

2. DEVELOPING EFFICIENT WORK HABITS

Different writers face different advantages and drawbacks in forming good writing habits. The circumstances of your personal life may make it easy or hard to find writing time, but time itself is not the real issue – it's *habit*. Writing must be something you do regularly, like brushing your teeth. The writer who waits for inspiration will wait even longer for a complete, published novel. Writing habits flourish best in routine, but the efficient writer also exploits opportunity.

Routine: Set aside some time every day when you can work undisturbed for an hour or two – first thing in the morning, during lunch, after dinner, whenever you can set aside other demands. Ideally, it's the same time of day. Your family and friends will soon build their routines around yours. With luck, they will resent your unscheduled appearances during your writing time, and will send you packing back to your desk.

Keep your writing equipment (paper, pens, software manuals, etc.) in your writing place, close at hand. Minimize distractions like interesting new magazines and books. Try to find a writing time when few people phone or visit. If a cup of coffee and some background music make you feel less lonely, by all means enjoy them.

Use household chores as thinking time: a chance to review what you've done so far and to consider where your writing should go next. Walking the dog or vacuuming the carpet can provide more ideas than you expect. This is really just "controlled daydreaming," letting your mind freewheel in a particular direction: What the heroine should do in the next chapter, how the hero would respond to escaping a car bomb, how the villain developed his evil character. But the process doesn't seem to work if you just sit and stare at the wall. You need to be up and moving in some automatic pattern.

Don't lean on others for editorial advice and encouragement – least of all people you're emotionally involved with. Spouses, friends and roommates rarely have both editorial perceptiveness and the tact to express it without infuriating you or breaking your heart. Empty praise will get you nowhere; unconstructive criticism can destroy your novel in an instant.

Instead, *be your own editor*: set aside regular times to write yourself letters discussing your own work, articulating what's good and less good in it. In the process you'll easily solve problems that could otherwise grow into full-blown writer's block. On a computer, the letters can form a continuous journal, recording your reactions to the evolving work. Checking back to the first journal entries can help keep you on track – or dramatically show how far you've moved from your original concept.

Writing a letter to yourself is especially helpful if you're beginning to have anxieties about the story. Sometimes we try to suppress those anxieties, which only makes them worse. Anxiety turns to frustration and despair, and finally we abandon the whole project. If you can actually write down what bothers you about your heroine, or your plot, or whatever, the answer to the problem often suggests itself. The act of turning our chaotic thoughts into orderly sentences seems to lead to much quicker and more satisfying solutions.

(Here's a slightly outrageous tip: *Don't respect the text.* Just because you've written something down doesn't mean it has a right to exist. If your internal editor can find a better way to say something, junk the original version and go with the new one. If you can't find a better way, and the passage really isn't good, junk it.)

In addition to these self-addressed letters, keep a daily log of your progress. Word processors' word-count functions are powerful encouragers. The log can give you a sense of accomplishment, especially on big projects, and can enable you to set realistic completion deadlines. For example, if you know you can write 500 words in an hour, and you write three hours a week, you can have a completed novel manuscript of 75,000 words in 50 weeks. If you write ten hours a week, the ms. will be complete in 15 weeks.

Compile a "project bible." This is a list of facts, names, and so on that you expect to be using for constant reference. If you have some important research findings you plan to use, put them in the bible along with their sources. Include lists of characters' names (with descriptions, so their eyes don't change color), unusual words or spellings, etc. The best format for this bible may be a looseleaf binder you can carry with you. (A word of caution: If your bible gets too big to carry easily, you're defeating its purpose.)

Opportunity: If you decide you "can't write" unless you're seated at your Gigabyte II computer with Mozart on the stereo and no one else in the house, you're just making life harder for yourself. Your routine will always contain "dead time" when you're away from home (or at least away from your workplace) with no other task at hand. You might be waiting in a doctor's office, on a bus, or trapped in a large, dull meeting. Use that dead time constructively by carrying your notebook bible in which you can record at least a few lines of a rough draft. Or you might jot down some background notes about your project, or a self-editing idea that's just occurred to you. You can then use these when you're back at your desk producing finished text.

These are general habits that will help you at all stages of the novel-writing process. But you may also find that you need to understand those stages and adapt your habits to each of them. You may not do yourself any good if you plunge into the writing phase before you've worked out a decent outline. So let's take a look at the stages of the novel-writing process, and then consider some techniques to maximize your efficiency in each of them.

Assignment:

Start a journal on your computer. Print out your entries and file them in the back of your bible, where you can consult them when you're away from your computer.

A good early entry for your journal would be a "pitch to yourself" about the story. That is, sell yourself on the story you want to write: What's special about the plot, setting, characters, and theme?

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