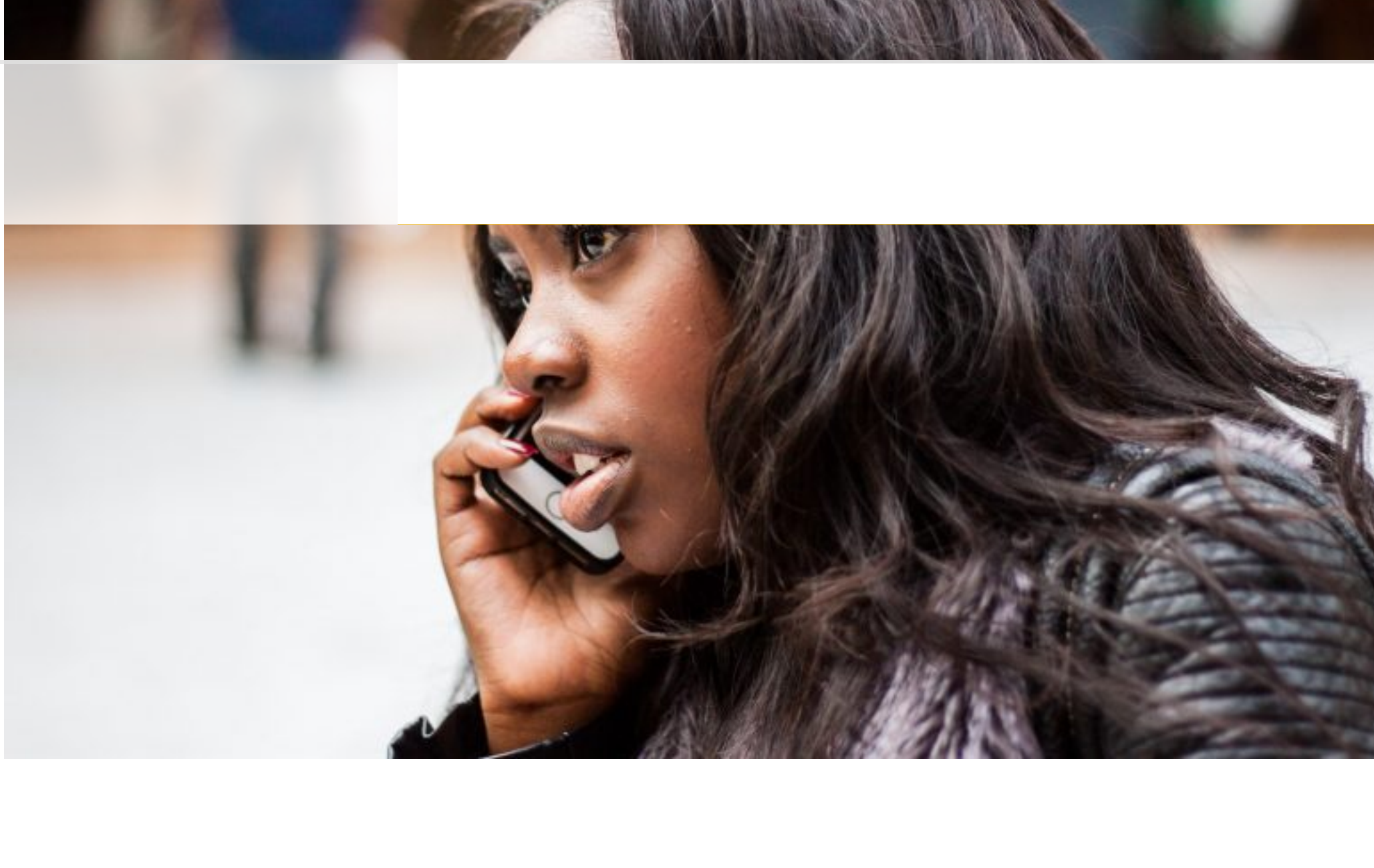


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Why Is Writing Easier Than Speaking For Introverts?

Here's The Science

by Jenn Granneman



“Oh, I love podcasts!” I told the interviewer, who was recording me, unedited, as a guest on *his* podcast. “I listen to one almost every day.”

“That’s great!” the interviewer replied. “Which one is your favorite?”

“It’s uhh... ummm...” *Shit*. I listened to that podcast every flippin’ week! Why couldn’t I think of its name?!

“It’s something by NPR... uhhhh...” I couldn’t produce the name until I quickly googled it. By that time, the conversation had moved on and the point I was trying to make died an awkward, public death.

Story of my life.

This wasn’t the first time I’d drawn a blank under pressure. [Job interviews](#) and [dates](#) were the worst. “Tell me about yourself” often resulted in me momentarily forgetting everything I’d ever done.

Even when the stakes are low, like in a conversation with a friend, I often need a [few beats to think before speaking](#). And it’s not unusual for me to have thoughts swirling around in my head that I simply don’t have the language to express.

Why are words so hard for [introverts](#)? Let’s take a look at the science.

(Note: *Not everyone agrees on what it means to be an introvert. Here’s our [definition of introversion](#).*)

Humans Are Prone to Visual Thinking, Research Suggests

Everyone goes blank or gets tongue-tied sometimes, even extroverts. The reason may be related to how the human brain is wired. A [recent Harvard study](#) suggests that humans are more prone to visual thinking than they are to verbal thinking.

That means people tend to think in pictures, not words. According to the scientists, this tendency seems to be ingrained in the primitive parts of our brains. Maybe that’s because language is a “recent” development for humans (we started using it a *mere* 100,000 years ago).

Those images we “see” in our minds need a verbal translation. No wonder people get tongue-tied. Our brains are playing evolutionary catch-up.

But that’s not the whole story — particularly when it comes to introverts.

Why Does It Seem “Worse” for Introverts?

For introverts, words just seem, well, *extra* hard. If you’re one of the “quiet ones,” you’ve probably had the experience of an extrovert talking circles around you. Meanwhile, your thoughts get stuck rattling around in your head and don’t exit through your mouth with the same eloquence — if at all.

The introvert’s “word problem” gets us labeled “quiet” or “shy.” It makes us seem like we don’t know what we’re talking about, even though we often [have deep insights and become subject matter experts](#).

In a society that values fast and frequent talkers, it can be tough being an introvert.

Introverts May Rely More on Long-Term Memory

As I explain in my book, *[The Secret Lives of Introverts](#)*, one reason speaking might be extra hard for introverts has to do with long-term memory. Information stored in long-term memory is mostly outside our conscious awareness. Like the name sounds, long-term memory contains information that’s retained for long periods of time. Some of this information is fairly easy to access, while other memories are more difficult to recall.

Contrast this with working memory (sometimes called short-term memory), which is limited and retains information for mere seconds. Working memory puts information on the tip of your tongue. It’s easy to access, but you don’t hold onto information for long, unless you move it to long-term memory.

In her 2002 book, *[The Introvert Advantage](#)*, Marti Olsen Laney writes that introverts tend to favor long-term memory over working memory. Extroverts do the opposite.

Pulling information out of long-term memory can be tricky. You need the right “key” to unlock the memory stored there — something that reminds you of the information you’re trying to recall.

For example, let’s say you were trying to remember your first date with your now-spouse. Walking by an Italian restaurant, you catch a whiff of *bucatini alla carbonara*. *BAM*, that smell reminds you of the dish you ordered on your date and “unlocks” more information about that evening.

Reaching into long-term memory can be a lengthy, complex process, which could explain why words are hard for introverts.

Anxiety Sucks and Makes It Hard to Think

Another reason speaking can be difficult for introverts has to do with anxiety. Not [every introvert is anxious](#), and not all anxious people are introverts. But there’s definitely some overlap between [introversion, shyness, and anxiety](#).

Even if an introvert *doesn’t* suffer from an anxiety disorder, it’s not unusual for an introvert to feel at least a little anxiety in social situations. Our comfort zone is [back home in our introvert den](#), after all.

Anyone who’s ever suffered from anxiety knows it’s mentally draining. That mental drain can make it harder to think, focus, and recall information. The stress hormone cortisol is released during times of anxiety. Cortisol [interferes with memory and concentration](#), among other things.

Writing Uses Different Brain Pathways

Introverts are known for their love of writing. Plenty of professional writers are self-professed introverts, from [John Green](#) to [J.K. Rowling](#). And even if you’re an introvert who doesn’t write for a living, you probably prefer texting and emailing over talking on the phone.

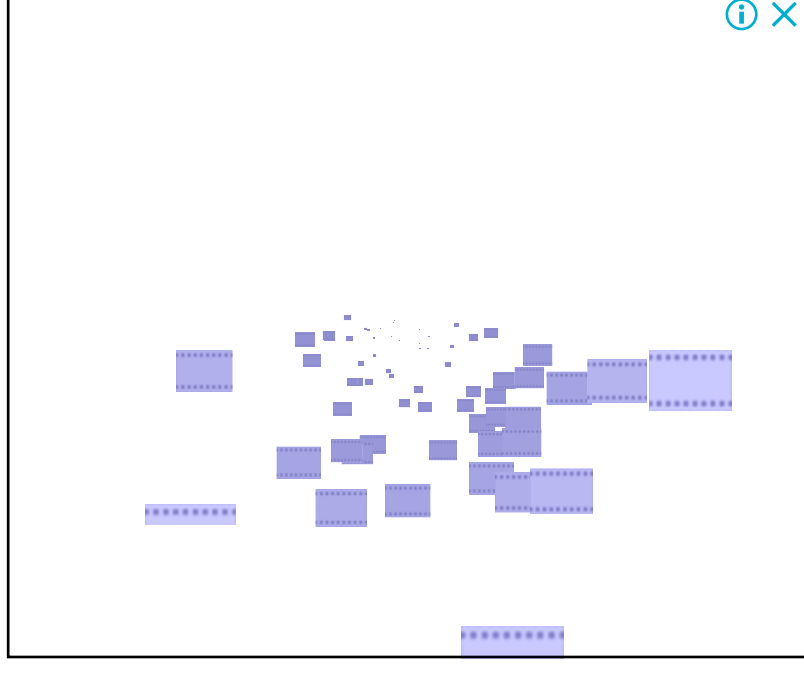
For many introverts, why is writing their thoughts easier than speaking them? [Again according to Laney](#), writing uses different pathways in the brain than speaking. These writing pathways seem to flow more fluently for introverts.

If, like me on the podcast, you find your mind going blank, the best thing you can do is to try to relax and let your mind wander. When your mind wanders, it may latch onto the right “key” to pull up the memory you need. Buy yourself some time by saying, “I need a few moments to think about that.” If all else fails, tell the person you’ll get back to them later — via text or email. ☺

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Learn more: *The Secret Lives of Introverts: Inside Our Hidden World*, by Jenn Granneman

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Jenn Granneman is the founder of [IntrovertDear.com](#) and the author of [The Secret Lives of Introverts: Inside Our Hidden World](#). Jenn is a contributor to [Psychology Today](#), [HuffPost](#), Susan Cain’s [Quiet Revolution](#), [Upworthy](#), [The Mighty](#), [The Muse](#), [Motherly](#), and a number of other outlets. She has appeared on the BBC and in [Buzzfeed](#) and [Glamour](#) magazine. Jenn started Introvert, Dear because she wanted to write about what it was like being an introvert living in an extrovert’s world. Now she’s on a mission: to let introverts everywhere know it’s okay to be who they are.