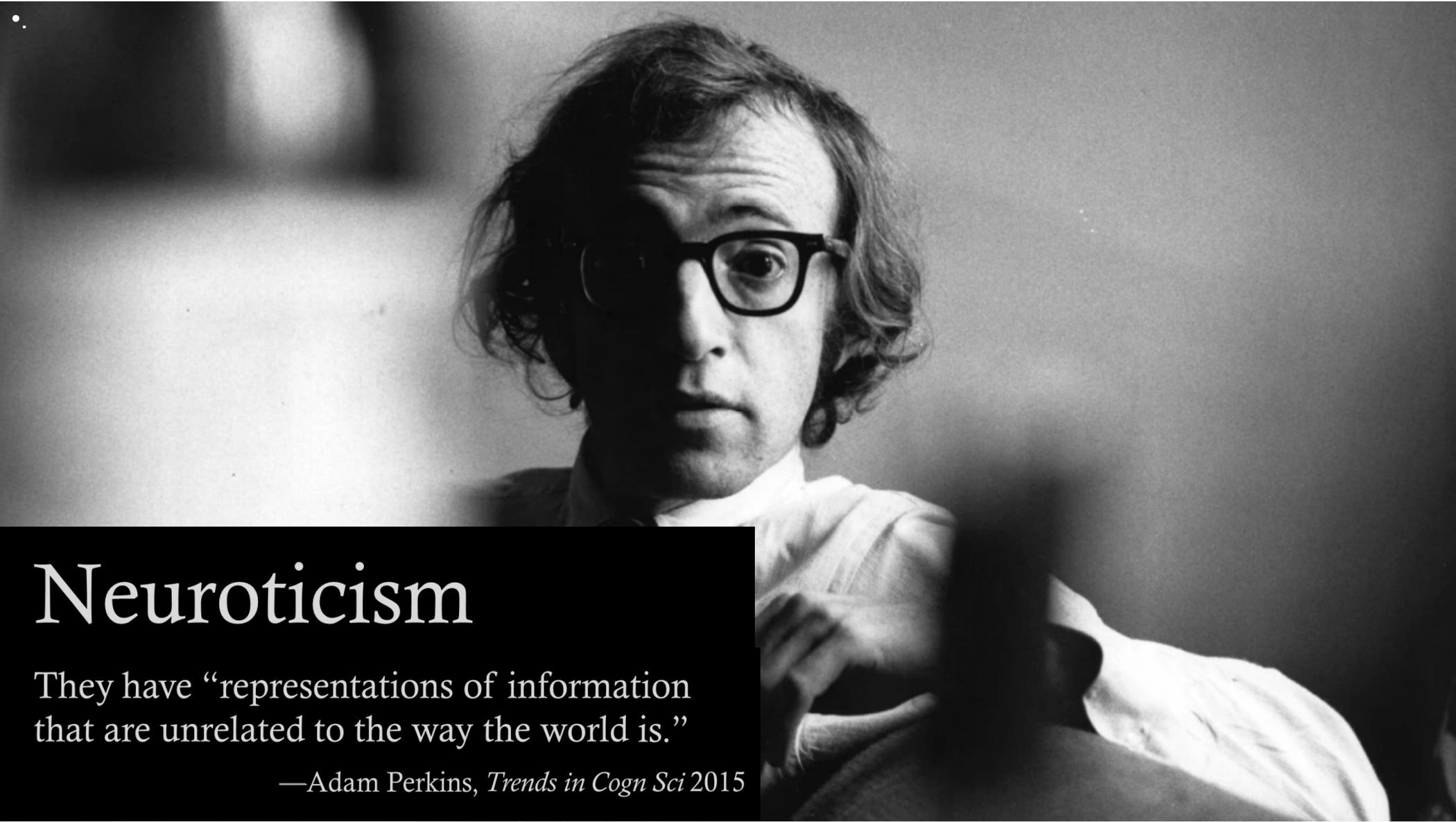
Pain, tension, or physical symptoms

Feeling pressured or disorganized

Withdrawing when upset (often to the bedroom)



A gap that won't close



# Neuroticism

They have “representations of information that are unrelated to the way the world is.”

—Adam Perkins, *Trends in Cogn Sci* 2015

[www.sitecenter.dk/dealeyplaza](http://www.sitecenter.dk/dealeyplaza)





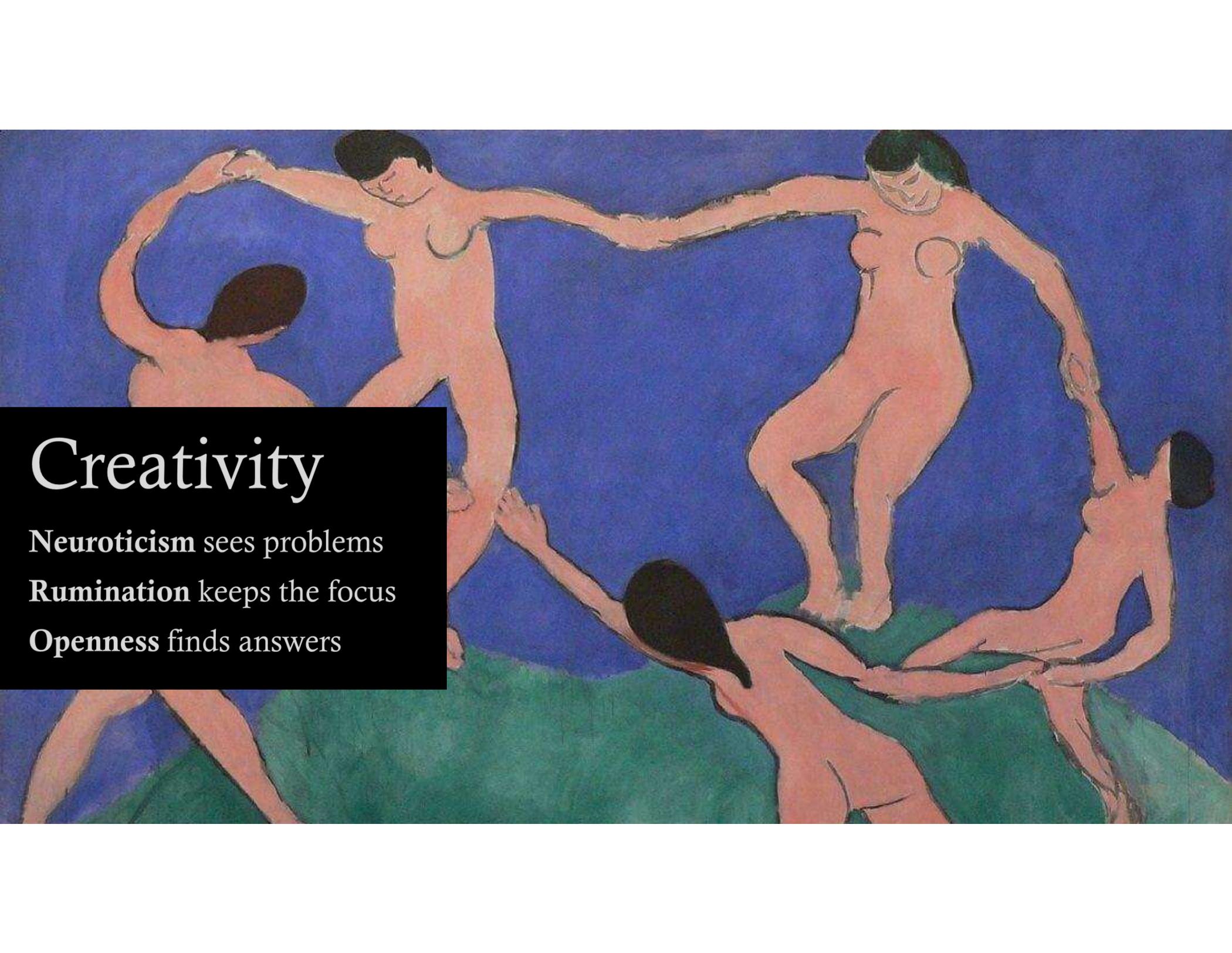
# Openness

Intellectually curious

Open to emotion

Sensitive to beauty

Willing to try new things

The background of the slide is a reproduction of Vincent van Gogh's painting 'Olympia'. It depicts five nude figures in a circle on a green hill against a blue sky. The figures are rendered in a style characteristic of Van Gogh, with visible brushstrokes and a vibrant color palette. The figures are holding hands, suggesting a sense of unity or a shared activity. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

# Creativity

**Neuroticism** sees problems

**Rumination** keeps the focus

**Openness** finds answers



# Adaptive Rumination

Functional

Leads to a plan or action

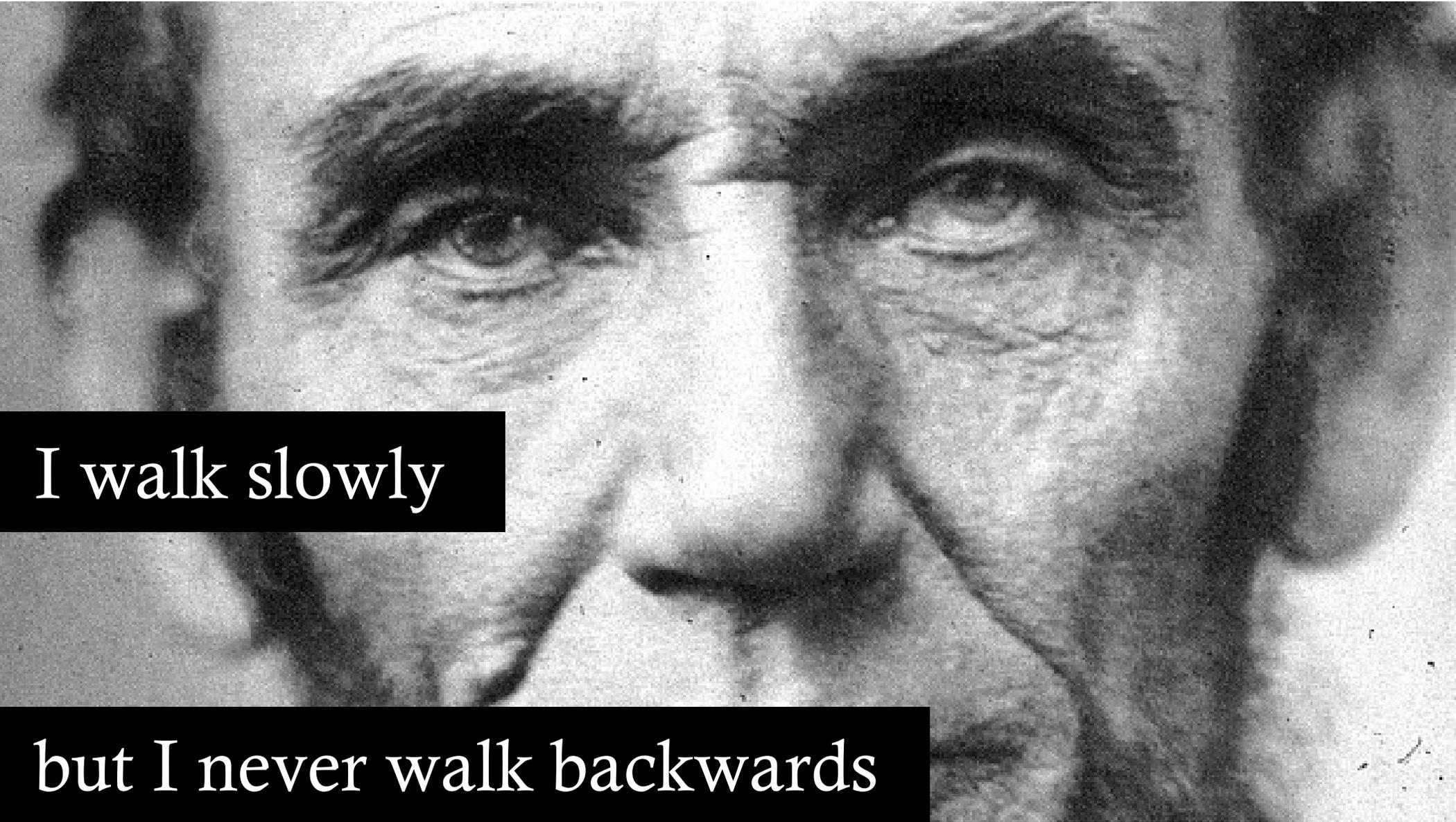
# Adaptive rumination linked to well-being

Ranking of psychological adjustment in 1,671 college students

1. Adaptive ruminators
2. Non-ruminators
3. Maladaptive ruminators

Yang H et al, *Current Psychology*  
2020 39(2), 483-499





I walk slowly

but I never walk backwards

# Adaptive rumination linked to creativity

Rumination explained the link between depression and creativity

Dysfunctional rumination linked to depression, while self-reflective problem solving linked to creativity

(two studies of college students)

Verhaeghen L et al, *Emotion*, 2005, 5:226-232  
Verhaeghen L et al, *Psych of Aesth, Creat, Arts*  
2014 8;2:211-218





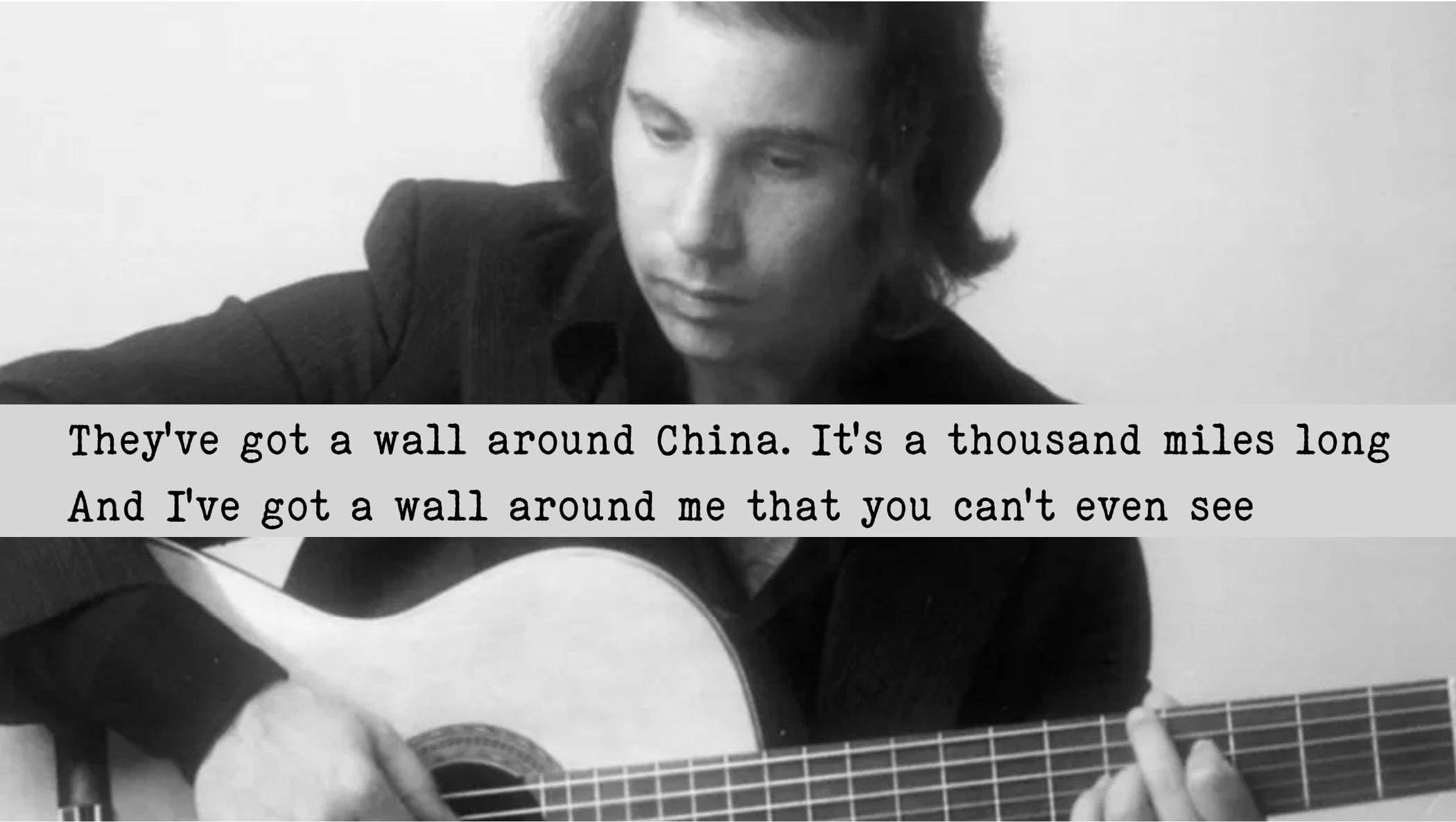
# Adaptive Rumination

Concrete, specific, sensory details

*Who, what, where, and when*

Answerable questions

*“How?” rather than “Why?”*



They've got a wall around China. It's a thousand miles long  
And I've got a wall around me that you can't even see

# Immersion in Memory

Recall a painful memory in  
full sensory detail

Allow yourself to be moved  
by it

Let go of the desire to  
change or avoid it



RF-CBT

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# Mindfulness

Awareness of what is, at the level of direct and immediate experience, separate from concepts, category, and expectation.

— *Dimidjian and Linehan*



RF-CBT

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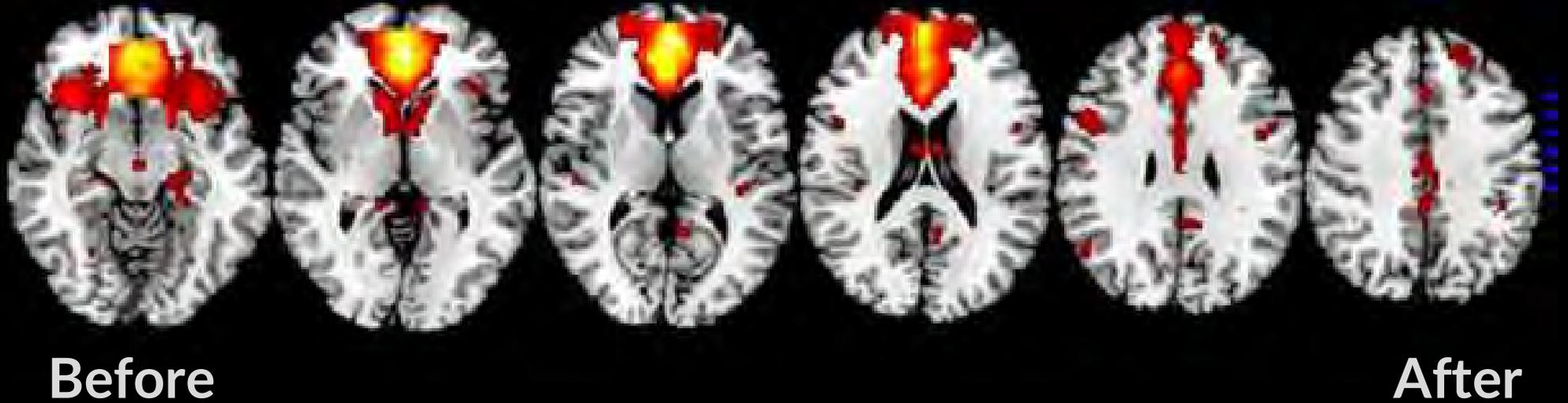


# Absorption

RF-CBT

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# Behavioral Activation Quiets the Default Mode Network



RCT of 5 session of BA in 40 adolescents, Yokoyama et al, 2018



Writing Well

# The Null Hypothesis

NOBODY WANTS TO  
READ YOUR  
**SH\*T**

AND OTHER TOUGH-LOVE TRUTHS TO MAKE YOU A BETTER WRITER



**STEVEN PRESSFIELD**

Bestselling Author of *The War of Art* and *Turning Pro*

ROY PETER CLARK

AUTHOR OF *WRITING TOOLS*

HOW  
TO WRITE  
SHORT



A yellow highlighter with a green cap is positioned diagonally across the word 'WRITE' in the title. The highlighter is lying on its side, with the green cap pointing towards the top left. The word 'SHORT' is underlined with a simple black line.

WORD CRAFT FOR FAST TIMES

"It both instructs and delights, in equal measure."

—BEN YAGODA, author of *How to Not Write Bad*

Can any words be cut without losing the meaning?

Don't be overly thorough.

Allow your reader to figure some things out on their own. They'll enjoy the discovery.

# What to Cut

**Adverbs** especially those that reinforce rather than modify the meaning of the verb, as in “deeply rooted,” “curiously inquisitive.”

**X-ing words.** “keep the pacing and rhythm” becomes “keep the pace and rhythm”

**Strings of prepositional phrases,** “On account of, In reference to, Because of”

**Intensifiers** “very, quite, really”

**Qualifiers** “sort of, seems, mostly, appears, actually, generally, could, possibly, is considered” or can as in “Short sentences can break up the text.”

**Technical jargon** ten dollar words, Latinesque words, and literary flourishes that don’t add to the meaning

**Redundant** words that repeat the meaning of or are implied by other words, e.g. “terrible tragedy”

**Self-evident** statements like “*In my opinion,* insurers should not require prior authorization.”

**Phrases** that can be replaced with a single word: “In the event that...” becomes “If”

**Negatives** that can be changed to single words: “not include” becomes “omit”

“Jesus wept.”

John 11:35

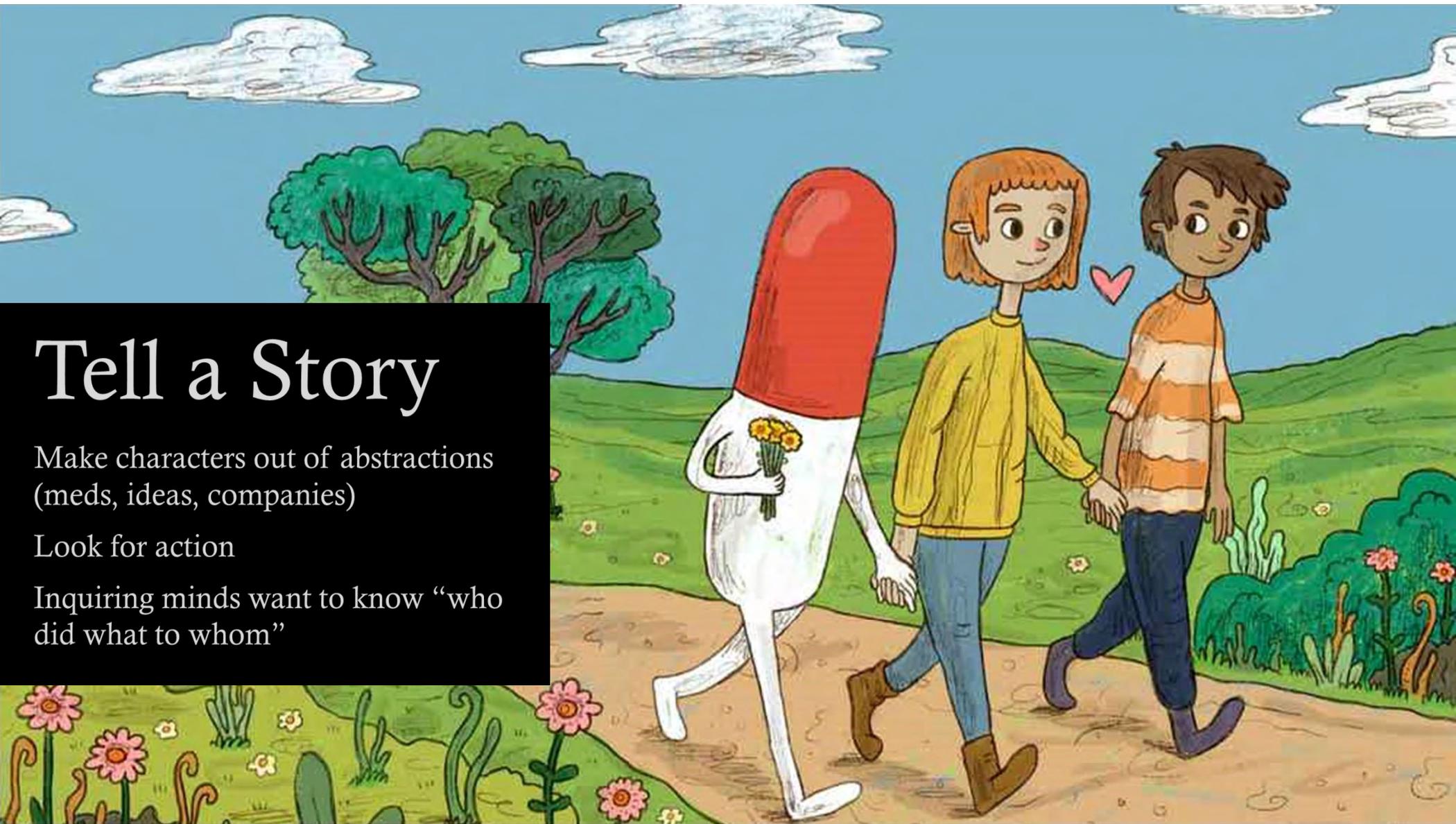


# Tell a Story

Make characters out of abstractions  
(meds, ideas, companies)

Look for action

Inquiring minds want to know “who  
did what to whom”



# Active Voice

The subject is performing the action

## PASSIVE VOICE

Large chunks of asbestos-laden material will be removed from the hallways on the second and third floors by asbestos abatement teams.

receiver of action

action

doer of action

## ACTIVE VOICE

Asbestos abatement teams will remove large chunks of asbestos-laden material from the hallways on the second and third floors.

doer of action

action

receiver of action

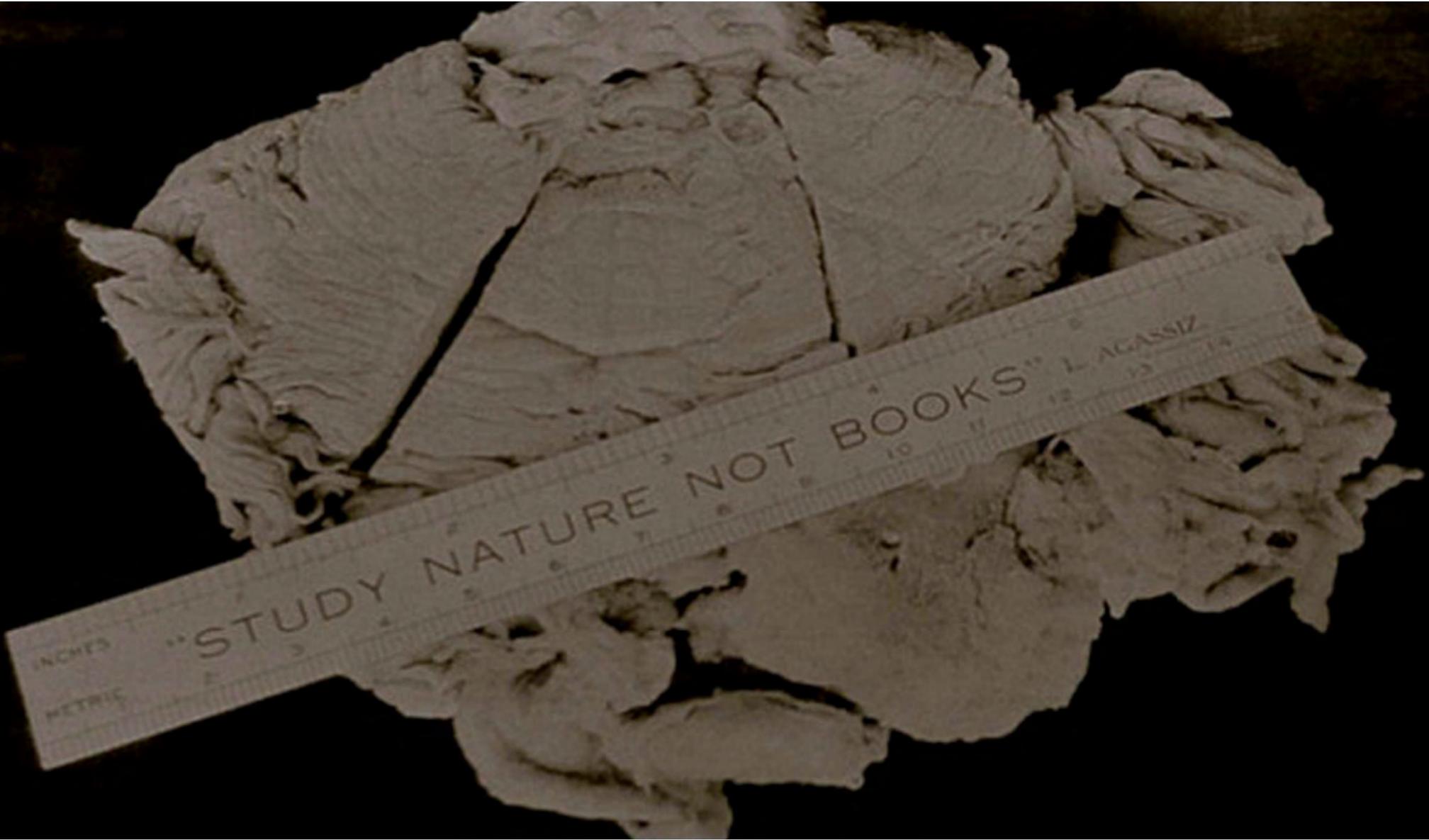
# Specific. Concrete. Visual.

Help your reader see the action



"No ideas but in things." —William Carlos Williams, MD





STUDY NATURE NOT BOOKS

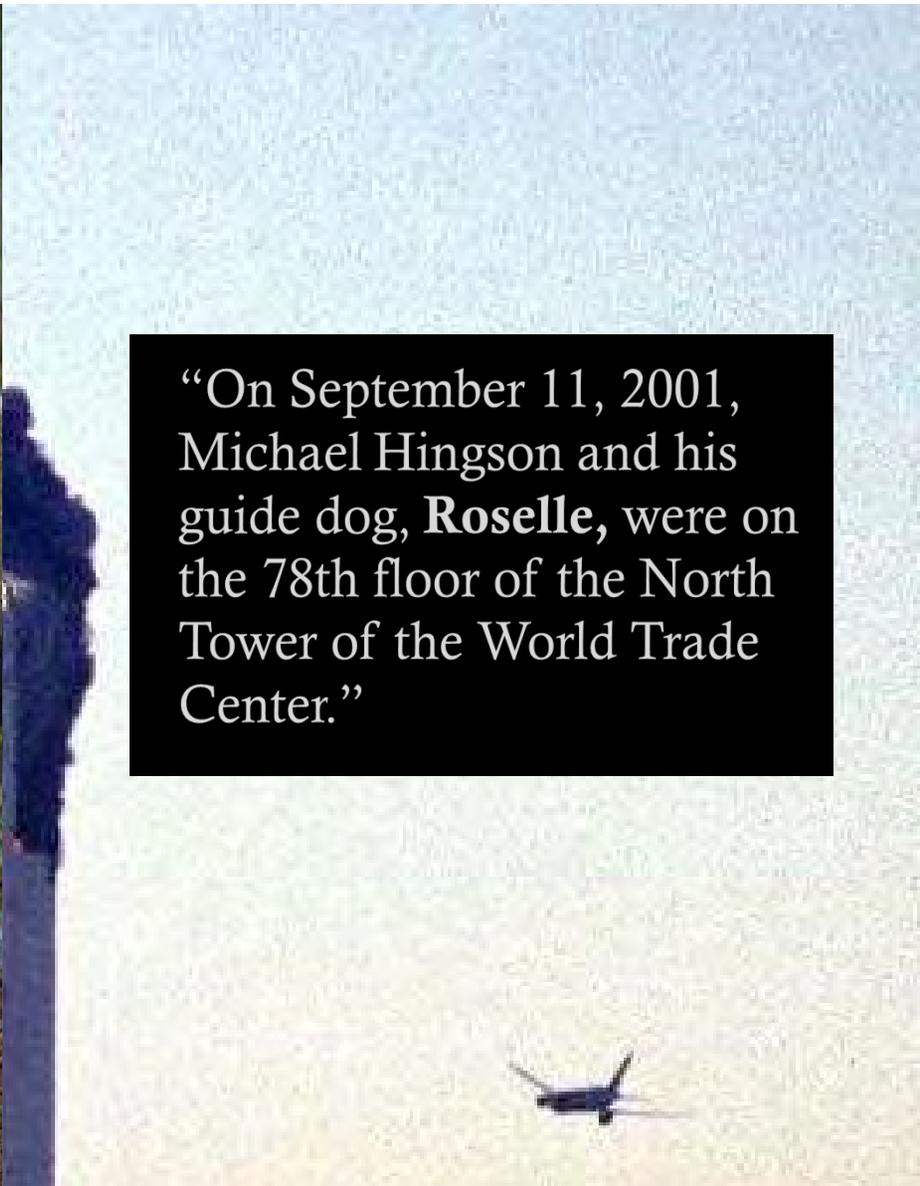
L. AGASSIZ

INCHES

METRIC



“On September 11, 2001, Michael Hingson and his guide dog, **Roselle**, were on the 78th floor of the North Tower of the World Trade Center.”



“Nancy Andreasen was teaching at a university when a crisis caused her to reevaluate her career. Shortly after publishing her first book, the future psychiatrist was hospitalized for a serious illness.”



“Nancy Andreasen was teaching **English** at the **University of Iowa** when a crisis caused her to reevaluate her career. Shortly after publishing her first book, *John Donne: Conservative Revolutionary*, the future psychiatrist was hospitalized for **sepsis.**”





# Order the Ideas

Don't bury the lead with hemming and hawing.

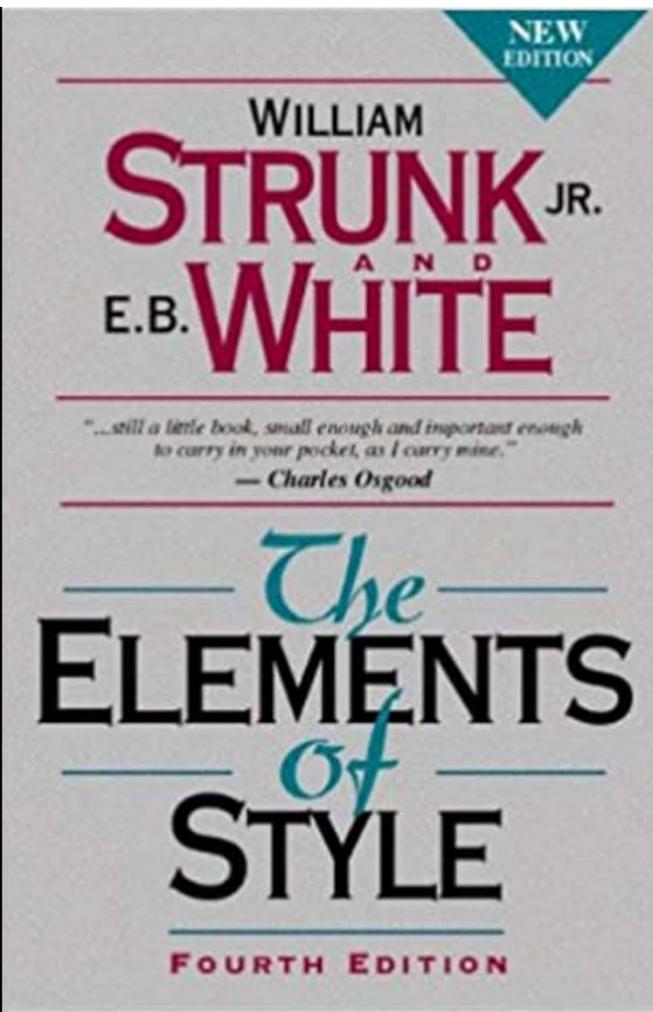
Engage your reader by opening with the big idea.

Place important words at the start or end of sentence.

Set the stage for your ideas. The reader doesn't have your context, but you can create that by word order.

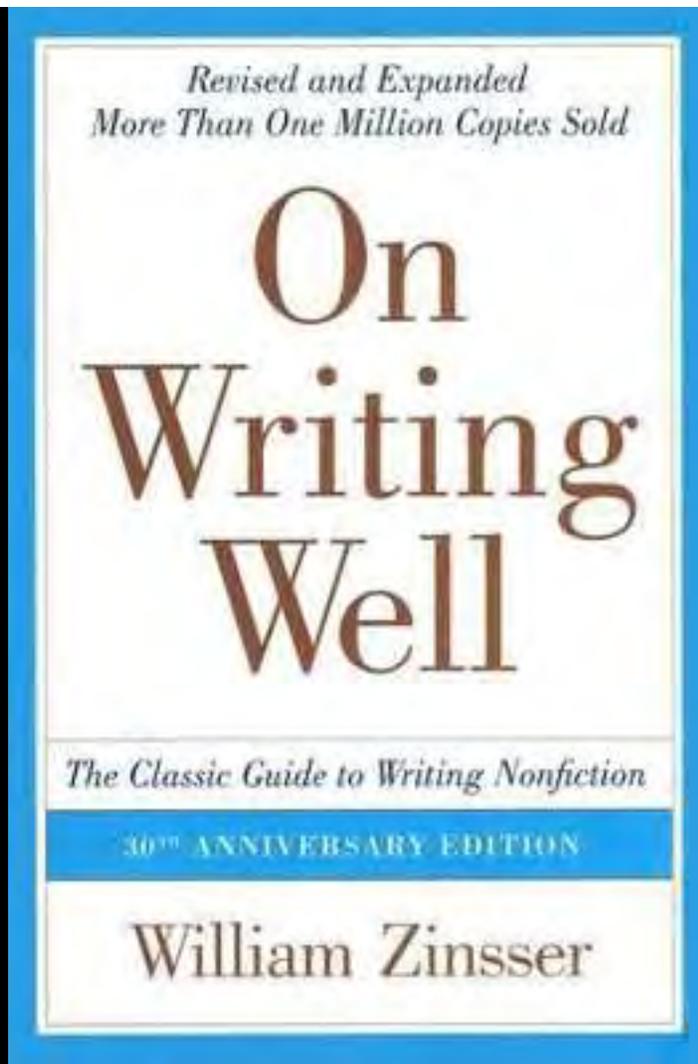
# Before & After

| Problem                            | Before  | After   |
|------------------------------------|---|---|
| Qualifiers                         | "...don't know where it <b>could be</b> coming from"  | "...don't know where it is coming from"   |
|                                    | "people who <b>may have</b> been in denial about racist experiences <b>may be</b> more open to recognizing the impact on their lives" | "people who were once in denial about racist experiences are starting to recognize the impact on their lives" |
| Overly thorough                    | "avoiding places, events, or areas..."  | "avoiding places" [no need to list all possible permutations – it kills the momentum of the sentence]         |
| Self-evident                       | " <b>What I want people to understand is that</b> racism is not just some negative experience..."                                     | "Racism is not just some negative experience..." [we assume the speaker wants us to know this]                |
| Redundancy                         | "You are not going to be able to do it perfectly <b>and the right way all the time.</b> "   | "You are not going to be able to do it perfectly."  |
| Unnecessary words                  | "One term you'll hear <b>used</b> a lot is <i>implicit bias</i> "   | "One term you'll hear a lot is <i>implicit bias</i> "   |
|                                    | "the ways that people interact <b>with each other</b> "   | "the ways that people interact"   |
|                                    | " <b>It should be noted that</b> this new law does not require you to have a perfect track record"                                    | "This new law does not require you to have a perfect track record"  |
| Point gets lost in excess verbiage | "Some insurance plans are also in support of this mechanism and quality improvement process"  | "It's also supported by some insurance plans."  |

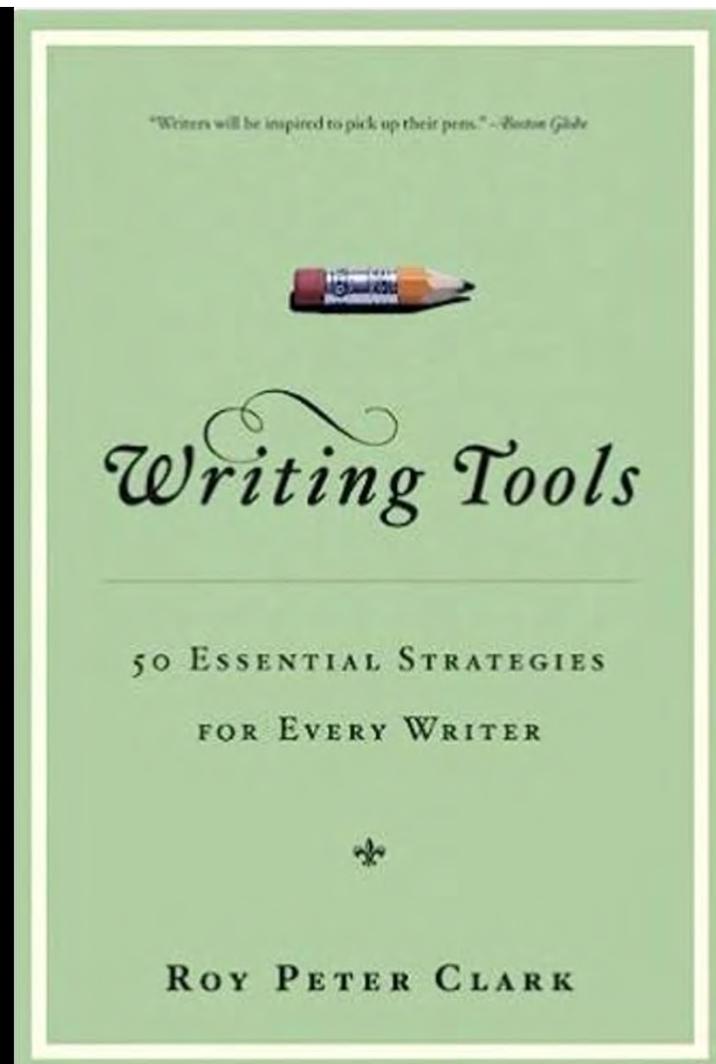


FOREWORD BY ROGER ANGELL

The original

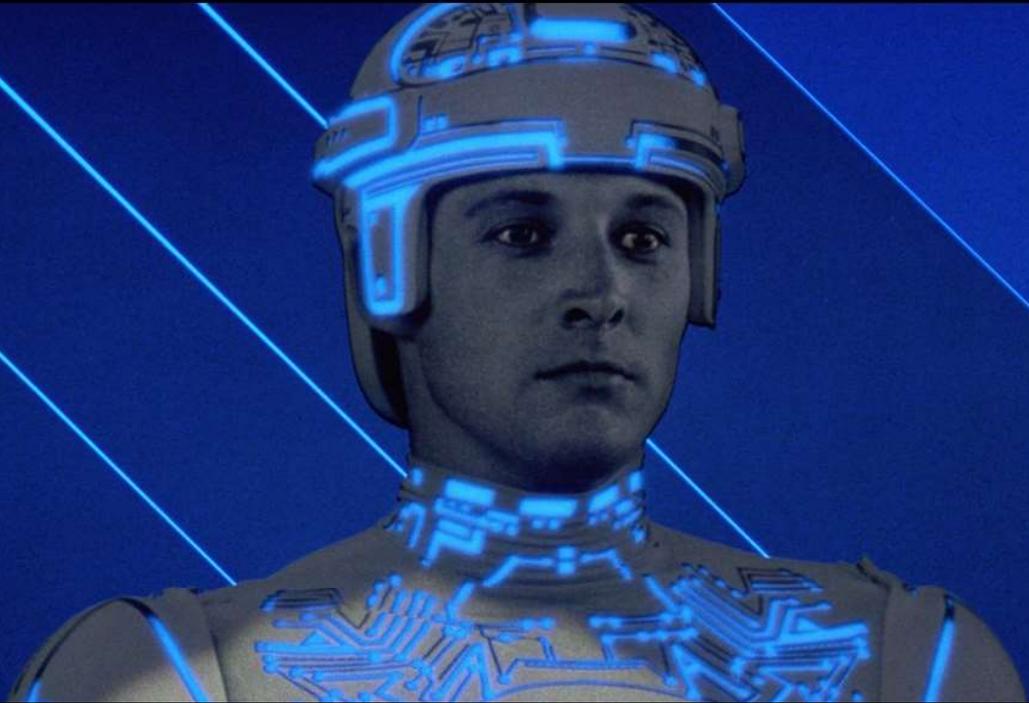


Start here



Advanced

# AI



Please edit this text so it is more in line with the guidelines from "Elements of Style" by Strunk and White.

Write in a journalistic style that is clear, concise, and easy to read. Use active tense rather than passive tense.

Use more concrete nouns and verbs to make the writing more engaging and vivid.

Incorporate a conversational tone throughout the article, using both "I" and "you" to make the reader feel directly engaged and involved in the content.

Highlight the changes you make in bold in the new version of the text. [Bing on Microsoft Edge uses Chat GPT]

# Expressive Writing for Depression

Write about a stressful situation for 15-20 minutes a day

Control group writes about a neutral topic like “time management”

# Does expressive writing reduce depression and anxiety?

A little.

Effect size 0.12, from 31 controlled trials of 4,012 largely subclinical participants.

Benefits delayed, and are greater when sessions are paced every 1-3 days rather than longer.

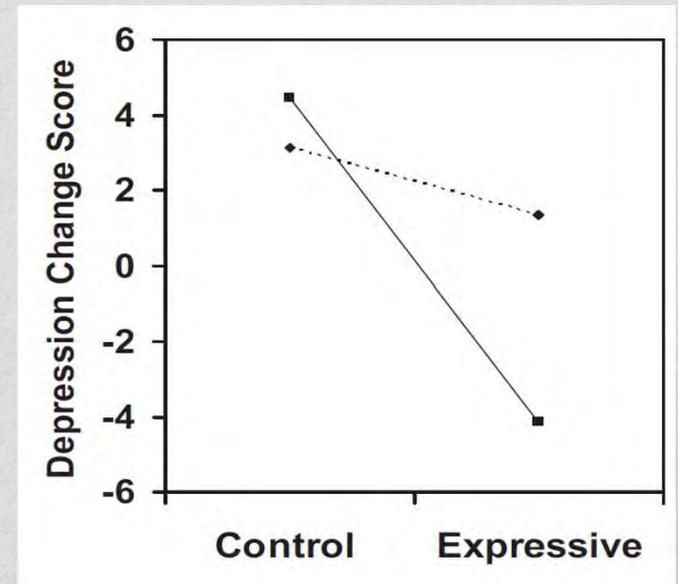
Guo L, *Br J Clin Psychol* 2023, 62(1):272-297



# How does writing reduce depression?

Those with ruminative tendencies benefited the most

---♦--- Low Brooding  
—■— High Brooding



Sloan DM et al, *Emotion* 2008;8(2):302-306

# Talk it Over?



Writing about stress reduced anxiety more than talking about it with a romantic partner

“Talk” group had worse relationship outcomes

Afifi TD et al, *Human Comm Res* 43 (2017) 76–101



Writer's Block



# Right Mind

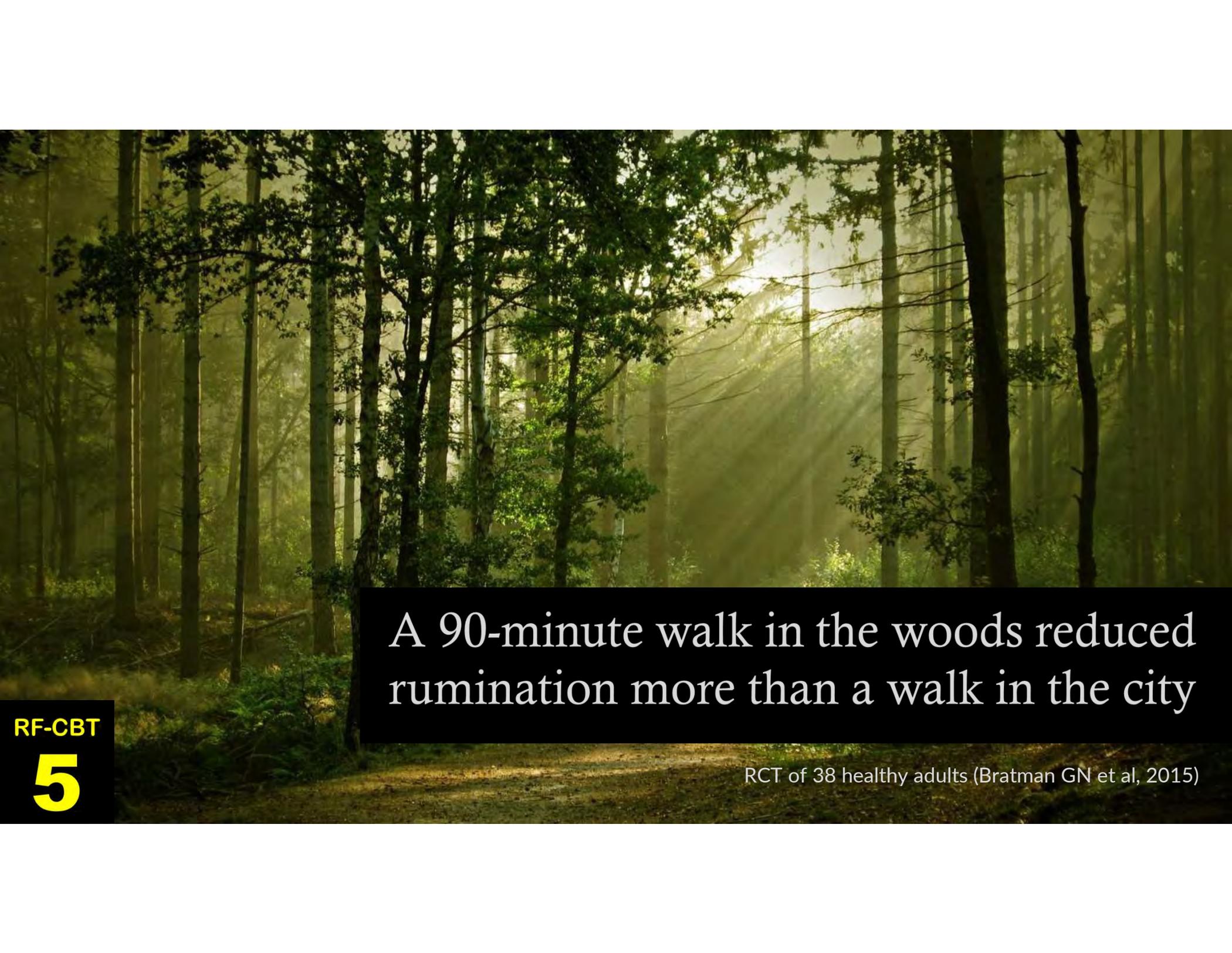
Seek novelty. Find flow.

Deep sleep improves creativity

Eat with a taste for what will  
improve your energy 3 hours later

Tea over coffee, and know your  
alcohol limit (usually 1 drink)

*Photo: Toni Morrison*

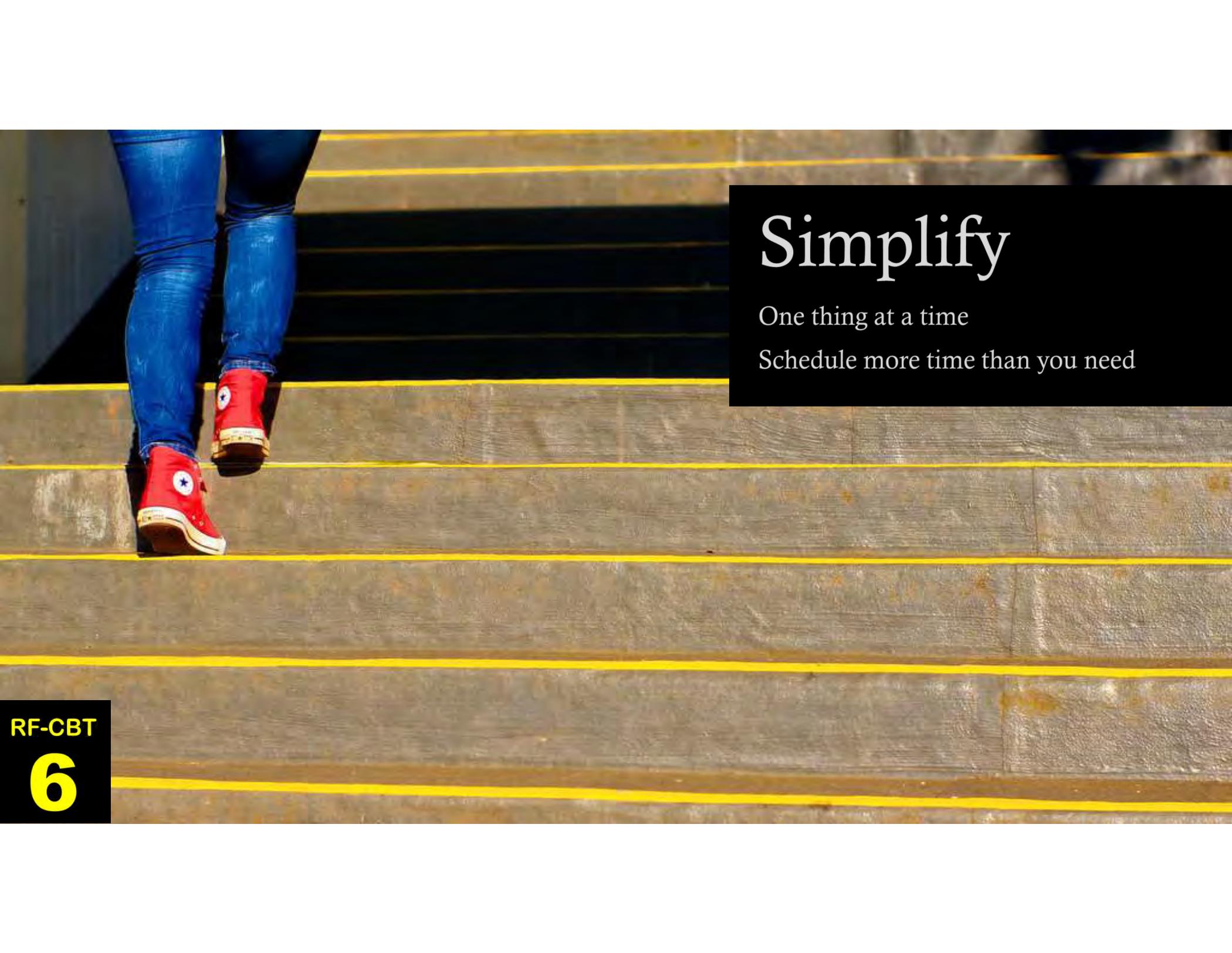


A 90-minute walk in the woods reduced rumination more than a walk in the city

RCT of 38 healthy adults (Bratman GN et al, 2015)

RF-CBT

5



# Simplify

One thing at a time

Schedule more time than you need

RF-CBT

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# Schedule Time

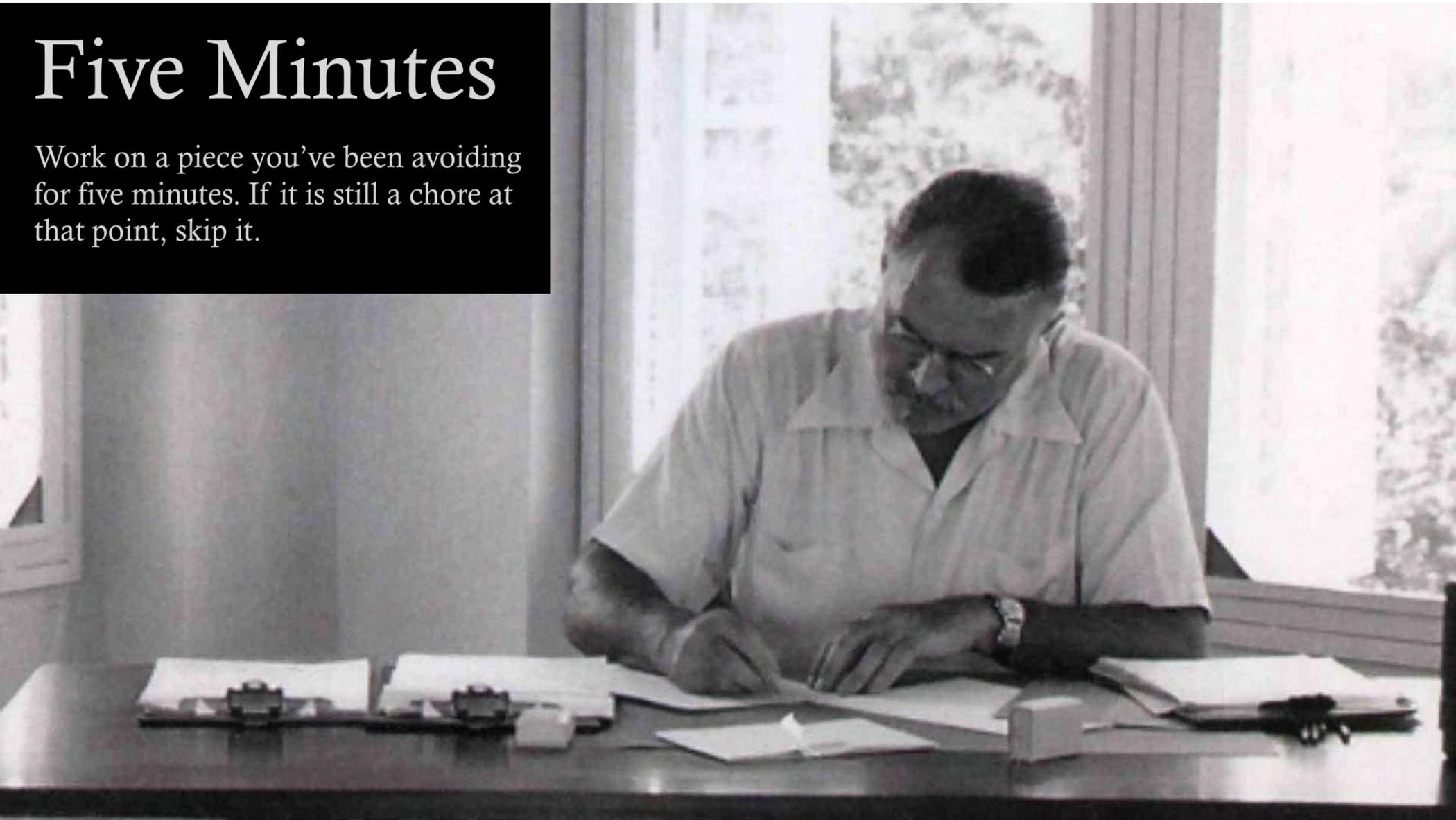
Schedule 1-2 hours a day for the work you are putting off. The fun stuff will come naturally.

When is your circadian rhythm primed for creative thought?

*Photo: Ernest Hemmingway*

# Five Minutes

Work on a piece you've been avoiding for five minutes. If it is still a chore at that point, skip it.



Questions? [caiken@thecarlatreport.com](mailto:caiken@thecarlatreport.com)