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Time, Tools, and Talismans

Susan Wyche

Susan Wyche is an Associate Professor in Human Communications at California State University Monterey Bay, where she also directs the University Writing Program. She still struggles with writing, still uses writing rituals to be a productive writer, and sometimes dreams of giving it all up to become a surfer.

Famous writers have been known to do a lot of crazy things to help them write: Dame Edith Sitwell sought inspiration by lying in a coffin. George Sand wrote after making love. Friedrich Schiller sniffed rotten apples stashed under the lid of his desk. A hotel room furnished with a dictionary, a Bible, a deck of cards, and a bottle of sherry suits Maya Angelou. Fugitive writer Salman Rushdie carries a silver map of an unpartitioned India and Pakistan. Charles Dickens traveled with ceramic frogs.

Writers also mention less bizarre practices. They describe eating, drinking, pacing, rocking, sailing, driving a car or riding in a bus or train, taking a hot bath or shower, burning incense, listening to music, staring out windows, cleaning house, or wearing lucky clothes. What do these rituals do for writers? The explanations are as varied as the rituals themselves. Tolstoy believed that “the best thoughts most often come in the morning after waking, while still in bed, or during a walk.” Sonia Sanchez says that she works at night because “at that time the house is quiet. The children are asleep. I’ve prepared for my classes . . . graded papers . . . answered letters. . . . [A]t a quarter to twelve all that stops . . . then my writing starts.” Although interpretations differ, one need

not read extensively in the journals, letters, essays, and interviews of writers to know that they consider rituals an essential component of their work.

Do these behaviors serve a purpose in the composing process? Are some practices more common than others? Do rituals make for better writers? Until recently, the answer was usually “No,” but anthropologists and others who study the subject of consciousness now say that private rituals are used by individuals to selectively and temporarily shut out the daily world. Researchers in psychophysiology have observed that rhythmic activities that can be performed “mindlessly” alter brainwaves into a more relaxed, creative state. Walking, pacing, and some kinds of exercise have this effect. So does staring out windows, which some researchers now believe may actively trigger day-dreaming rather than being a symptom of it. Although coffins and frogs are probably effective only in the personal psychology of a Sitwell or a Dickens, scientists at Yale have discovered that rotting apples produce a gas that suppresses panic—a reminder that we should be careful not to scoff too soon at writers’ rituals.

I became interested in the subject of rituals after suffering through my master’s thesis with a bad case of writer’s block. When a counselor asked me to describe my work habits, I became aware of the condition under which I had chosen to work: at school in the afternoon (my worst time of day) in an office where I was constantly interrupted or at home (also in the afternoon) while my husband’s band practiced in the living room. I answered the phone, made coffee, and tried to shut out mentally what the walls could not. As Tillie Olsen points out, writing under such conditions produces a “craziness of endurance” that silences the writer. After awhile, even when I wasn’t interrupted, I’d create my own distractions by calling friends, scrounging food in the kitchen, or escaping the house to run errands.

At the counselor’s prompting, I began looking for a protected place to work—at first in the library and later at coffeeshops, where the conversational buzz and clatter of dishes provided consistent background noise. Somehow the interruptions in these places were less disruptive than those at home. I also began to pay attention to those moments when ideas bubbled up effortlessly, like on my walks to and from the university or while soaking in a hot bath late at night. I realized that ideas had always come in offbeat moments, but I had rarely been able to recapture them at “official” writing times. In the next three years, I gradually revamped my work habits and was able to face writing my doctoral dissertation, not with fear-producing blank pages, but pocketfuls of short passages scribbled in the heat of inspiration.

As a teacher of writing who works with unprepared students who are “at risk” in the university, I began to wonder what they did when they wrote. I knew there were times when they, too, became frustrated, blocked, and turned in work that did not represent their actual abilities. In spring 1990, I conducted a project with two writing classes in the Academic Skills Department at San Diego State University. I wanted to know

What rituals did students practice when they wrote for school?

What explanations would they offer for their practices?

Where did they get their best ideas?

What did they do when they blocked?

Were they aware of habits that sabotaged their composing processes?

Students filled out several pages of a questionnaire on their schedules, their rituals, and the amount of time they allocated for writing school assignments. Afterward, several met with me for follow-up interviews. In the following section, I present edited transcripts of three students who represented the range of responses I received.

Interviews

The first student, Adriana, provides a profile of work habits typical of other students in her class. She takes five classes, works twenty hours each week, and spends six to ten hours per week on homework:

I create a schedule for a day but if there's one particular thing I'm supposed to do, and I fall behind, I just throw it out. Sometimes I call my friends on the phone and tell them what I'm writing about in the essay, and they give me ideas.

Everything has to be clean and neat because if I see my clothes hanging everywhere, I can't study; I can't concentrate. So I have to straighten it up—everything—before I start.

I do most of my writing at night. Last night I stayed up till three o'clock. Before, I used to go to the public library, but it got too loud because of all these high school students jumping around. Now I work primarily at home.

Pacing gives me time to relax and jot down what I'm doing. I can't stay in one place, like for five hours and write a paper. I have to stand up, walk around, watch a little bit of TV and then start again. If my favorite program comes on I just have to watch it. Sometimes its hard to do both—writing and TV.

To relax, I breathe deeply, stuff like that. I lay in my bed, looking at the ceiling. Nothing special. I work sitting down or lying down. I stare out a window. That's how I get my thoughts all together. I guess it helps, I find myself doing it a lot. I also have this one cassette with all piano solos by George Winston.

At times I put off working on an assignment until it's too late to do my best work, because I work better under pressure. If I start maybe a month before, I won't really concentrate. If I start three days before, then I'll get on it. If I have a month to do a project, and I sit down the week before, I'm not even thinking about it the other three weeks. Sometimes I work when I'm too exhausted, because I have a deadline to make. I've got to do it or fail the class.

I get my ideas sometimes right away, but most of the time it takes an hour to sit and think about it. I also get ideas from reading essays or from the person next to me. I'd ask what they're writing about, and sometimes I get some ideas. When I do go blank, I get frustrated—don't even know what I do. I think I just sit there and keep staring at my paper.

Adriana has difficulty creating and following through on self-made schedules. Her problems are further compounded by being unable to concentrate for extended periods of time; instead, she takes numerous breaks, including watching television. By her own account she begins drafts cold, using only the hour prior to drafting to give the paper serious thought.

Given all this, it is surprising to note how many beneficial rituals she practices. She cleans her workspace, paces, and breathes deeply to relax. She stares out windows to gather her thoughts and focuses her attention by listening to instrumental music. However, she mitigates the effect of these practices by placing herself under the pressure of imminent deadlines. It's no wonder that she becomes frustrated when she blocks. She has little time left for delays, and her coping strategy—to sit staring at the blank page—is more likely to create stress than to relieve it. The conditions she chooses would torpedo even a stronger writer's chance for success.

The second student, Marcia, also has five classes, averages eighteen hours each week at a job, and spends sixteen to twenty hours each week (twice as much as Adriana) on homework.

Usually I study in the evening. I start at seven or eight, and lately I've been finishing about one or two. I talk my paper over with my friends. I ask if it's OK to write on this, or I ask them to read it when I'm finished, to see if it's OK. I usually work in my room, sometimes on my bed or in the living room on the floor. For some reason, I can't do my homework on my desk. When I'm in the family room, I just lie down on the couch, and do my homework with my legs up on the table. I play the radio, sometimes I'll watch TV. If it's an interesting show, I'll continue working during the commercials.

I guess I'm just a procrastinator. I always tend to do my writing assignments at the last minute. Like when they give it to you, and they say, this is due a month later, I'll start on it a week before it's due. Sometimes when I'm thinking about a paper, I think, oh, I could write that in my paper, but when I come to writing it, I forget. I get distracted when I watch TV, or when there's people there and I say, OK, I won't do this now, I'll do it later when I'm by myself. Sometimes I'm on the phone or I go out. Then I end up not doing it, or starting late. When I was doing one assignment, I wrote it in about an hour.

If I block, I put it down for a while, or I ask somebody to read it, or do something else. Then I'll go back to it. When I block, I feel mad, yeah, frustrated. I don't cry. I just think, I hate writing, I hate writing. Why do I have to do this? That kind of stuff. Writing is not my subject.

Marcia writes in the evening, after a full day of work and school. Like Adriana, she describes herself as a procrastinator. She has no designated workspace and often seeks distraction in friends or television. Although Adriana describes using an hour to generate and organize her ideas, Maria mentions no such practice. She doesn't write down ideas and often doesn't remember them when she is ready to draft the assignment. There are other clues to serious problems. Although help from peers can be useful, she seems overly reliant on her friends for ideas and approval. She looks to them to tell her whether her choice of subject is a good one, to help her when she blocks, and to tell her whether her draft is adequate. She spends very little time on the work and may not even finish if interrupted. Her frustration with writing is obvious; her rituals—what few she practices—sabotage her efforts.

The third student, Sam, represents a highly ritualistic writer. He is enrolled in four classes, works twenty-five hours, and spends six to ten hours on homework.

I'm really into driving. When I drive I notice everything. Things like, Oh, that billboard wasn't like that yesterday. I notice if my car feels different. I'm constantly looking and thinking. What's going on? And so, when I have time to prepare for my paper, all the thought goes into that, from there.

In high school, my thoughts used to go down on microrecording. But I haven't used it since college. My batteries went dead. I do a little bit of performing stand-up comedy, so now I carry a little book for when I see something funny or some kind of story I want to keep. I've probably been through three of those books. I lose a lot of creative energy when I don't write things down.

My roommates and I lift weights every day. A lot of thoughts come from that. I don't like to sit. When I'm thinking, I pace. I do a lot of what you could call role playing. I think, if I come from here, then I gotta hit the next paragraph this way. I actually look this way, then turn the other way. I really get into my papers, I guess. I'm Italian, I talk with my hands. It's a way to release energy both physically and mentally.

Ideas come at different times. I've been known to write paragraphs on napkins at work. At home, I don't have a desk. I have my computer, which just sits on top of my dresser. I usually sit on my bed. A lot of times I lie down; a lot of times I'll stand up, just depends. I write in the afternoon, I feel a lot better than I do when I write at night. I look out a window and just write. But, when it comes to the mid hours, six o'clock, seven o'clock, there's too many things going on. I'm too jumpy, too hyper to concentrate then.

I'm a very procrastination kind of guy. If I had a paper due in two weeks, there would be a lot of afternoon writing, a lot of jotting down. I'd probably end up pulling it all together late one evening. You never know, that last week, I might come up with something more. But at all times, I'm actively thinking about it.

I never keep working on a problem once I've blocked. I feel this is useless. So, I'll stop, and a half hour later, it'll hit me. If I block at night, I'll stop for the rest of the night. If it's in the day, I'll try to get it again at night. I prefer a sleep period in between. Everybody believes in a fresh new day. A new outlook.

Like Adriana and Marcia, Sam considers himself a procrastinator. But unlike either of them, he actively makes use of the interim between assignment, noting down ideas, even writing entire sections if they take shape in his mind. Because he works better in the afternoon than late at night after he's put in a full day, he tries to schedule his work periods early. He seems to be a kinetic thinker—getting ideas in motion—and he takes advantage of that by allowing himself to pace and act out ideas rather than work at a desk. His interest in stand-up comedy has taught him to pay attention to the world around him, and this has become a source of material for his school assignments. In a way, Sam is always preparing to write. The result? He spends less time on his homework than Marcia and rarely experiences, as Adriana does, the frustration of being blocked.

I appreciated the candor of these and other students in responding to my questions but, as a teacher of writing, I was disheartened by many of the things I learned. Over half of the students surveyed spent fewer than ten hours per week on homework for a full schedule of classes, and three-quarters averaged twice as many hours on the job. The picture that emerged of their composing processes, from both statistics and interviews, was even bleaker. Few practiced rituals to help them write, most wrote under conditions hostile to concentration, and more than two-thirds admitted that procrastination regularly affected the quality of their work.

How Rituals Help

Rituals cannot create meaning where there is none—as anyone knows who has mumbled through prayers thinking of something else. But a knowledge of rituals can make a difference for students who want to make better use of the time they spend on writing. For one thing, rituals help writers pay attention to the conditions under which they choose to work. Some people think, for example, that fifteen minutes spent writing during TV commercial breaks is the equivalent of fifteen minutes of continuous, uninterrupted time. If they knew more about the nature of concentration—such as the destructive effect of interruptions on one's ability to retain and process information—they would recognize the difference. If they knew that language heard externally interferes with tasks requiring the production of inner speech, they would know that instrumental music or white noise (like the hum heard inside a car) might enhance their ability to write but that television or music with lyrics is likely to make work more difficult.

A knowledge of rituals can also encourage more effective use of the time spent on assignments. While many teachers consider two hours of homework a reasonable expectation for each hour in class, the students I talk to spent half that time and projects were typically written in one stressful sitting. Writing teacher Peter Elbow calls this “The Dangerous Method” and warns that it not only increases the pressure but depends for its success on a lack of any mishaps or mental blocks.

The problem with waiting until the last minute to write is that ideas rarely appear on demand. Instead, they come when listening to others, while reading or dreaming, or in the middle of other activities. Certain conditions stimulate their production, such as when a writer is relaxed and the mind is not strongly preoccupied with other matters. These moments may occur at particular periods of the day, for example, during “hypnagogic” states, the stage between waking and dreaming. Automatic, repetitious activity has a similar effect, which may be why writers often mention the benefits of walking, pacing, or exercising of some kind. They learn to make use of those times by noting down ideas or combining naturally productive times with their scheduled writing time.

Having some ideas to start with is an advantage to the writer, but not enough in itself. Ideas seldom occur as full-blown concepts, complete with all of the details, order, and connections that are required for formal writing. More often, they begin as an image, sensation, key word or phrase, or a sketchy sense of shape and structure. Transforming these bits into a full-fledged piece—whether poem, essay, or short story—usually requires one or more periods of concentration. The term concentration means “to bring together, to converge, to meet in one point” and in reference to thinking, it refers to keeping one’s attention and activity fixed on a single problem, however complex. For the kind of writing required at the college level, concentration is crucial.

Most of us know that it is hard to concentrate when we are tired, when interrupted or preoccupied, ill or under stress—thus we recognize, experientially, that writing requires the concerted effort of mind *and* body. Some people can concentrate under adverse conditions—they could work unfazed in the middle of a hurricane if they wanted to—but most of us aren’t like that. Concentration comes naturally to a few things that we like to do or are vitally interested in—music, perhaps, or sports. The rest of the time, we juggle several things at once, like jotting down a shopping list while we watch TV or organizing the day ahead while we take a shower. Switching from this kind of divided or scattered mental activity to a state of concentration often generates resistance, especially when the task is unpleasant or formidable.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1975), a psychologist at the University of Chicago, refers to this state of intense concentration as “flow,” and from interviews with athletes, artists, and various professionals, theorizes that flow can only be achieved when a person is neither bored nor worried, but in control, possessing skills adequate to meet the challenge at hand. The key to achieving and maintaining flow is to balance one’s skills against the challenge. “What

counts," he says, "is the person's ability to restructure the environment so that it will allow flow to occur" (53).

Although rituals can take a bewildering number of forms, they help writers restructure their environment in one or more ways: clear the deck of competing preoccupations, protect from interruptions, encourage relaxation, reduces anxiety, and provide a structure (through established limitations of time) for dividing projects into manageable increments. This last use is especially important as writing assignments increase in length and complexity. The transition from the shorter assignment that can be completed in the space of two or three hours to an assignment that requires weeks of reading, research, and multiple drafts can be devastating to those who have conditioned themselves to write in only one, high-pressured session. In such cases, the writer needs strategies to help him or her overcome mental resistance and make good use of scheduled work-time.

Using Rituals

Because no two writers are alike, no formula for effective rituals exists. Even the same writer may use different rituals for different projects, or for different stages of a project. One writer may need several rituals involving workspace, time, and repetitive activities; another may need only a favorite pen. Every writer must learn to pay attention to his or her own needs, the demands that must be juggled, the mental and biological rhythms of the day, and the spontaneous moments of inspiration. Here are some suggestions for establishing productive rituals:

1. Consider the times of the day in which you are most and least alert. Most people have two or three cycles each day. Note the times that are your best.
2. Identify those times and activities in which ideas naturally occur. These may include certain times of day (when waking up, for example), during physical activities, or when engaged in repetitive or automatic behaviors (driving a car or washing dishes). Carry a tape recorder, small notebook, or some means of recording your ideas as they occur.
3. Draw up a schedule of a typical week. Mark those hours that are already scheduled. Note those times that are left open that correspond with the times identified in items 1 and 2. These are the most effective times to schedule writing. If possible, plan to do your writing during these times instead of "at the last minute." Each semester, once I know when my classes meet, I draw up such a schedule and post it on my refrigerator. Although I can't always use my writing time to work on writing, the schedule serves as a constant reminder of my priorities.
4. Consider the amount of time that you are normally able to maintain concentration. Even experienced writers tend to work for no more than three

or four hours a day. They may spend additional time reading, making notes, or editing a text, but these activities can tolerate more interruptions and can be performed at less-than-peak times. Remember, too, it sometimes takes time to achieve a full state of concentration—an hour may provide only fifteen to twenty minutes of productive time. Writing frequently for short periods of time may be best. Many writers advocate working a little bit every day because the frequency helps lessen the initial resistance to concentration.

5. Consider the conditions under which you work best. Do you need absolute silence or background noise? Does music help you to focus or does it distract you? Do you prefer to work alone or with other people around? Do you prefer certain kinds of pens, inks, or paper, or do you need access to a typewriter or computer? Do you work best when sitting, standing, or lying down? Does it help you to pace or rock in a rocking chair or prepare a pot of coffee? Do you prefer natural, incandescent, or fluorescent light? Is the temperature comfortable? Is this a place you can work without being interrupted? Identify these needs and assemble an environment in which you are most comfortable.
6. Cultivate rituals that help you focus. Many writers use meditational exercises, write personal letters, or read recreationally to relax and prime the inner voice with prose rhythms. Some writers eat and drink so as not to be bothered with physical distractions; others eat or drink while they work because the repetitive activity helps them stay focused. Some writers feel they are more mentally alert if they write when they are slightly hungry. Experiment with different rituals and choose what works best for you.

Once concentration is achieved, writers tend to lose awareness of their rituals, but when concentration lapses or writers become blocked, they may consciously use rituals to avoid frustration and regain concentration as quickly as possible. The rituals vary according to the writer, the situation, the task, and the cause of the interruption or block, but common practices suggest several options:

1. Take a short break from the work and return later. If pushed for time, a short break may be most efficient. The trick is to stay away long enough to let strong feelings that may sabotage the writing subside, without letting one's focus shift too far away from the project overall. This is time to get something to drink, stretch out, or put the clothes in the dryer—activities that don't require one's full attention.
2. Shift attention to a different part of the same task and work on that. If you don't need to take a break, work on a section of the project with which you are not blocked. If you know, for example, that you plan to describe a personal experience later in the draft and you know what you want to

say about it (even though you are not yet sure how that experience fits within the overall organization of the piece), go ahead and write it and set it aside for later.

3. Shift attention to a different task and return later. Other tasks can provide a break from the writing and, simultaneously, maintain the feeling of productivity; some professional writers juggle more than one writing project at a time for this very reason.
4. Switch to reading—notes or other texts—to stimulate new ideas and to help regain focus. If you are working from notes or research materials, sometimes browsing through them will remind you of things you wanted to say. If that doesn't work, try reading materials that are not related to your task. One student told me that he used articles in *Rolling Stone* to help him get into a "voice" that helped him write. If you are working on a computer and have lost your sense of direction ("What should I say next?"), printing out your work and reading that may also help you regain your flow of thoughts.
5. Talk to someone about the problem or, if no one is around, write about it. Writers frequently use a friend or family member to talk through their ideas aloud (notice how often family members are thanked in the acknowledgments of books); reading or talking to someone not only offers a respite, but may result in the needed breakthrough.
6. Take a longer break, one which involves physical activity, a full escape from the task, or a period of sleep. If the block seems impenetrable or if you are so angry and frustrated that a short break won't make any difference, then spend enough time away from the task that you can begin afresh. Get out of your workspace, go for a hike, see a movie, or spend an evening shooting pool. Intense physical workouts can burn off tension created by writing blocks. If you're tired, take a nap. Some people can work well when tired, and pulling an all-nighter is possible for them, but others are far better off sleeping first and working later, even if that means waking up at 3:00 A.M. to write.

Coda

Writing this article has reminded me that knowing about rituals and making use of them are not always the same thing. Parts of this developed easily; others had to be teased out line by line. Ideas came while walking the dog, stoking the woodstove, taking hot baths, and discussing my work with others. After reading the last draft, my husband asked me how I intended to conclude. By discussing X, Y, and Z, I answered. I knew exactly what I wanted to say.

That was several nights ago, and today, I can't for the life of me remember what I said. If only I had thought to write it down.

Annotated Bibliography

The writers' rituals described here were gathered from a variety of sources—interviews, published diaries and letters, biographical and autobiographical materials—but anecdotes about rituals appear almost anytime writers discuss their writing processes. For further reading, see the *Paris Review Interviews with Writers* series, Tillie Olsen's *Silence*, or *Working It Out: 23 Women Writers, Artists, Scientists, and Scholars Talk About Their Lives and Work*, edited by Sara Ruddick and Pamela Daniels.

For further reading on writing and altered states of consciousness, see Csikszentmihalyi's *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*, Richard Restak's *The Brain* (based on the PBS television series *The Brain*), and Diane Ackerman's *A Natural History of the Senses*. For an older but excellent introduction to the subject of psychophysiology see *Altered States of Consciousness*, edited by Charles T. Tart.

Although the subject of rituals is not a common one for most teachers of composition, a few have discussed the personal and idiosyncratic needs of writers. See especially several of the self-reflective articles in *Learning by Teaching* by Donald M. Murray, Peter Elbow's *Writing with Power*, and James Moffett's essay, "Writing Inner Speech, and Meditation," in *Coming On Center*.

Work Cited

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly (1975). *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*. New York: Jossey-Bass.

Sharing Ideas

- Describe your best writing conditions and your most effective (even your most secret) writing rituals. For instance, as I write these questions, I have my two cats sleeping behind me, a quiet house, a desk with lots of pencils in a room that is just messy enough (my mess, no one else's), and a mug of coffee. Surely I could write without any of these conditions, but I spent some time arranging the atmosphere I wanted for writing to you.
- What do you sympathize with most or view as most like you as a writer: Adriana, Marcia, or Sam?
- What advice would you give each writer for improving his or her writing processes?
- Tell some stories of times when you achieved flow states (as a writer or during other activities, too).

- What would be involved for you in adopting some of Susan's advice for establishing productive rituals?
 - Explore the connection between rituals and inspiration.
 - Interview professional or amateur writers of your choice; describe and analyze their writing rituals.
 - Use this essay to discuss Joe Quatrone's writing habits as he reports them in his self-analysis in Chapter 24.
-