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How to Get the Writing Done

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Famous writers and writers who hope they will become famous, published writers and unpublished writers, master writers and miserable writers, good students and poor students have one problem in common: How can we get the writing done?

I am going to take you into the back room of the writing shop that readers never see and show you how one professional produces his daily quota of words.

There is no one way to get the writing done. Many of my strategies are contradictory, what works on one project will not work on the next. I have to keep trying new ways—or retrying old ways—to produce effective writing. The strategies keep changing as I steal a technique from a fellow writer or from another craft, remember one I have forgotten, or discard another that works for someone else but never seems to work for me. Here are the strategies hung above my workbench this morning:

1. Write Now. Write before you know what you have to say or how to say it. Ignorance is a great starting place. Write as fast as you can—and then increase the speed! Don't worry about penmanship or typing, punctuation or correctness, making sense or being silly. Velocity is as important in writing as in bicycle riding—speed gets you ahead of the censor and causes the accidents of meaning and language essential to good writing.

Later you can read what you have written and the draft, rough as it is, will often reveal what you have to say and how you can say it.

2. Rewrite. Take a rough draft and get into the writing by rewriting. The old draft will stimulate a new one. I used to revise by hand, cutting (I love to cut—this chapter is growing shorter at the moment), adding, moving around. Now I work on a computer, and I write right over what I have written, layering new meanings on top of old ones the way you build up an oil painting.

Rewriting is not failure but an essential part of the process of writing, each draft leads us to our meaning and allows us to tune our voices to that meaning.

3. Delay. But sometimes writing early doesn't work. In that case stand back. E. B. White says, "Delay is natural to a writer. He is like a surfer—he bides his time, waits for the perfect wave on which to ride in. Delay is instinctive with him. He waits for the surge (of emotion? of strength? of courage?) that will carry him along." And Virginia Woolf wrote: "As for my next book, I am going to hold myself from writing it till I have it impending in me: grown heavy in my mind like a ripe pear; pendant, gravid, asking to be cut or it will fall."

I find it helpful sometimes to take a walk, drive somewhere and do errands, watch the Celtics on TV, take a nap, or assign my subconscious to consider a writing problem as I go to sleep at night. The writing goes on, and when I return to the writing desk I discover I know what to say and how to say it.

4. Rehearse. We rehearse plays and concerts, rehearse what we will say when applying for a job or a loan from a parent, and rehearse our approach to a member of the opposite sex, and writers rehearse writing. Talk to yourself, try beginnings and key paragraphs in your head before you get to the page, hear what you may say before you see it. I am at my desk a couple of hours a morning but I write in my head during the twenty-two or so hours I am away from the writing desk. To help me in this process I keep small cards in my shirt pocket so I can catch a phrase or thought if one flies through my head. I also keep a daybook, a writing log or journal, in which I can talk to myself in writing, playing with what I may write when I return to my writing desk.

5. Consult. Develop a writing community with which you can talk about what you may write, what you are writing—and rewriting. I have developed

my own community by sharing my writing first. Then some of them share theirs. We consult on what we may write, what we are writing, what works, and what needs work. I not only receive help from the writers in my community; I hear the answers to my writing problems in what I say to them.

I have one rule for admission to my writing community: I only invite people to join who make me want to write when I finish talking to them.

6. Plan. Some writing is unplanned. You freewrite and a text seems to arise spontaneously from the page. Wonderful. Accept the gift, but don't count on it happening regularly like the six o'clock news. Most writing is planned. But rarely do writers plan in rigid detail, outlining with complete sentences—"The Harvard Outline"—or an intricate A, a, B, b; Ii, Iii; 1.1, 1.1.1 sequence. The planning techniques I find most helpful are

Line. I know I have a piece of writing when I have a line, a fragment of language, sometimes a word, most likely a phrase, rarely a sentence, which contains the essential conflict or tension within the subject. I knew I could write this piece when I heard the phrase "master writers and students have the same problem: how . . ." The article would be released by the tension within those words.

Title. I find the title helps me get started if it contains the energy to push the writer—and the reader—forward. Write a title such as "How to Get the Writing Done" and the draft follows directly.

Lead. As a journalist, I have to get the lead right, the first few sentences or paragraphs, before I go on. I play with those lines in my head, in my daybook, on my computer screen, drafting half a dozen or three dozen leads quickly until the essential tension within the piece is established, the voice is clear, and the reader is drawn in, as I hope I did in developing the line into the lead, or first paragraph, of this article.

Cross Heads. In writing most nonfiction, I write the headings and sub-headings first, as I did in this article. They may change as I go along but as I draft the heads I can see the sequence and pattern the article will take.

7. Attitude. Every writer goes to the writing desk with a set of assumptions that may make the writing difficult or easy. For years I wanted to impress teachers, editors, and associates I didn't even like. I also wanted to write perfect copy the first time out. But I learned to follow William Stafford's advice:

I believe that the so-called "writing block" is a product of some kind of disproportion between your standards and your performance. . . . [O]ne should lower his standards until there is no felt threshold to go over in writing. It's easy to write. You just shouldn't have standards that inhibit you from writing.

I can imagine a person beginning to feel he's not able to write up to that standard he imagines the world has set for him. But to me that's surrealistic. The

only standard I can rationally have is the standard I'm meeting right now. . . . You should be more willing to forgive yourself. It doesn't make any difference if you are good or bad today. The assessment of the product is something that happens after you've done it.

Now I go to the desk determined to write as well as I can write each morning but no better. If I lower my standards, I receive a draft. Then I can rewrite.

8. *Habit.* Right there, in the center over my workbench are four words in big black letters *NULLA DIES SINE LINEA*. The Latin command—"never a day without a line" is attributed to both Horace and Pliny. Never mind who said it, it is the motto of most writers, ancient and modern, men and women. Jogging and writing require habit. And it is more productive to write every day for a short time than one day for a long time.

Brief writing periods can be amazingly effective. One prolific—and excellent—writer, Anthony Burgess, pointed out that by writing only one page per day, you can have a 365-page book drafted in a year. I find that I can get an amazing amount of writing done in bursts of half-an-hour a day, twenty minutes, fifteen; three pages a day, one page, half a page; 500 words, 300, 200, 100.

9. *Deadlines.* There's little that clarifies the mind and increases the concentration better than a deadline, a point upon which you pass and you are dead. As the deadline approaches, the adrenaline flows and copy comes; it is too late for excessive thought: don't think, write.

But *their* deadline should not necessarily be your deadline. My deadline for my Tuesday column is Monday—a week ahead. And I stick to it.

Work backward in time and establish your own deadlines, saying, "On the twelfth the research will be done, on the fourteenth I'll have the lead and a list of the main points to be covered, on the nineteenth I'll have a first draft, on the twenty-second the final draft."

10. *When Interrupted as You Wr.* . . . Stop in the middle of a sentence so that you can finish the sentence and be involved in the writing immediately after the interruption or the next day when you return to your writing desk. If you have an idea of the sequence of things to be written scribble them down at the same time.

11. *Change Your Working Style.* What works on one project may not on another. I advocate fast writing, but sometimes I have to slow down and work with pen on paper. I am an early-morning writer, but once in a while a project will seem to require days of ruminations as I do errands, and I end up writing in late afternoon. I usually outline nonfiction texts and plunge into fiction, but sometimes I have to plunge into nonfiction and stop to plan fiction.

Know your working patterns, but when a project isn't going well—or even going—experiment with other styles to see if they fit this new project. New projects may require new work patterns.

12. Count Words, Pages, or Hours. While writing never ask yourself or answer the question: “How good was my writing today?” You have no idea. You can’t tell in the middle of a project. Forgive yourself. Follow the counsel of Jonwillum van der Wattering that has kept me productive:

To write you have to set up a routine, to promise yourself that you will write. Just state in a loud voice that you will write so many pages a day, or write for so many hours a day. Keep the number of pages or hours within reason, and don’t be upset if a day slips by. Start again; pick up the routine. Don’t look for results. Just write, easily, quietly.

13. Work Within the Draft. When the writing doesn’t come easily, do not look outside the draft to textbooks, including mine; to the principles and traditions of writing; to the expectations of teacher, editor, or reader; but first look within the text. Read the paragraph you have just drafted. It will tell you what to deal with next; it will call for more description, an opinion, some evidence, whatever is needed to develop what you have to say, paragraph by paragraph.

14. Answer the Reader’s Questions. Effective writing is a conversation with a reader. Anticipate the reader’s questions—and answer them.

15. Make What Works Better. I used to write the way most schools teach writing, by pointing out the errors in a draft and then trying to correct them. I always felt guilty, unsure, hesitant, and, more and more, a stranger to the draft. It was less and less mine.

Then I photocopied each page of my first draft on a large sheet of paper and made notes on what I was doing when the revising went well. I was increasing and strengthening those qualities and elements in the writing that went well. If the draft was well organized, I worked on making it even better; if the voice was clear, then I made it clearer; and if the documentation seemed the strength of my argument, I made it even stronger.

My writing went easier when I learned this lesson, the drafts were more my own, and most of the problems of the early draft disappeared. If they didn’t, then I corrected them—in the context of an effective working draft that had established its own method and its own standards.

16. Make Use of Failure. I continue to learn to write from what works well and from the instructive failures that are a necessary part of any writing act. I do not like to fail, but I no longer see my writing failures as judgments against me personally as if I were flunking the human race. They are the normal, instructive failures of an experimental art in which you commit yourself to discover what works and what needs work.

17. Write in Chunks. John Steinbeck once wrote:

When I face the desolate impossibility of writing 500 pages a sick sense of failure falls on me and I know I can never do it. Then gradually I write one page and then another. One day’s work is all I can permit myself to contemplate.

All of us feel despair and hopelessness when we contemplate a long writing project. I was comforted by Steinbeck's quotation and by the answer of a woman who spent many days and nights climbing a huge rock face in California. When asked how she stuck it out, she answered: "You eat an elephant one bite at a time." Break long writing tasks into daily bites.

18. *Write with Force; Unleash the Draft.* Let it rip. As Annie Dillard states:

One of the few things I know about writing is this: spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place in the book, or for another book; give it, give it all, give it now. The impulse to save something good for a better place later is to signal to spend it now. Something more will arise for later, something better. These things fill from behind, from beneath, like well water.

You can cut later, but you cannot cut from an undeveloped, under written text. Write from abundance to get the draft done, let the energy rise out of the writing; cut, shape, polish later.

19. *Write.* Write when you think you don't have anything to say. Write when you are tired. Write between classes. Write during TV commercials. Write when what you see on the page makes you want to vomit. Write when the writing isn't going well—and when it is. Write fast. Write slowly. Use a pencil, use a pen; type on typewriter and on a computer. Dictate to a tape recorder. Write when you are sick. Write. Write. Write. Write, and something will begin to happen, a word, a line, a sentence, and when you least expect it, the writing will come.

Writing is the way to get the writing done.

Sharing Ideas

- Don provides you with several provocative quotes by poets and novelists. Use one as a starting point for a freewrite of your own, considering or expanding on the author's advice.
- Decide which five of the nineteen categories of advice you find here are the most important to you as a writer. Are those five the same as the ones chosen by other class writers? Consider how your learning and personality preferences may influence your choices.
- Think about ways to break out of school-imposed deadlines. Decide when it might be useful to set your own writing deadlines. For instance, in any class there are always some writers who get work done ahead of schedule. It's certainly not cool, but it is productive. What would you have to do to be one step ahead of your normal production schedule and what, if anything, would you gain?

- What do you think about the suggestion that writers should write every day? Chris Anson and Richard Beach's discussion of journaling shows you one way to get the words down. What would happen if you set your own word count, as Don suggests, and what would that word count be—100, 200, 300, 500 words?
 - Spend a week changing your working style and report on the results.
 - Don's section 14 on readers is quite brief. Spend some time deciding who your readers are, and how they do (and should) affect your writing.
 - It's certainly hard to accept, but we all fail as writers sometimes. Tell stories of times when you learned from writing that didn't quite work.
 - What writing conditions are necessary if you want to follow the advice to unleash a draft and let it rip?
 - Think more deeply about Don's advice that writing anything at any time is *always* better than not writing.
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