

on finding time to write

Get out your paper and pens. Write something for your story for five minutes. Write as fast as you can – don't think, don't pick the pen up from the page, don't be neat, just write as fast as you can. If you need an idea, write about your main characters thinking about the object of desire. If you get stuck, don't stop writing – write "I don't know how to say it" over and over until you get the next word. Go!

Problem

I am often asked about how I find time to write, how I manage my time. Perhaps they ask me because of my large family.

I've observed that I am only ever asked about time management by women. Cynthia Leitich Smith may have the best explanation for that. She said, "Given my cultural-gender socialization, my default is to put everyone and everything else first. I have to say "no" a lot more than I'd like, to people who matter. Though all of those important people support my work in theory, the vast majority persistently expect or at least hope that I will still set it aside for their needs."

I suspect that this is the case for most women. Joseph Conrad, author of *Heart of Darkness* did not warmly welcome the children that blessed his marriage. An absent-minded sort, he expressed surprise each time his wife Jessie delivered a baby. When he emerged from his study after completing a novel, he would observe that his children had grown considerably in the interval.

By comparison, Eudora Welty, soon after her first novel was published, stopped writing to care full-time for her family for fifteen years: for two brothers with severe arthritis and her mother who had had a stroke. Only after her mother died did she return to writing.

I believe the key to making time to write involves three important elements:

1. a burning **desire** to write
2. a definite plan, expressed in some kind of **continuous action**
3. **a mind closed against discouragement and negative influences**

Let's discuss those three points.

1. A burning **desire to write.** We need burning desire or an intense will to write. Vince Lombardi said once, "The difference between a successful person and others is not a lack of strength, not a lack of knowledge, but rather a lack of will." I think that's all so wise and beautiful. Vince Lombardi did not ever tell anyone how to get such will when one has been up half the night with the baby, or when we have a job that sucks our life force five days a week. He was silent on this matter. But somehow you have all nurtured such will. I don't believe there was ever a group of people with a more desire than writers. If desire and will were flammable, you couldn't safely think about lighting a match in this room. We have the burning desire. I don't believe that's the real issue.

2. A definite plan expressed in some kind of **continuous action.** Some people might call that *discipline*. The saying goes: More people have talent than discipline, and that's why discipline pays more. It does take discipline to write because however we may love it, it's work, and nobody is making us do that work and nobody is paying us much for that work, and when its done, somebody will likely say something disparaging about all that work. Discipline implies persistent and consistent effort in the face of obstacles. I don't

necessarily believe that discipline is the real problem, but I do believe it's worth talking about.

For example, how does one get it?

I confess I do not have natural discipline. Everything I do in life has one overarching objective: to be able to do absolutely nothing. But I believe there are a few keys to developing discipline:

First key to developing discipline: declare yourself

Say the words, I am a writer. Unless you define yourself this way, it will be difficult to find a way to fit your writing into days that say, I am a parent, or I am an employee, volunteer, gardener, chauffeur, etc. Until you say the words, I am a writer, out loud, you may not treat it as an integral part of who you are, you may not see it as your work. Unless you say the words, I am a writer, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to give it priority in your life. Saying the words out loud, I am a writer, to yourself, children, friends, parents, coworkers obligates you and empowers you to write.

I heard this advice years ago and I began saying I was a writer I was met with small, compassionate smiles, and they always asked, of course, so what have you published? For years I had to say, "Nothing." But one day you will be able to tell them one of your books has been accepted for publication and it will be worth all the humiliation.

When you fill out forms that ask for your employment information, fill in "writer." When people ask you what you do, say, I'm a writer. Hanging outside the home of an acquaintance is a sign that says, "Writer in residence." I like that. Every time anyone comes to her home, she is declaring herself and defining herself. This is one of the most important ways to trick yourself into developing the discipline of fitting your writing into your everyday life.

The first key to developing discipline is to define yourself as a writer.

Second key to developing discipline: swear off unhealthy, unproductive distractions

It helped me to memorize a Frank Zappa lyric a long time ago. It goes like this:

I am gross and perverted
I'm obsessed 'n deranged
I have existed for years
But very little has changed
I'm the tool of the Government
And industry too
For I am destined to rule
And regulate you

I may be vile and pernicious
But you can't look away
I make you think I'm delicious
With the stuff that I say
I'm the best you can get
Have you guessed me yet?
I'm the slime oozin' out
From your TV set

You will obey me while I lead you
And eat the garbage that I feed you
Until the day that we don't need you
Don't go for help . . . no one will heed you
Your mind is totally controlled
It has been stuffed into my mold
And you will do as you are told
Until the rights to you are sold

If you would rather sell the rights to your novel, avoid being slimed by TV. They say the average person watches three to four hours of TV a day. That's a lot of novels not getting written.

Third key to developing discipline: depend on routine

Marion Dane Bauer tells this story: "When my daughter, the younger of my two children, started first grade, my then husband came to me and said, "It would be awfully nice if you'd go back to work and earn some money." (Since he's a clergyman, the need for more income couldn't be argued.) I had a sudden vision of myself as a very old woman, lying on my death bed saying, "Wait a minute! I wanted to write! Nobody ever gave me time to write!" I realized right then that no one was ever going to *give* me time, that I had to make it myself. So I said to him, "Let me take five years to work seriously, professionally, full time at my writing. If I can't achieve something that you and I agree is success in that time, I won't agree to give up the nasty habit of writing, but I will agree to go back to work full time." He's a pretty good guy--or maybe he's afraid of me, or maybe a bit of both--but he agreed, and I suddenly found myself sitting in a corner of our bedroom at the 1956 manual, portable Smith Corona typewriter that had been my high school graduation gift in front of the blankest sheet of paper anybody has ever stared at. And I stared at it every single day. There was a lot of serendipity in the years that followed, as well as a lot of steady, hard work, but my first book was published in three-and-a-half years, my next one in four-and-a-half years, and when the five year mark rolled around, no one mentioned it. And I've been treating my writing as my work, as the job I go to, ever since."

Honest work calls for both honest attention and honest intention, and part of that has to be showing up for work in some sort of regular fashion. Different stages of a project call for different work habits, but if you can establish a routine that gets you to your work, you will be a long way toward developing a disciplined and professional approach to your writing.

Fourth key to developing discipline: keep small promises to yourself

The key word here is *small*. Hemingway only demanded of himself 500 words a day. Kate DiCamillo only writes two pages a day as does Jane Resh Thomas. All I really demand of myself every day is one perfect sentence. Toni Morrison doesn't write every

day, she just thinks about it every day. Exercise your discipline muscle every day by making and keeping small promises to yourself.

Fifth key to developing discipline: put your writing first in your day

Sarah Ellis said it best: “Don’t clear the decks! If you wait until you've filed your income tax receipts, updated your website, emptied your trash (both real and virtual), paid your bills, answered your phone messages, checked your patron record at three libraries, answered all your correspondence, booked a flight online and dusted the aspidistra you will never, ever write. Just push aside the mess and begin.”

Alison McGhee writes four pages every day before breakfast, and she loves breakfast. Liza Ketchum writes five pages a day and does not allow herself to eat lunch until her writing work is done.

You already have a burning desire to write. And if you will define yourself as a writer, swear off unproductive distractions, establish a routine, make and keep small promises to yourself every day, and put your writing first in your day, you will be a disciplined writer.

3. Now let’s talk about the third important element to making time to write: A mind closed against discouragement and negative influences.

I have a small but prized collection of negative thoughts that I’ve been saving up over the years, and I’ll be happy to share them with you.

Negative thot #1 – I have to do it now, right now

This is especially for the young ones. Give your life time. Remember that in writerly years, if you are 30-something, you are just a little girl. Take time to grow. Serve your apprenticeship. Don’t spoil the joy of the apprenticeship by wishing it away.

Of course, you can't wait for the perfect time to write, either. We all know there's no such thing. A woman named Grace Murray gave me some important counsel when I was young and had just given birth to my sixth baby. She was a retired mother and grandmother who was intrigued by my interest in writing. She knew about it because, of course, I had declared myself. She explained to me that over the years she had published a few articles in the local paper. I said to her, well, someday I'm going to write, when I have the time. She said, "My dear, you will never have the time. I've been waiting for the time all my life and I still don't have the time." She passed away a couple of years later.

I'm almost the same age she was when she gave me the advice. I've learned for myself that she was right. My kids are all grown. But I have eighteen grandchildren I like to see. I have aging parents who need me. I have a husband who likes me to spend time with him once in a while.... You get the idea. If I had waited for that magical time when I had time to write, I *would* still be waiting.

Negative thot # 2 – It's someone else's fault that I don't have time to write

I think sometimes we blame our children or our jobs for not having time to write. Neither children nor employers will thank you (or pay you) for sacrificing all your dreams at the altar of their every whim. People who say they can't write because of their children lay a huge debt at the feet of those children.

Once a doctor called me to say that she didn't really want to be a doctor, she really wanted to be a children's writer. Unfortunately, she didn't feel she could do both. And she couldn't quit her job and follow her dream because she needed the money. So what she was saying was that money was more important than writing. Which is fine – being a doctor is a wonderful thing. But we have to be honest with ourselves. Sometimes it

isn't that we don't get enough of what we want, it's that we don't want what we want with enough passion and drive to make the sacrifices to get it.

Negative thought #3: I'm no good compared to others

Some novice writers worry that they're fooling themselves, that they're not talented. This negative thought can be debilitating. Sloan Wilson said, talent is a very dangerous word because if one believes one has it, one might not be scared enough to rewrite a story a dozen or more times to deserve the attention of others. If one believes one is untalented, one might just give up to make way for those mythical people who can write anything at all because they have a gift from the gods. There is no such thing as talents, and the gods don't give gifts to people who want to write. They just give prizes for hard work."

Experienced writers also can be blocked by comparing themselves. Sarah Ellis confessed once that two of her biggest time wasters are fear and envy. Her fear voice goes like this: "I'm writing the same book over and over again. My publisher doesn't really like my books, she just feels sorry for me. I'm only writing because I'm too lazy/incompetent to have a real job. I don't write for adults because I'm not a real adult, hence not a real human. I'm too slow. I'm repeating myself. My writing is derivative. I'm a lightweight."

Her envy voice goes like this: "Susanne Fischer Staples got a \$25,000 advance for her last book, five times what I ever got. Richardson can write a novel in the time it takes me to format a disk. Tim Wynne-Jones has published in every genre known to children's literature, also for adults and songs and lyrics. I just write the same old thing with the same old plot. In Toronto's Lillian H. Smith's Library there's an entire shelf devoted to Kit Pearson's novels."

How do you get rid of fear and envy? I believe we have to really understand why we write. Most of us write for the sheer joy of it, because we never stopped wanting to

play. We write because we do language. If we can get back to the essential reason why we write, every time, not only will we be less tortured by fear and envy, but we will also be better writers. If money is our biggest motivator, it may be the very thing that keeps us from getting it because we won't be writing our best work, our authentic work.

Now. Count the words you got in your five-minute exercise. Put up your hand if you got close to 100 words. That's five minutes. If you did that every day for a year you'd have 35,000 words – that's about the average length of a children's novel

One more thought that might be wrong.

I wrote my first book *Dragon's Tapestry* when I had six children between the ages of two and twelve. I wrote *Prism Moon* a year later while I was also driving ambulance on an on-call basis. Then I became a single parent with sole custody of the children. I faced the option of going to work in a nearby slaughterhouse because I had no marketable skills – I didn't even know how to turn on a computer. Or I could go to university with the help of single-parent grants and get my undergrad degree. I returned to school and wrote essays for a few years – that was what was important to me. I wrote my third book *Takers Key* as my honors thesis in the last year of my undergraduate degree. I remarried and began working full time and wrote my fourth book *Dollmage* on my lunch hours (the kids are now between the ages of eight and eighteen). While I was working I became pregnant with my seventh child and wrote the first draft of *Tom Finder* while I was on maternity leave. I wrote the first drafts of *Heck Superhero* and *Keturah and Lord Death* while I was in the program here at Vermont College and had toddler. When I graduated, I went back to full time work and did the rewriting of both novels on the commuter bus.

Then!

One summer a wonderful thing happened to me. In my blurb I wrote that I had calculated that I'd spent about 125 days spent on tooth brushing. Well, someone gave

them back to me. Last summer I was fortunate enough to receive a grant from the Canada Council for the Arts to take a leave of absence and write a book I had been thinking about for a long time. Three months to do nothing but write. This was a luxury I had never experienced before. I had a burning desire to write this book. I showed up at my desk in a disciplined fashion and wrote every day for long, delicious hours. I had locked away my collection of negative thoughts. I wrote a hundred pages, and threw them away. This was not alarming. I almost always do this when I begin a project. I wrote a second hundred pages. I threw them away. This had never happened before, but that's okay. I wrote a third hundred pages, relieved that the story was finally coming to me. About page 120, I stopped. I read what I had. I realized that it was bad. Very bad indeed. I kept a few of the pages and started again, for the fourth time. Along about page 100, in despair I admitted that this was the worst of all. I put the pages away, thinking that perhaps I was being too hard on myself. A few months later I took them out and read the first few pages again. No, I wasn't being too hard on myself. They were dreadful. I threw them away.

This experience caused me to wonder if the need for time to write could possibly be an illusion.

Yann Martel said, "Time is an illusion that only makes us pant." Perhaps having time is not as important as having desire, not as important as discipline of character to write for the right reasons, not as important as creating a story you care about so intensely you will get it down even in the smallest corners of an impossibly busy day.

Sometimes you will spend a lot of time on a book that doesn't become a book. This is not wasted time. Samuel Becket said, "Ever tried. Ever failed. No Matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."

Henry David Thoreau said: "Go confidently in the direction of your dreams! Live the life you've imagined. As you simplify your life, the laws of the universe will be simpler."

On your 650,000th hour, may you have no regrets.