



## RESOURCES

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# 4 Ways to Keep Writing From Being a Literal Pain in the Neck

High-maintenance clients, looming deadlines, and late payments are just a few of the ways making a living as a freelancer can be a pain in the neck. But, even though freelancers

have the freedom to work wherever they want, that pain in the neck can come from other sources: a keyboard too high, a screen too low, or a chair with too little back support.

According to the [London Pain Clinic](#), more than 87 percent of computer workers suffer from acute to chronic neck and shoulder pain. If you can relate, poor posture, increased tension, and repetitive movements are most often to blame. You should always check with a medical professional regarding persistent pain. In the meantime, however, use the tips below to give your workspace an ergonomic makeover to help relieve what ails you.

## **Dedicate a space**

“People often think they don’t need a well set up workstation at home and will use what they have already, hanging out on the sofa, in bed, or working at the kitchen table,” said Shari Arribere, occupational therapist, certified industrial ergonomist, and director of [Ergonomics At Your Fingertips](#).

These makeshift home offices can lead to a Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI). An RSI may barely register as pain at first. However, once pain hits, the injury can be difficult to ditch. For one less headache (or backache) later in your career, set up a designated place to work sooner rather than later.

## **Build for your body**

Having a dedicated space is less about where you store your belongings and more about

constructing a custom computer experience that will benefit your body. If you've been struggling with the alignment of your screen, keyboard, and mouse, hiring an ergonomic consultant might be beneficial. The consultant can analyze your working environment and recommend ways to make it safer and more efficient. It will be an upfront cost, of course, but a preventative one to avoid potential pain and healthcare costs.

For an immediate improvement, Arribere suggests making the following changes to your home office:

- ■ Choose a table or desk where your keyboard and mouse are at elbow height when sitting with a straight back and shoulders relaxed.
- ■ Adjust your monitor to face height, with eyes aligned in the top third of the screen. If you wear progressive or bifocal eyeglass, lower your alignment slightly. If needed, add a lift under your monitor to create the perfect height for you.
- ■ Choose a chair with optional adjustments, such as height, lumbar support, and movable armrests.

To customize your chair:

- ■ Raise the seat so it allows for the optimal elbow height. Use a foot rest if your feet do not touch the floor.
- ■ Adjust the seat until your legs make a 90-degree angle without touching the front edge of the chair with the back of your knees, which can compress the sciatic arteries and nerves in your legs.
- ■ Set armrests just below elbow height to relax your shoulders. Avoid leaning on them, which can compress blood flow to the forearms and hands.
- ■ Adjust the lumbar support to “belt height,” and keep the back angle of the chair fairly straight, similar

to a standing posture.

## Limit your laptop time

You shouldn't spend more than two hours per day on a laptop. If that's your primary mode of working, it's time to make an investment and buy a desktop computer—don't worry, it's a tax write-off!

“The monitor of a laptop is too low to keep the head weight balanced on the neck,” says Arribere. “An average head weighs ten to twelve pounds; double that on the neck if the head is looking down and triple that on the lower back. The low back is the most easily injured, with the neck second—the two most expensive, and disabling body parts to medically treat.”

## I have a hunch

If long hours at the computer have already turned you into a hunchback, all hope is not lost. While it's better to avoid an RSI altogether, stretching and exercise can bring needed relief when pain hits. The London Pain Clinic recommends taking frequent breaks, preferably after every 30 minutes of sitting, to move around, change posture, and stretch, so when you get up, give these moves a moment of your time:

- **■ Shoulder shrugs:** With good posture, raise the top of your shoulders toward your ears, holding the tension for up to 5 seconds. Then relax your shoulders to their normal position.
- **■ Ear-to-shoulders:** Starting with your head in a neutral position, drop your left ear to your left

shoulder. For an extra stretch, use the arm on the same side to gently add weight to your head. From this position, rotate your head in small movements to target the stretch to other areas. Repeat on the other side.

- ■ **Shoulder rolls:** Relieve tension in your neck traps and shoulders by making small backward circles with your shoulder. Repeat in the forward direction.
- ■ **Chest opener:** Stand in a door frame. Placing your forearms on each side, support yourself against the door frame as you lean forward.

In addition to the wide variety of [stretches](#) you can do at your desk, a [Danish study published in the Journal of Applied Physiology](#) showed strength training to be a solution for sore necks. [Specific exercises](#) tested included: dumbbell shoulder shrugs, one-arm dumbbell rows, upright rows, reverse flies, and shoulder abduction.

If your goal is to build a lasting freelance career, you will have to endure a few pains in the neck along the way. But it's up to you to make sure those pains are figurative.

*Image via Vital Endurance*

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