

Get Your

Butt



in the

CHAIR

33 Quick Tips You Can Use
RIGHT NOW for More
Productive Writing!

Adam Hughes

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Get Your Butt in the Chair — 33 Quick Tips You Can Use RIGHT NOW for More Productive Writing

By Adam Hughes

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Introduction (Briefly)

Having a plan is essential to building long-term success as a writer.

In fact, I believe whole-heartedly that most authors — *especially* those with full-time, non-writing jobs — will **never** achieve their writing goals by winging it, or by “pantsing,” in the vernacular.

But, *holy crap!*

We authors are the undisputed champs when it comes to using planning as a **weapon against ourselves**.

You’ll write that book when you get your life lined out, when the outline is perfect, when the title resonates with the angels above, when your website is ready for book promotion, when you have 2000 Twitter followers, when ...

Well, when you have your plan tweaked and polished to the point that the words just fall out of your brain and onto the Kindle bestsellers list one morning.

Sound about right?

It sure sounds right — though also so **wrong** — to me *because I’ve been there myself, over and over and over*.

Eventually, you just have to call your plan “good enough” and start writing.

Get your butt in the chair, pull your belly up to the keyboard, and **crank out some damn words**.

And that’s what this book is all about.

What follows are 33 quick writing tips to make you as productive as possible with your *actual writing tasks*.

You won’t find detailed novel plans here, though some of the methods can be used that way — when the time is right.

You won’t find your muse buried in these pages, either, though hopefully at least one of these techniques will motivate you to up your word count TODAY.

You will find suggestions for boosting your output every time you sit down to scribe.

So, if you're ready to write — finally — and just need some fast ideas to get you moving, you're in the right place.

Buckle up, click through these chapters (or skip around if you want), and then get to writing.

Thanks for reading.

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Stop Doing

We all carry a lot of baggage that weighs us down and keeps us from achieving all we could. Some of this excess blubber is the price of living in the world and may be unavoidable to some extent — things like commuting, preparing meals, going bowling with your father-in-law on Monday night when all you really want to do is write the next chapter of your book.

But there are plenty of shackles that we place on our own wrists and ankles out of an obligation to tradition or because someone told us we should be doing something. These are the activities that suck a ton of our time but yield little or nothing in terms of growth and don't provide any essential benefit like keeping you alive or maintaining a good relationship with your spouse.

For example, how many times have you heard that authors need to maintain an active blog, post to social media several times a day, or write detailed outlines of each book before they start writing? It's all standard advice that most of us take to heart and try to implement to at least some extent.

But do those activities really make a difference to your bottom line, which is producing more books and building a bigger audience? And do you really have **time** for all that?

Maybe the answer to both of those questions is, "yes" ... for you. But it won't be yes for everyone, and I'm certain there are things you're doing every day, *right now*, in the name of your writing career that are not helping you at all and may very well be hindering you.

Call it what you want: your stop-doing list, the Pareto Principle, the 80/20 Rule. No matter what you name it, just realize that you need to focus your energies on the activities that matter most in whatever endeavor you're undertaking while limiting or eliminating those activities that don't bring you the results you seek.

For writers, the potential list of 20% activities (those that don't contribute materially to your success) would include:

- Blogging
- Guest blogging
- Social media
- Writing exercises
- Detailed outlines
- Pantsing

Again, it's not a certainty that any of these will or won't help you along the path toward your goals, but you need to evaluate them critically. For instance, are you getting any new downloads from the Tweets you're sending into the netosphere? If you've been at it for awhile and can't show a direct correlation between Twitter usage and your sales or book production, it might be time to retire your little blue bird.

And this list is far complete. In fact, about the only activities that most authors engage in that **shouldn't** be considered candidates for the "cut" list are writing and reading. Even then, there are qualifiers.

Does writing a short story for a contest do anything to move your author's needle? Does reading Cracked every day help you become a better writer?

Maybe, but maybe not.

Find your fat.

Cut it.

Then dig in on the meat left behind.

Mini-Milestones

To paraphrase the old rub, “How do you write a novel about elephants?”.

The answer, of course, is “one word at a time.”

That may seem obvious or trite depending on your vantage point, but it holds a truth that too many authors overlook to their detriment.

Overwhelmed by Blank Pages

The idea of completing a novel when you’re staring at that first blank page can seem overwhelming. How in the world will you ever write a hundred thousand words of readable content?

It’s almost unfathomable.

But you want to do it, need to do it, so you get started.

You write a sentence. Then another. Maybe you string together 500 words over the course of a disjointed hour.

Then you check your progress against your eventual word target. Great, only 99,500 words to go!

This is where many authors back off or give up completely. The goal is to complete a novel, and they can’t get any real traction in that direction.

What’s the point of banging your head against the wall?

One of the best ways to overcome this kind of progress stall is to set up a series of mini-milestones.

Bite-Sized Tasks Build Into a Full Novel

In most cases, mini-milestones are simply the steps that you must go through to reach your ultimate goal anyway, only you call them out by name. In our example of writing a 100-thousand word novel, your mini-milestones might look like this:

- Write a synopsis of the story you want to create.
Build an outline of your story.
Break your outline down into chapters.

Write beats for your chapters.
Write Chapter 1.
Write Chapter 2.
Write Chapter 3.
Write Chapter 4.
...
Write Chapter N.
Author edits
Developmental edits
Revisions
Line editing
Revisions
Copy editing
Corrections
Final proofreading
Corrections
Get book cover
Publish

Sound like a plan? It's more than that ... it's actually ...

Your Novel-Writing Roadmap

There may be more or less points involved in your actual novel depending on your stage of development and your end goals, but you get the picture. Each milestone in this list is something tangible to strive toward. You can and should assign target dates for completing each one and, when you do, the list becomes a timed roadmap that will take you from your first blank page to your finished novel.

Your roadmap may look daunting — after all, there is still a ton of work to do here. But you're no longer faced with the entire novel as your atomic unit, and you get the reward of accomplishment every time you knock off one of your smaller milestones. That doesn't necessarily mean that you have to reward yourself physically every time you, say, complete a chapter, but you could if that helps you.

It does mean you should revel in the achievement each time, though, even if for just a few moments.

You can get back to work in short order with your enthusiasm high not only because you've reached a goal, but because the next goal on your list is attainable in a reasonable amount of time — and it's something a bit new, which always tends

to pique short-term interest.

Use mini-milestones any time you have a monumental challenge ahead of you, and soon you'll be eating elephants left and right.

Daily Goals

When I was a junior in high school, our student body president was a preppy, cocky senior who was annoyingly sure of himself. I was not a fan of his style in general.

At our fall academic honors banquet, this student was the keynote speaker, and most of his talk is a blur to me. He did, however, relay one insightful nugget that has stayed with me all these years and instantly raised his status in my eyes. To paraphrase:

Shooting at Nothing

“A young, aspiring basketball player practiced hard every day for years, worked out religiously, and studied play books late into the night, every night. His diligence paid off when he was named a starter on his high school team as a freshman, and he enthusiastically invited all his friends and family watch him play in his first game, which was also to be the first game in the school’s sparkling new arena.

“At tipoff, this young man raced to the ball and sprinted down the court, dribbling with perfect grace and leaving his opponents gasping for air behind him. As he neared the end of the court, he snatched the ball to his body and went into a perfect layup. He had practiced the move so many times in preparation for his big moment that he didn’t even notice that the construction crew had failed to install backboards or baskets on the court. Spectators later told him that his play reminded them of watching a ballet, but his shot sailed into the air bounced across the floor and into the stands.

“Without a goal, all his hard work and preparation meant nothing, and his perfect shot was just an ephemeral piece of art that helped his team not at all.”

Sure, this a contrived story, but its lesson resonates with me still. If you don’t have a **goal**, then why are you working so hard?

Don’t Write Without a Goal

As writers, most of us have lofty visions of what we’d like to do, what we’d like to be, someday, but we often neglect to map out a path that will get us there. And, way too often, we have no set goal for our writing in a particular *week* or *day*.

So here’s the challenge: before you put pen to paper **today**, make sure you know

what you're trying to accomplish.

Do you want to write 1000 words? That's your goal.

Are you trying to write a 50,000-word novel in the next 30 days? Then you'd better crank out at least 1700 today.

Been working on a blog post for awhile? Make *this* the day you put a fork in it.

Whatever you do, make sure you always have a goal of some sort, and watch your productivity spiral to new levels.

Prioritize

Even if you successfully break down your goals into bite-sized chunks — such as daily goals and mini-milestones -- there is still a danger of not achieving your goals.

The problem is that we all have a stack of competing tasks and, even when we work in manageable fragments, we can get distracted by the avalanche of demands on our time. If you're working on a novel and a blog and a short story all during the same period, how do you know which one you should work on at any given time?

The answer is that you have to prioritize your writing tasks.

How to Prioritize Your Writing Projects

First off, you need to prioritize your *writing* — as a general concept in your life. That's why setting deadlines and scheduling your writing are so crucial to success. They force you to value your writing right along with all the other important parts of your world.

For this discussion, let's assume you've already taken care of that part.

Now, what we want to do here is prioritize your writing *activities against each other*.

Here's how to go about it:

Line up all your projects where you can see them. You can use post-it notes, index cards, or a spreadsheet, but one of my favorite tools for prioritization is Trello.

For each project on your list, figure out:

- How important is it to your overall goals as an author?
- How long will it take you to complete the project?
- When is the optimal time to complete the project?
- How will the project move you toward your goals? Will it make money? Generate traffic?
- How bad would you feel if you don't ever complete the project? Would it really matter?

After you answer these questions, use them as a score and rank your projects against each other. Order them from highest priority — all things considered — to

lowest priority.

How to Prioritize Your Writing *Tasks*

Now that you have your list of projects in order, you need to determine how you'll go about doing the actual work to finish your projects.

Prioritization will help you out here, too. This time, though, you'll be ranking the smaller, session-by-session tasks that will take you from first blank page to finished novel (or whatever your goals is).

Here's how:

- Start with the project on top of your priorities list.
- If you haven't done so already, break down that project into a series of tasks, each of which is bite-sized in some way. Some divisions you might consider:
 - Chapters for a novel or how-to book
 - Individual blog posts for a new website
 - Bullet points from your project outline
 - Any other unit of work you can complete in one or two sittings
- For each item in the task list developed above, ask these questions:
 - How risky is it to my project if I don't finish this task?
 - How risky is it to my project if I don't finish this task?
 - How long will it take to finish this task?
 - Am I sure this task can't be broken up further? (If yes, chunk it up and start the task-level prioritization over from the top.)
 - When do I need to finish this task in order to complete my project on time?
- Armed with these "scores," rank the tasks from highest priority to lowest priority.
- Repeat these steps for the next project on your overall priorities list.

Depending on how closely your projects rank to each other in terms of overall priorities, I would recommend having task-level priorities available for 2-4 projects

at a time. That way, you always know what you *should* be doing at any given writing session.

How to Use Your Priorities

So there you have it: a list of task-level priorities to drive your writing efforts for the foreseeable future.

Your destiny is set, for better or for worse.

OK, maybe it's not quite *that* dire.

In reality, you should maintain some flexibility in your schedule or you risk burnout. No one is a robot who can just chug through the same list day after day.

So how should you use your priorities list? As usual — in this post, at least — I have some bullet points:

- Open your prioritized list of writing tasks.
- Open your weekly writing schedule.
- Start at the top of your priorities list and match that task to the first time slot that fits the anticipated completion time for the task. Schedule it.
- Alternatively, schedule the task across multiple time slots if it won't fit in one.
- Move on to the second task and the third and so on.
- Schedule out your work for the next week or two.

You'll run into situations where none of the work in your top project that fits any available time slots. In those cases, you can move to your second project and start plucking priorities from there.

And, once you knock out a few of your top priorities from your top project, you may decide that your second-level project needs some love.

When that happens, you're all set, because, once again, all you have to do is start at the top of Project 2 and slot those high-priority tasks as soon as you can.

Not only does prioritization help ensure you stay on track with your writing goals, it also gives you the freedom to be flexible with your work, and to flex with confidence.

Daily Prioritization

What are your writing priorities for *tomorrow*?

That is, when you've finished at your day job or cleared away your chores or settled in for some late-night creating, what will you be working on?

(And if you don't already have your writing blocks scheduled, you better [get to it.](#))

Dabbler in All words, Master of None?

If you're like most writers, me included, you have tons of ideas about what you want to be writing at any given time. Heck, you may even have several projects *in progress* at any given time. And that's fine ... as long as you know what your priorities are.

As long as you know what you're supposed to be working on today, and tomorrow.

That's why you should make a habit of ending each day by prioritizing your work for the next day. This technique can work for any area of your life, but it's especially important for your writing *precisely because* you have so many ideas flying around all the time.

A common scenario is to sit down at your computer, open up Scrivener, and crank out a hundred or so words on your novel. Then a vision of a great blog post flashes through your mind, and you fire up WordPress. You get off to a good start, but the words just aren't flowing into the post the way they sounded in your head, so you move on again ... maybe back to your novel, maybe to a short story, maybe to email, or maybe to nothing productive at all.

This is a sure path to *finishing* nothing and, I suspect, one of the main culprits in the epidemic of [writer's block](#) that we hear about all the time. Without a clear plan for the day, you'll twist in the wind.

So here's what you should do instead ...

Prioritize Your Writing *Every Day*

First, make sure you have all of your writing goals and tasks written down

somewhere that is very easy to access. You can use any kind of tool you want for this, but I find Kanban boards extremely useful, and [Trello is about the best](#) of the lot. It's also free.

OK, now, every night before you go to bed, set aside five or 10 minutes to review your writing world — the list of projects and tasks that you have on your plate. During this session, ask yourself, “What is the most important short-term goal for me to accomplish in order to move closer to my writing dream (whatever that may be)?”.

Be honest with yourself here, and don't just go for sexy. Sometimes (usually) it's more important to finish that next chapter than to find the perfect accent color for your website, as boring as that may sound.

Once you have identified your **most important** goal, then ask, “What is the one most important task I need to accomplish tomorrow to achieve my most important short-term writing goal?”

Now, take that task and move it to the top of your list (this is really easy to do with Trello).

Don't Stop at the Top

Repeat this process over and over, building out your second, third, fourth, etc., most important tasks for the next day. Keep going until you're confident you have identified enough work to fill whatever time you will have available for writing.

Once you have your list ordered, read down it one last time and then hit the hay.

Now the tricky part: when you sit down to write the next day, start at the top of your list and tackle that number-one task.

Don't stop writing or change tasks until your most important one is finished.

When you can confidently and legitimately check that paramount task off your list, then move on to number 2.

Rinse. Repeat. Produce.

Worst First

“If it's your job to eat a frog, it's best to do it first thing in the morning. And If it's your job to eat two frogs, it's best to eat the biggest one first.” — Mark Twain (via BrainyQuotes.com)

Veggies-cum-Frogs

I wish I had been familiar with this quote when I was younger. Twain's advice about getting the worst of a task out of the way just might have saved me a heap of trouble and many nights of angst.

You see, when I was a kid, our “suppers” would almost always consist of some sort of meat, a starchy carbohydrate, and a vegetable. Back then, it seemed as if all the veggies that showed up on our table came from a can, and they were slimy, foul, disgusting, and just generally Grinch-like.

I usually did OK with the meat-and-potatoes portion of the meal, but the vile weeds were a different story altogether. I can't even *tell* you how many nights I sat staring at my bowl of Brussels sprouts, cauliflower, broccoli, or spinach for hours on end, just praying that my mom would get tired of threatening me with paternal “interaction” if I didn't finish the goo.

Tough Tasks Won't Just Go Away

She never did, though.

I had to eat them, and by the time I did, they were always ice cold and tasted worse than ever. We didn't have microwaves back then, so re-heating meant firing up the stove again, and THAT wasn't going to happen. (On a side note ... *I'm so old!*)

Eventually, I figured out that I was going to have to slug down the villainous plants no matter what, so I might as well do it while they were at least hot. Before long, I realized that not only did eating my veggies **FIRST** get them out of the way and out of my sight, it also left a beautiful plateful of the foods I *wanted* to eat.

And, I didn't have the specter of the dreaded okra chaser hanging over my head.

These days, I love almost all kinds of vegetables but opt for the fresh or lightly steamed varieties when I can. The green stuff no longer causes me heartburn or

anxiety, and it's been years since I lost any sleep over food.

Still, those dinner-table battles taught me a lesson that I revisit from time to time when I feel stuck ...

DO WHAT YOU HATE FIRST!

OK, maybe "hate" is harsh, but if you have a series of tasks you need to complete, there is bound to be at least one that makes your heart jump and your palms sweat just thinking about it. And it'll sit there mocking you, just like my bowl of cold peas, until you finish it.

Now, there may be times when order matters — you can't *publish* your book before you write it, for instance. But when you have a choice, you're almost always better off to do the icky stuff first and leave yourself with a plateful of dessert.

So get out there. Write that email. Compile your book in Scrivener. Pick your antagonist's name, already!

And when you're done, you can do what you love. (HINT: That *should* be writing your story if you're reading this.)

Batching

There are tasks we all complete each day or each week that, while important, are not really material to getting more words on the page. Most of these duties don't take a lot of time on a per-unit basis, either, but they can be disruptive to your creative workflow. Among the tasks that fit into this category, depending on your situation, are:

- Checking, answering, and sending email
- Interacting on social media channels
- Updating your blog or website
- Cover creation
- Writing blurbs
- Editing your work
- Planning your work
- Actually publishing your books

These are just the tasks that are, or at least may be, directly related to your writing career, and there are probably dozens more you could add.

Tedium Is Everywhere

To this list you can add the repetitive tasks you do outside of your writing life but which cost you time, energy, and mental attention:

- Buying groceries
- Cleaning the house
- Mowing the lawn
- Paying bills
- Watching TV
- Doing laundry

You get the point.

We do all do a lot of “stuff,” and we're constantly switching from one small task to the next.

Necessary To-Do or Convenient Distraction?

It's bad enough that we have to **do** all these things (maybe — see the Stop Doing chapter), but what's worse is that they disrupt our writing productivity when we

don't have a plan for getting them done as economically as possible. Worst of *all* is that many of us use these activities as a crutch for avoiding butt-in-chair writing time.

How many times have you been stuck for a word or thought while writing and decided to pop over to your email for "just a minute," only to get sidetracked on some net surfing adventure?

"Way too many" is my guess.

So what's the answer?

Batching to the Rescue

Well, your first option should be to kill off any and every extraneous activity that you can, then delegate as many others as possible. For those that are left, **batching** can help ease the burden they impose on your writing schedule.

Email provides a good example.

Instead of leaving your email application open *all the time*, designate a couple times per day for working on email, and schedule 10 minutes or so at each session. Then, when that time rolls around, open up your email, do what you need to do, and close it down again. If you take this approach you might be able to reduce a major time sink from, say, two hours a day to just 20 minutes.

Shopping for groceries is a great example of a non-writing, non-promotional activity that also can benefit from batching. Since we're all pretty mobile these days, it's easy to just pick up what we need at the store, when we need it.

Sounds convenient, but there is a hefty overhead for each trip to the market. Parking, getting a cart, cherry-picking your way through the store, and checking out several times a week can add up to significant lost time over the course of a month or two. Aim for one shopping trip every week or two, and stock up on what you need.

The bottom line is that you need to treat your writing time as a precious commodity and not waste it on any more menial tasks than are absolutely necessary. Batching won't get you out of washing your clothes, but it *will* help you reclaim much of your intellectual bandwidth.

Timeboxing

If there is one common wish among authors, and especially among authors who hold down non-writing jobs, it is simply to have more time to write.

The Most Precious Resource?

How many times have you said to yourself something along the lines of, “I could finally finish my novel if I could just make each day a couple of hours longer!”?

I’ll wager it’s a thought that passes through your mind at least several times a week.

Now ...

How many times have you found yourself with a couple of hours to spend on your writing but you sit down at the keyboard, you spend the first 30 minutes checking email and paging through Facebook? And then, if you find something interesting or funny in your feed, don't you spend a few minutes more “researching” that topic on the Internet? And *then*, when your writing time is up, you feel depressed because you've knocked out only a couple hundred words and wasted your shot at doing some writing?

And even at that, were the scant few thoughts you managed to get onto “paper” disjointed and unworthy of your vision for your book?

Yeah, happens all the time. To all of us.

Happens so much, in fact, that there's a name for it ...

Parkinson's Law

[Parkinson's Law](#) tells us that work expands to fill all the time allotted to it, whether or not that much time is actually *required*. It seems to be part of the human condition, and you’ve probably witnessed Parkinson in action everywhere from road repair crews to your child’s homework to your own job.

It just seems like, no matter what kind of mental constructs we try to impose on our work, we always space it out over whatever time frame we have available.

This is not *terrible* if you're good at lining up tasks with the time blocks you set aside for them, but it can be disastrous if you undertake an open-ended project during a more or less open-ended time frame.

So when you sit down to "work on your book" and have three hours at your disposal, the indefinite goal mixed with the huge chunk of time is more likely than not to leave you (way) short of full productivity.

Timeboxing to the Rescue

What's the solution, then? You certainly don't want to throw away a golden opportunity to write just because there is a high likelihood that you'll misuse that time, right?

Of course, you don't, and timeboxing can help alleviate both the anxiety of staring at a blank page in front of a huge writing project and the defeat of underperformance.

Here's how it works ...

1. No matter how much time you have *available* to you, break it up into short "sprints" of, say 20 or 30 minutes.
2. Now, break each sprint a bit further into 15- or 25-minute "work" periods and 5-minute "rest" periods.
3. Pull out your [list of chunked-up work](#) to be done — from your novel outline, for example.
4. Pick a hunk of work to tackle.
5. Set a timer for your "work" period.
6. Start the timer.
7. Write until the timer goes off.
8. Set the timer for your "rest" period.
9. "Rest" until the timer goes off. Resting in this context can mean walking around, reading a book, stretching, etc.
10. Repeat steps 5-9 until all your time is gone.

If you follow this routine diligently, your word count will likely be at least twice what it would have been if you were free-wheeling for a couple of hours. The spurts of effort and short back-off periods are awesome for honing your concentration, and you just might get hooked on this type of "cycling."

Writing: the Time-Filler

After you've used timeboxing for a while, you'll also probably realize that you have more time to write than you thought you did. After all, if you can rip off 500 quality words in 15 minutes (definitely possible), it's pretty hard to justify killing time between meetings or waiting to pick up your son from soccer practice.

Write instead!

Early Bird

Little kids the world over and from time immemorial have been graced with the wise advice of their elders. When it comes to getting ahead in life, the counsel usually goes something like: "The early bird gets the worm!".

It's trite and overused and yet ... we still hear this advice all the time.

Not only is this nugget nestled into just about every productivity post and book, but we have actual living, breathing examples of people who get up early and are extremely productive.

Early Rising -- Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous

A 2016 [article at Business Insider](#) lists 21 of these go-getters. Among them are Michelle Obama, Richard Branson, Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz, Xerox CEO Ursula Burns, and scads of other tycoons and luminaries.

And writers looking to squeeze in as many words as possible are constantly told to wake up early and write before the rest of the world can wreck their days.

I'd love to be a contrarian here and tell you the advice is bunk. That you can sleep in all you want and not forfeit a golden opportunity to boost your word count.

I'd love to tell you that because I'd love to cuddle into my blankets for an hour or two longer each morning.

But I can't say that because, in my experience, early morning really is an almost magical time for writers.

Why Waking Up Early to Write Is So Awesome

If you've never tried waking up early to write, you might not know that ...

- The house is really quiet at 5 am. That means you can concentrate -- completely -- on what you're doing.
- There's nothing else scheduled at 5 am. That means you don't have to scrape to keep your time safe from the ravages of interruptions -- that time is all yours.
- No one cares what you look like at 5 am. Write in your pajamas or grease-stained sweats at 5 am. No one is going to see you.
- When you finish your writing early, you don't have to worry about it

later. You can attack the rest of your day with peace of mind and without the anxiety of wondering whether you'll get time to write later on.

- Your mind is calm at 5 am. Unless you have a bad dream or something really stressful happening in your life, chances are you'll be at your most peaceful when you wake up. The weight of the day hasn't had a chance to frazzle your nerves.
- Early risers are more productive and more proactive. In a [2010 study](#) at the University of Education in Heidelberg, Germany, Professor Christoph Randler found a positive correlation between waking up early every day and proactivity/productivity. Causation is not clear, but here is a definite relationship.

Of course, 5 am is just an example. Some go-getters rise at 3 am or before, and 6 am is still pretty early for most folks.

So you have some semantic leeway if you want to try the early-bird routine. It's not for everyone, though, and there are ...

Drawbacks to Waking Up Early to Write

You can't just blindly jump into any new habit without considering the downside. In the case of rising early to write, you should know that ...

- You need your winks. Sleep deprivation packs a serious bad-health [punch](#), and no book or writing project is worth sacrificing your well-being.
- You might disturb your family or housemates. They'll probably get over it, though.
- You might not want to stop writing. Seriously, when you get rolling in a writing session, it's hard to stop. Bad news if you have to go to work.
- You might not be able to stay awake late. Not a big deal for most, and you DO need your sleep (see first point above). But if you have to stay up late for some reason, consistently waking up early can be a real drag.
- You might run out of things to write. Ha! Just kidding ... your next inspiration is always just a funny cat video away, right?

Should YOU Wake Up Early to Write?

So there you have them ... the cases for and against early-morning writing.

Is it for you?

You're a good candidate for pre-dawn scribing if ...

- You can't write as much as you want during the week.
- You've tried early writing before and found it to be helpful but didn't stick with it.
- You've never tried early writing.
- You have big writing goals but not enough time -- normally -- to pull them off.
- You have a stressful job or home situation that breaks you down as the day wears on.

You may not be a good candidate for waking up early to write if ...

- You're already getting up early ... can you really wake up earlier?
- You're already short on sleep.
- You're getting done all the writing you want to get done.
- Writing is a not all that important to you, so however much you get done is cool with you.
- You need or like to stay up late on a consistent basis.

The choice is yours, but most writers would be well-served to try early-morning writing at least once in their lives.

Gap Reading

The single most important key to writing more, and writing better, is simply to get your bottom in the chair, belly-up to the keyboard, and actually *write*. Do it a lot, even if you don't have much time per session. Eventually, all of those minutes and hours will turn into words and chapters, and you'll have built a decent body of work.

But if you're looking for a single tip or trick to *improve* your writing, then you can't do much better than reading.

Reading Is Your Secret Writing Weapon

Hopefully, if you're a writer and have designs on making writing a major part of your life, you're already an avid reader. Because only by reading a ton can you discover the type of writer you want to be and the style of writing that you want to emulate. Reading will also teach you more about sentence structure and word choice than Mrs. Graham's ninth-grade English class ever could.

So, you know you should read ... but *what* should you read?

Well, fiction for sure. Especially in the genre(s) in which you plan to write.

But non-fiction has a place in your library, too. Read history when you're doing research for your stories or when you just want to learn something about the human condition. As they say, truth can be stranger than fiction, and you may not believe some of the stuff our predecessors went through.

Read books and blogs about writing, but don't get too hung up on them or any particular advice. Read other personal-development books but, again, don't get so wrapped up in trying to find a better mousetrap that you miss the cheese right under your nose.

Read news and sports and entertainment websites if you want, but not to excess. A positive mindset is important, and dwelling on the wildness and bitterness that passes as news can bring you down.

The Infinite Book Room

That's a huge library to consider, and it really just skims the top of the book stack available to us in this age of e-readers and free e-books.

Your bandwidth is likely already jammed with emails, phone calls, and soccer practices, so how are you ever going to do all the reading you want to do?

The truth is, you'll probably never catch up on your reading list, but that's a good thing. The minute we think we know everything or have read all there is of interest to read in the world is the moment we stop learning and start dying.

Make a Dent with Gap Reading

But you almost surely can read *more* than you are now ... if you engage in a little "gap reading."

No matter how busy you are, there are down times in your schedule every day — periods when you're just waiting for the next thing to happen. These are the golden moments that can boost your page count and help you take in more of the information you crave.

These days, it's really easy to take advantage of these opportunities, too.

Just install the Kindle reader app on your phone and download some free e-books -- or buy the ones you really want to read. Then, any time you find yourself twiddling your thumbs, pull out your phone and start learning. Truth be told, you probably *already* pull out your phone in these cases, but instead of scrolling through your Facebook feed, why not do something productive?

Heck, your family and friends don't even have to know what you're doing if you don't want them to. After all, they have their noses buried in their own phones most of the time, too.

Find the Gaps

Gap reading can be used in many contexts, but here are just a few ideas:

- In waiting rooms (doctor's office, car repair shops, principal's office, etc.)
- While exercising, especially on a treadmill or stationary bike
- At your kids' soccer practices (you're not watching every move the whole time)
- Instead of watching TV at night
- Even *while* watching TV if your spouse is picking the show and you really don't like it

- Walking to and from the bathroom during breaks at work — don't crash into anyone, though!
- Waiting for your food at a restaurant
- During your commute if you carpool
- During your commute if you drive alone — audio books only for this one!

The list goes on and on, and it's limited only by your imagination.

Gap reading is the sneaky method of squeezing more information into your brain so that you can become a better writer over time. Make liberal use of it if your "to read" list seems to only grow, but never shrink.

Tempo (fast)

One of the insights that [NaNoWriMo](#) has imparted to the writing community is that it's possible to write fast. I mean, if you'd have told me a few years ago that I could write a novel — even “just” a first draft — in a month, I would have clutched tight to my wallet.

But having been through the November ringer three times now, I know it's possible. So do thousands of other authors, who either have completed their own NaNoWriMo journeys or who take inspiration from those who do.

"Slow Writing" for Better Results?

Recently, I have noticed a backlash of sorts against this kind of speedy writing, though. Folks who participate in this “slow writing” movement generally drop their arguments into two buckets: you can't write good stuff quickly OR you'll kill yourself trying to write fast.

To the first of these, I say, “Bullocks!”.

To a great degree, you can either write well, or you can't. Slowing down may make you think about your structure or your plot or your word choice, but you should have most of that figured out before you ever lay a fingertip on your keyboard. On the other hand, moving very slowly is a proven method for producing stilted prose and locking you into a writer's prison of self-doubt and second-guessing. It's like an invitation to writer's block.

I'll never be a great literary genius, but my words flow nice and easy when I keep my pace at 1000-words-per hour or higher. If I drop below 500, I start to agonize over every word, and I get slower ... and agonize more ... and get slower still.

For me, slower writing usually means worse writing.

Compete with Yourself

To the second objection to fast writing — that you'll run yourself ragged trying to “keep up” — I say it's all relative to you, not to anyone else.

Gauge your speed against what *you* have done in the past, not against what I do or what NaNoWriMo tells you *should* be doing.

The bottom line is that *you're going to be dead soon*. That's a pretty dark thought, but here's something even darker ... whatever stories you have in your head and don't write down before you bite the big one will die right along with you.

You only have so much time to get your art out into the world. You need to make the most of that time, and *that* means writing as fast as you can while maintaining the quality you want to project. This becomes more imperative and frustrating as you age because the more life experience you have, the more story ideas you generate.

And yet ... the less time you have.

Die Empty

If you want to be as productive a writer as you can be, you need to gear your whole approach for speed. Every day, cut a bit more fat from your prose, improve your typing, streamline your planning. Improve, improve, improve!

You're going to fall short of the author legacy you envision for yourself, but you the way to move as close as possible to your full potential is to leave everything on the playing field of your manuscripts.

Fill them with as many of your stories as you can. When you've reached your limit of production, push a little harder. Never let up.

Write faster. Get your stories out there. Dying with an empty brain is the goal.

Insanely Bad

We all want to be the best we can be.

I mean, no one sets out to mediocre, right?

But that drive to be the best can lead us down the rabbit hole of perfectionism.

Never Good Enough ... for You

Have you ever fiddled around with the ordering of words in a sentence for more than a few minutes or spent an hour tweaking the RGB values of the accent colors on your website trying to get them “just right”? I know I have, and it’s maddening.

It’s also not productive.

No one is going to care whether your visited links show up in candy apple red or in fire engine red, so all that time you spent making your decision was just wasted.

It’s tough to break free from perfectionism because you can always fool yourself into thinking that you’re just dedicated to improvement. It’s also a very comfortable place to be because, if you spend all your time twiddling font knobs, you’ll never have to tackle the tough part of your job as a writer — *writing*.

Getting Bad to Get Better

Just as with every other condition you can imagine, humans have come up with all sorts of ways to overcome perfectionism and move on from the paralysis it engenders. But there is one technique that you may not have tried, and it’s a fun one ...

Be terrible!

I don’t mean yell-at-your-kids or burn-a-book terrible. No, I’m talking about picking a writing “assignment” and approaching it in such a way that you *know* the results are going to be just awful.

Here are some ideas about how you might tackle this:

- Write a short story using sentences with five words or less.

- Write a story using only passive verbs.
- Write a story with your eyes closed.
- Design a book cover using a box of crayons.
- Write a blog post on a topic about which you know very little, and don't do any research first.
- Enter a [Bulwer-Lytton contest](#).

You get the idea.

But why would you want to do this?

Well, there are a couple of reasons.

Keep Churning While You Chill

First, if you've been beating your head against the wall of perfectionism for awhile, you need a mental break. You could just walk away from writing for awhile entirely, but that's a fate worse than liver and onions for most of us. It also comes with the risk that you won't ever find your way back to the keyboard in any meaningful way.

But if you just keep slogging away, you'll burn out for sure, and then you'll have to step away.

Being intentionally bad gives you an avenue to keep writing but to not worry about all the details that usually trip you up. After all, your goal is write something rotten, so why let a few missing commas or inconsistent spacing slow you down?

The second way this exercise can be valuable is in showing you that you don't have to get everything right the first time you write it.

Try as you might to be awful, the truth is that you're probably going to like at least some of your woeful words. You might find them to be so funny that you'll publish them as-is. Or maybe you'll discover the seed of a really good story hiding among the monsters of your madness.

Regardless of whether you uncover a nugget in your throwaway writing or just ... well, *throw it away* ... being really bad sometimes can be really *good* for you in the long run.

Minuteman

Life is full of decisions, and they can eat you up if you let them.

Where should we eat for dinner? Should I apply for that job on the west coast or not? What color socks should I wear with my new shorts?

Many times we get caught up quibbling with ourselves over minutiae of choices like this.

And this isn't just reserved for real-life situations. I'll bet it happens *all the time* in your writing, right?

Authors Have Lots of Choices

Some common decisions that writers face include:

- In which genre should I write my next book?
- Is this story a short, a novella, a novel?
- Should my protagonist be male or female?
- What should I name my book?
- Should I publish to KDP Select or "go wide"?
- And on and on and on.

These are important decisions and can impact both your artistic profile and your bottom line. But every minute you spend wringing your hands over these and other questions is a minute you'll never get back, and a minute that you *haven't* spent writing.

In the vernacular of the [Pareto Principle](#), agonizing over fairly minor decisions fall firmly into the inefficient 80% of writing activities.

But what are you to do? I mean, you have to make decisions in life, and you can't just pluck options out of a hat.

Maybe not, but that doesn't mean your progress has to grind to a halt every time you have to make a pick.

You're on the Clock

Instead, when you come to a decision point that requires some deliberation, put a time box around your choice. After all, once you've been through a few rodeos with writing, you know the pros and cons of each direction you might take, so there is no need to make simple choices into elaborate exercises.

Most of the time, you should be able to pull the trigger on your path within a minute.

That may sound harsh and drastic, but it's usually realistic.

The process goes like this:

- You come to a fork in your writing road.
- You see the two or three options in front of you.
- You run through the choices in your mind, noting the pros and cons of each.
- You pick the one that, based on your experiences and your preferences, makes the most sense for your writing goals.

And that's it.

When you first try this out, you might actually set up a timer just so you get used to the pace of making quick decisions. After a few go-rounds, it will feel normal and natural.

Choose and Move On

Of course, there will be times when you come up against a *monumental* decision for which you have little background. In those instances, by all means, do your research. But even then, don't stress out for days and weeks on end. Make your choice and move on.

Rarely is a mistake so drastic that you cannot recover, and, most of the time, "mistakes" open new opportunities that you would not have had otherwise.

Like more time to write.

Pareto

You might be familiar with the [Pareto Principle](#), named after Vilfredo Pareto and which basically says, “Eighty percent of your results will come from just 20% of your effort.”

In other words, about four out of five things that you do — or four out of five hours you spend — in any field of endeavor will be somewhat ineffective in moving you toward your goals. It’s a rule-of-thumb, to be sure, and it doesn’t hold precisely true in every circumstance, but there are enough real examples around you that it’s hard to deny it’s general veracity.

After the holidays, you might spend an hour or two picking up toys and decorations and sweeping away Christmas tree needles. When you’re done with that, it looks like a different place. Then you move on to dusting, sweeping, mopping, cleaning toilets. You might spend *another* five or six hours, and, while everything smells better and gleams a little more, the wholesale differences are nil. Someone who walked in after your initial push would have a hard time spotting any difference after you killed yourself for another several hours.

Same thing happens when you build a new flower garden. The first big push includes digging up the plot, laying a weed barrier, planting the new flowers, and dumping in some mulch. Not easy work, by any means, but it probably won’t take you more than a few hours. Then, you spend the rest of the summer plucking weeds, watering plants, trimming the edges, and doing all of the minutiae that may or may not make a difference to the garden’s overall appearance.

Both of these illustrate Pareto to some degree.

Writing is More than *Writing*

Now, you may be thinking that writing is about *writing*, so Pareto doesn’t really apply. After all, you can’t write just 20% of the words you could write and still have a viable story or blog posting, right?

Maybe, but maybe not. And even if you can’t apply Pareto to your writing itself — a debatable notion — you should realize that there is a lot more involved with being a writer in the electronic age than just getting words onto the page.

Consider these various activities in which an author may engage over the course of a week:

- Writing a chapter for his novel
- Writing one or more blog posts
- Writing one or more short stories
- Editing a chapter, blog post, or short story
- Posting to Facebook
- Tweeting about writing or his book
- Drafting a message to his email list
- Creating a book cover
- Searching for royalty-free images for a blog post
- Answering email from readers or potential clients
- Brainstorming article or story ideas
- Building a new blog
- Re-designing his blog
- Networking with other authors or readers

This is far from a complete tally, but it gives you the flavor of the types of things you probably do in your “job” as a writer. If you haven’t encountered these tasks yet, then you surely will before long.

Pareto in Writing

With this list in mind, and any additions that you can think of, it’s probably a bit easier to see how Pareto might figure into your plans as a writer.

For instance, what’s going to move you closer to your goal of finishing your first novel — writing another chapter or posting to your author website?

It’s the new chapter, of course, and the score is not even close.

But flip it around — if your *primary* goal is to build an authority blog, will you be better off putting together a new post or spending an hour or more crafting social media posts?

That’s a bit tougher to call because it depends, in part, on where you are in building your blog. In most cases, though, I’d guess that writing a blog post will do more for you than any level of “social” involvement.

Focus on Your Goals

In fact, if you were to generalize the Pareto Principle for writers, anything that

involves actual content creation is probably worth consideration for inclusion in your big-bang, 20% tasks. Anything that takes you away from writing for any appreciable length of time probably belongs in the big 80% bottom tier of activities. They may be fun or interesting but don't do you a whole lot of good.

Again, the exact percentages will vary, and the composition of your 20% will depend on your goals at any given time. You need to constantly evaluate what you're doing and the returns you're getting for your efforts. Just remember that any time you spend on activities that don't have an appreciable payoff is time lost — time that you could have spent actually moving you toward your goals.

Pareto rules, in other words. Disregard him at your peril.

Cross-Pollination

No matter how exciting your career is, there are days when going to work just feels like a *job*.

You just can't always be doing the exciting stuff.

I mean, sure Han Solo spends a lot of time chasing parsecs records and shielding Kylo's lightsaber from the elements, but I'll bet he sees his fair share of doldrums, too. You wouldn't believe the paperwork involved in transporting hot goods and folks across the galaxy, and Wookiee coats require a lot of upkeep.

It's enough to make even the staunchest of ex-smugglers look for another line of work. Can you say, "warp-speed burnout"?

Writing Is a Job

And as a writer, even your *highs* are probably not quite on par with Han's. If you're like most, you get a spurt of adrenaline when you think of a new idea and when you start writing a new book or story, and probably another boost when you hit the "publish" button on your polished manuscript.

In between, though, you face a mind-numbing routine of *gasp* writing, editing, formatting, cover creation, promotion, and all the rest of the "grind" of being an author these days. And if writing is not your primary career, then you're trying to wedge all of this into an already jam-packed life.

Whether you realize it or not, the meltdown is just over the horizon, next to that craggy tree where the witch built her lair.

Or, if not an outright meltdown, it's a sure bet that your writing productivity is being sapped by the feeling of overwhelm that builds over time.

How do you avoid the wall?

Learn How to Back Off

That's not an easy question to answer, but a good place to start is to acknowledge that you can't do everything all the time and that you will never work as fast as you want to. We all need to back off once in a while, and building in downtime is important.

You can make that downtime more productive and feed your mind if you purposely engage in other activities rather than just shutting down completely. You may occasionally require an afternoon on the couch curled in the fetal position, but often just switching your focus can yield the relief you crave.

One perfect adjunct to your writing is physical activity. So much of our jobs (or hobbies) happens while we're sitting on our rumps, that writers are inherently at risk of diseases related to a sedentary lifestyle: heart disease, diabetes, obesity, etc., etc., etc. Try to get in some exercise each day to combat both the physical maladies that our craft can engender AND the mental blahs that besiege all routine-doers from time to time.

Your Hobby Can Make You a Better Writer

Beyond *movement*, having hobbies outside of writing can be a boon both to your productivity and to your creativity. Traveling, for instance, will expose you to a wealth of new ideas that will almost surely find their way into your stories, one way or another. And engaging in another artsy activity — think painting, drawing, music, sculpture, dance — will encourage you to think in new ways and make new connections that you won't see locked to your keyboard all day, every day.

Make no mistake — your most important responsibility as a writer is to sit down and actually **write**, day after day and year after year. But don't beat your head against the wall of words that won't come when a little cross-pollination of your activities can head off boatloads of frustration and make you a better writer in the long run.

Deadline

Sometimes a simple idea is all you need to get you moving forward again, and that's the idea behind this series of Quick Writing Tips culled from around the net: to get your writing back on track.

You know that great aunt of yours who *loves* to receive letters from you? The one who raised-you-like-a-son/gave-you-her-kidney/saved-you-from-a-towering-birthday-cake-inferno-when-you-were-eight? That one?

When was the last time you wrote her a letter?

I know, I know. You've started it a hundred times, but something always comes up before you can finish.

Now ... you know that monthly bill you have for the local newspaper? The one that's the *only* one you still have to pay by live check? The one that you begrudge like your *other* aunt, who knocked over the card table on your eight birthday and almost sent you to your fate with a towering birthday-cake inferno?

When was the last time you *missed* writing that check?

You say you've *never* missed that payment? Interesting.

But not surprising.

So, what's the difference between Aunt Agnes and *The Daily Dashboard*? I mean, aside from the unreasonable resentment you hold toward one for being just so darn *good* to you?

Deadlines.

Parkinson's Law in Writing

Parkinson's Law says that work — any kind of work — expands to fill the time that we have allotted for it.

If you have to get a report done for your boss by the end of the day, you'll give it to her at 4:59 pm.

If you have until next Friday to get her that same report, chance are you'll also finish at 4:59 pm — but next Friday.

It seems to be part of the human condition that we put off everything except unbridled pleasure or the avoidance of pain for as long as we possibly can.

That's why deadlines are so important. You pay the newspaper bill on time because you don't want to miss out on whatever joy the paper brings you.

You don't write to Aunt Agnes because there is no "on time" where she's concerned. Do it, or don't do it, and she'll still love you.

So what does this have to do with you as a writer?

Easy ... you need to put deadlines on your writing projects or *you'll never finish them.*

Don't Write Without a Deadline

That's one of the secrets to the success of [NaNoWriMo](#): it forces you to set a deadline. Start your novel on November 1, finish by November 30. If you don't, you *lose*.

Contrast that to the way that most authors approach most of their books ...

We get a great idea for a story and start clacking away at our keyboards. Within a week or a day or an hour, our original path weaves, and we can't find our way back to a solid plot. Or we get distracted by something shiny. Either way, we set the story aside and move on, knowing it will still be there "when we get back to it."

Without a deadline for "getting back to it," though, we never do. And it spends eternity in the dust pile of our good intentions while we're busy finding the latest funny cat videos.

Set deadlines and stick to them.

You'll be much happier with your writing progress if you do.

Promise

There is little worse in this world than setting a goal that is *really* meaningful to you ... and then blowing off the work required to achieve that goal.

You've looked yourself in the mirror and said, "This is part of who I am. I must achieve *this* to fulfill my life's mission."

That may sound dramatic, but why on earth would you set a goal in the first place if you didn't hope achieving it would move you closer to your vision of the best you possible? You wouldn't.

That's why failure hurts so much — because you've missed out on a chance to become a better version of yourself. Failure is a natural part of life, though, and you can move on with your dignity intact if you know you gave it your all.

Excuses Kill Self Esteem

It's when you make excuses and don't put in the kind of effort you know you're capable of that your self-esteem takes a heart shot. Every time you let yourself down like this, your self-worth ratchets down a couple of notches, whether you realize it or not.

Yet most of us repeat this cycle over and over — promise ourselves we'll do something, "try" for a few days or weeks, give up when results don't come quickly, slip deeper into mediocrity.

Every time around, we feel less worthy and capable of doing great things than before. And we set our sights lower.

The problem is that it's just so darn easy to let yourself down when your goals are intensely personal and don't have an overt impact on everything else happening in your life.

Miss your deadline for finishing that first novel? Hey, that's OK as long as you're still working and pulling in a paycheck to support your family.

Quit writing for a few weeks and whiff on your 1000-word-per-day goal when you start up again? No biggie ... you still made it to all your kids' programs, right?

And that's the rub, really. From an early age, we're groomed to please other

people, even if it's at the expense of our own desires and well-being. Putting others first is one of the hallmarks of a mature and thoughtful person.

It's not such a bad thing, really, this selflessness, if you use it in the right context.

Yes, you should hold the door for other people even if it means you have to stand in the cold a few extra seconds. But should you really jeopardize your writing progress just to answer a silly question for your boss -- on off hours, no less -- or mow the grass one last time before the family get-together?

Debatable at best.

It's hard to turn off this "instinct," though, so most of us slog along doing the things we're supposed to do but never really digging in on the things we NEED to do for self-fulfillment.

The good news is that there is a way around this contentious situation, and it's sneaky good.

The answer in many cases is to trick yourself into thinking you're working for others in order to achieve your goals.

How do you do that?

Make a Promise

Easy: make yourself accountable for your writing progress to those around you by involving them in the process. *Tell them your objectives*, share your deadlines with them, invite them to monitor you.

If you haven't tried this yet, you'll be amazed at how much having a bit of external pressure can ratchet up your writing focus.

Tell your son that you're going to write one short story a week — and tell him that you'll read it to him on Sunday night — and I can just about guarantee you'll have that thing done and *polished* by Saturday at the latest. You don't want to disappoint your son, do you?

Or your wife?

Or your mom?

Obviously, you don't, which is why you break your back to keep your commitments to them day after day after day.

Make one of those commitments your own writing career, and you can serve both masters — you and the ones you love.

Shoot First

If there is one thing that authors and bloggers are good at, it's planning. Well, unless you're a *pantser*, anyway.

And even if you do write your novels by the seat of your pants, there's a pretty good chance that you have other works planned out ... in your mind if not written down anywhere.

You *plan* to develop a children's book as soon as you can find the perfect topic and get your artwork lined up.

You *plan* to write a series of western novels once you sketch out the complete story arc, from Book 1 all the way through Book 233. It's gonna be epic and awesome.

You *plan* to start a blog when work slows down and you settle on a niche. Or when you find the perfect domain name, for sure. **Then** you'll start.

The Perfect Plan

I love planning and think it's essential for most writers. That's especially true if you work a full-time job that's *not* writing and you have other obligations — a spouse, children, friends, etc. You're just not going to get much writing done if you try to wing it and fit in your novel or blog wherever you can.

You need a blueprint for your writing career; a roadmap that can take you from where you are to where you want to be as an author.

But you can overdo planning, and it's not *hard* to do, either. Once you start building out timelines and outlines, it's tempting to tweak them. You want to tune everything to perfection because, if you get it just right, the words will almost write *themselves* when you finally do start writing (or so you think).

Perfection is impossible to achieve, though, and you'll never be completely satisfied with your plan. You may even jump from master plan to master plan looking for just the right combination. If you're not careful, all of the gyrations you go through *preparing* to write will become a crutch that allows you to hobble along without *actually* writing much of anything at all.

At some point, you've got to put away the sketchbook and open up the word

processor if you hope to ever finish a writing project.

Getting Off the Sidelines

If you find yourself spiraling into this Hell of perpetual planning, what can you do to pull out of the tailspin?

The easy answer is to invoke your inner Michael Jordan and “just do it.”

But if you haven’t just done it to this point, what’s the likelihood you will now?

Instead, you need something to bust your plan-encrusted inertia — you need a **plan!**

Don’t worry, though: *this* plan is a short one, and it’s set in stone. You’re not allowed to change it.

Ready? Here it is:

- Take a long last look at your soul-crushing master plan and soak in its expansiveness.
- Pick **one** writing project that you think is really important to your goals.
- Put your plan away.
- Open your word processor.
- Set a timer for 15 minutes.
- Start the timer.
- Write until the timer goes off.

That’s it.

Earn the Right to Plan

Don’t worry if you haven’t finished your outline or don’t have your plot worked out.

Just get your fingers moving and keep them going for the full 15 minutes. Even if you’re totally stuck, just write *something*. Write about the setting of your novel or describe your main character. It doesn’t matter at all if the thoughts are random and don’t fit together because the point is just to **get you writing in the world of your project**.

When your 15 minutes are up, stand up and stretch. Walk around for a few minutes. Maybe grab a snack.

Then come back to your desk and do it all over again.

String together as many of these “sprints” as you have time for, and then come back to repeat the exercise later on.

The most important thing is that you *keep* coming back and keep chipping away at your novel or story. And **don't** pull out your planning materials again.

There will be plenty of opportunity for that once you've proven to yourself that you *can* actually write something. Knock out a few thousand words, and you'll have earned your way back to the planning table.

Until then?

Just sit down and write that damn book.

Purpose

Have you ever gone to a meeting that had no agenda?

Unless you've never been to *any* meeting, then the answer is almost surely, "Yes."

How productive was that meeting? How *inspiring* was it?

"Not very" is likely being generous in answering these questions, right?

The problem with meetings that don't have an agenda is they also usually don't have an explicit **purpose**.

You have staff meetings on Friday mornings because ... well, because you've *always* had staff meetings on Friday mornings.

The tradition may have started for a good reason, but whatever that is has been lost to the ravages of time. Now, you just all show up — most of you late — and slog through lifeless updates and the same old questions about the same old projects with the same old answers as the week before.

Yuck!

No wonder meetings have such a bad reputation. In fact, terrible meetings are a driving force in major changes that could be coming to the workplace, according to a [CBCNews report](#).

Writers' "Meetings"

But you're a writer, so the plague of bad meetings doesn't affect you, right?

Well, maybe. Certainly, some writers have at least occasional meetings related to their craft, and I would venture that *most* writers have outside jobs that do involve regular meetings.

Even if you never go to a meeting, though, you run the same risks that your hapless corporate counterparts shoulder every time they step into a conference room without an agenda in hand.

As a writer, your equivalent of meetings are your *writing sessions*. Each and

every time you sit down to your keyboard, you have the opportunity to produce something amazing and move you closer to your writing goals ... or to waste time and become discouraged.

Do you have a clear understanding of what you're writing and why you're writing it *every time* you open up your word processor or spiral notebook? If not, or if you're not sure, then you have some work to do.

Recognizing the Problem

If you're not **confident** that you're writing is in line with your goals and has a purpose, try this simple test.

Look at the page in front of you and ask yourself why you're working on it.

If you can't answer that question quickly and easily, you might have a murky purpose. If the answer is forthcoming, then ask yourself why **that** goal is important.

Let's say that you're writing a blog post about the Dallas Cowboys Super Bowl victories, for example. Why is that important?

Maybe it's because you're trying to outline the entire history of the 'Boys in a series of posts.

But why is **that** important?

Perhaps you're trying to build an authority site about America's Team. Great, then you're on the right track.

But if the Cowboys are just *interesting* to you and you're writing for your personal journal-type blog ... *meh* ... you're just spinning your wheels.

Drill down on the "whys" until you're stumped, come up with an answer you don't like, or come up with a **big-picture** answer that supports your overall vision as a writer.

If you hit the third kind, you're golden. Otherwise, you don't have a clear purpose for your writing.

Developing Purpose

Defining your purpose *as a writer* is akin to developing an overarching vision

and mission. It can take years to emerge with utter clarity. But you **should** have big goals in front of you at any given moment, along the lines of ...

- Write my first novel
- Write my first novel series
- Build an authority website about mid-century comic books
- Write a book about project management for non-profit organizations

Each of your writing sessions should derive from these larger goals, informed also by the time you have available and your overall progress as you sit down to write.

To get there, first break down your big, honking targets into smaller milestones — chapters, blog posts, sidebars.

Then prioritize the pieces.

Then, when you get ready to write, pick the remaining task with the highest priority that *also* fits most snugly into the time you have available.

It's a simple formula, but it's also your agenda for each writing session. Don't start typing without it.

Single-Handling

How many email messages to you receive in a day?

[Some estimates](#) put the average number of emails at around 140 per day, per *person*. Some of those you can delete without ever opening, some of them you never open and just leave in your inbox (though you *shouldn't*), some you open and know just what to do with, and some you open and just stare at.

Consider one of those, “now what?” messages.

Maybe it asks you a question that you're not sure about. You spend a few seconds thinking about your answer, maybe search your other mail messages for some answers. Then you give up.

You “star” the message or just leave it sitting, knowing you'll have to come back to it someday.

So you move on through the rest of your inbox, grab some lunch, start working on your short story.

"High-Touch" Kills Productivity

Eventually, though, you have to go back to that email message that's been hanging over your head all day. And, when you do, you have to re-center yourself and go through the entire thought process again.

When you finally decide what to do about that perplexing message, you've spent a lot of time and a lot of mental energy — maybe twice as much as you would have had you just dealt with the issue presented in the message in the first place.

This is the classic high-touch, or multiple-touch, problem. That is, you've “touched” a task multiple times when you could have knocked it out in one sitting. It's the product of indecision and an attention span weakened by the flurry of activity that accompanies every moment and aspect of modern life.

Don't have a ready answer for a question? No need to dig in and do the tough work when you can peruse Facebook for a few minutes instead.

Multitasking Is Failing You

The myth of momentary multitasking also feeds this illusion that it's OK to move on. Hey, I'm not giving up, I'm just doing two (or three or four) things at once!

Of course, that diversion will always come back to bite you, because we rarely get to completely punt on an obligation just because it's difficult.

The high-touch problem doesn't apply to just email, either.

Home improvement projects, scrapbooking, building lasting relationships, getting your work done *at work* — all of them can fall victim to the allure of context switching.

Writers Have Lots of Ideas ... All at Once

The bad news for writers is that we're maybe more susceptible to multi-touching than most other folks. Not only do we have 140 emails per day, and kids' soccer practice, and dinner to make, and tile to lay, and a program to write — we *also* have to finish our novel, and craft a short story, and update our blogs.

And inspiration might strike in the middle of any of these activities. I mean, the only thing sexier than a great story idea is the *next* story idea, right?

But jumping from project to project and task to task is absolute murder on your overall progress.

Look at it this way ...

Do you have a story somewhere on your hard drive or in the cloud that is half-finished?

Do you have *another* story squirreled away that is only partially baked?

Probably yes and yes.

And are you working on either one of those right now?

Probably not.

Now ...

Choose Single-Handling

In the long run, wouldn't your writing career be in a better place — and wouldn't you be *happier* — if you had finished that first story rather than switching gears and moving on to the second?

Unless you're a famous dead author for whom the reading public mourns, chances are your partial manuscripts are worth exactly *zero* to anyone. And they're worth less than zero to *you* because they represent yet another unfulfilled promise to yourself.

So make a pact right now.

Whatever your current project is, stick with it until it's done. Stick with **ONLY** it until it's done. You may eventually hone your bat powers to the point that you can move between multiple projects during a span of time, but you're not there right now.

Right now, you're looking for ways to be a more productive writer.

Pick a horse and ride (write?) it.

Don't frustrate your progress by jumping from unicorn to unicorn.

What's Important?

Do you ever miss work because “there just wasn’t time”?

How about your kids’ soccer games or piano recitals or school drop-offs? Do those get squeezed out by more important events very often?

Unless you’re a crappy employee or parent, then you almost surely answered, “NO!” to all of these questions.

But now think about your exercise routine and date nights with your spouse and ... *your writing*.

Do any of *those* ever get pushed to the side because life gets in the way? Does it happen often?

Sadly, for most of us, the answer is a resounding, “YES!” (though maybe not with that much enthusiasm).

Why is that? Why can we make it to work every day but can’t find the time to bang out our 1000 words?

Most of the time, the answer comes down to prioritization and scheduling.

What's Essential to You?

Going to work, taking care of your kids, paying your mortgage — all of those are vital to your happiness and well-being AND they have a definite schedule around them. Come in 30 minutes late a few days in a row, and you may be out of a job.

Miss your son’s big basketball game, and you can make your reservations now for the gnarliest nursing home he can find in a few decades.

Punt on paying your mortgage? Brace yourself for eviction.

These activities are all powerfully *externally motivated*.

It’s harder for most of us to place the same kind of gravitas on those things we want to do for ourselves, like exercising and writing. These pursuits are important, sure, but they’re not truly urgent.

And therein lies the problem. If we don’t make time for those types of activities,

it's way too easy for us to skip them. Someone is always happy to snatch our time from us, and without urgency, we have no defense.

So how do we impart urgency to our *merely important* interests?

Make Writing Important Again

Schedule them!

Open up your calendar program and slide in an hour for writing, right there between making school lunches and the morning meeting at work. Block off time before dinner to work out. Snatch some of those evening hours before you hit the sack to read fiction.

Then, just stick to your schedule like you would for everything else.

Share your calendar with everyone who might snack on your time and make it clear that ALL of your appointments are inviolable. Just because you're the only person in a meeting doesn't make it any less important, and, in fact, usually means it's MORE important ... to you.

Schedule your time.

Guard your time.

Do the stuff that's important to you.

Decompress

No matter how enthusiastic you are about your career, you can't work all the time or your health and personal relationships suffer. That's why we have weekends and hobbies.

But what happens when your *hobby* starts to take over all your free time and causing you stress?

Hobby Anxiety

It seems counterintuitive that an activity designed to help you enjoy your leisure time and forget about work could end up winding you even tighter, but it happens all the time.

Fantasy sports enthusiasts spend countless hours and often dollars on building their teams, and they follow on-field performances religiously. If the slugger you're counting on to carry you to a pennant spirals into a slump or sustains a big injury, you have to scramble to find replacement production and your stress levels skyrocket.

Collectors enjoy the hunt for items to complete their sets of baseball cards/limited edition plates/Elvis statues, but that joy can turn to anxiety as they obsess more and more about securing the perfect, elusive specimens.

And "aspiring" writers or those who claim to write as a hobby? Forget about it.

Passion Begets Stress

In my experience, writing is not an activity that you can pursue in any sort of passive sense. In fact, most writers are the exact opposite — passionate.

We're passionate about our subject matter, we're passionate about our word choices, we're passionate about the projects we undertake. All that emotion is great for our finished product, but it's not so wonderful if we hope to keep our "hobby" in perspective.

After all, how can you take your thumb off the throttle when you realize you're within 25,000 words of finishing your novel? You can't.

Heck, if you hunker down, you can finish up this weekend!

But it's a never-ending treadmill, because once you finish that rough draft, then you have to edit it, send it off for more editing and proofreading, get a book cover, promote the book, publish the book, promote it some more, fix the typo you and your editors/proofreaders/mom/wife/best friend missed the first 10 times through, re-publish, promote, iterate, recurse, and on and on and on.

And then ... there is the next book and the next story and the next blog post.

Before you know it, you can't see the top of the work pile that your success and ambition have stacked up on top of you. And when *that* happens, your perception of what success really is starts to change and your enthusiasm wanes.

Not for everyone. Not all the time.

But for most of us, most of the time.

This is how burnout happens, even when you're doing what you love.

And when your zest is charred, you won't get *anything* done.

Avoiding Burnout

If you want to be successful in writing or *any* endeavor over the long term, you need to avoid burnout like a proctologist. And, just as with Dr. Glove, you may not be able to sidestep burnout forever, but you can take steps to keep it at bay as long as possible.

Here are some tips on keeping your passion from overwhelming you:

Don't Take on Too Many Projects

At any one time, the typical writer might have 15 or 20 — or more — ideas swirling in his head. He wants to write a novel, a collection of short stories, and a historical essay for his favorite truther magazine, and he *also* wants to start his long-anticipated blog for Pet Rock collectors. He'll most likely try to do them all at once, too, and that will be his undoing. We're capable of a tremendous amount of work, but by spreading our efforts so thin, all we'll get are half-assed results and a frazzled brain. Pick a couple or projects and work the heck out of them before moving on to something else.

Don't Spend Every Spare Minute Writing

While we (here and elsewhere) spend a lot of effort identifying hidden pockets of time when you can write, you need to do other stuff, too. Make sure to get regular exercise, nurture your relationships, and just find ways to relax. Speaking of which ...

Chill Out Sometimes

No matter how in love modern society is with staying busy, you don't *always* have to be doing something. Sometimes, you just need to plop down on the couch and stare at the TV, or at the wall. Don't beat yourself up over your nightly tube hour if it truly helps you relax. If nothing else, you might stumble into a laugh or two, and that's always good for you ... just ask [WebMD](#).

Read Something Else

One trap that a lot of writers — including me — fall into is to spend our time away from writing *reading* about our subject matter. It makes sense to bone up on your area of expertise, and it can be helpful in crafting your next novel or blog post. But if you're already circling the drain of motivation, pouring more of the same fuel on top of the brush fire of your nervous system won't help at all. Instead, do at least some reading purely for pleasure.

If you write horror, try reading a western or the sports pages. If you're a baseball blogger, read a bodice ripper every now and then.

Write Something Else

If you feel the drudgery of your writing descending on you but you just can't stand the thought of not writing, then why not shift your focus for awhile? Stop working on your novel and knock out a few short stories. Or maybe start that blog you've always dreamed about. The change will do you good and is a particularly useful tactic after very intense stretches devoted to a single project, such as NaNoWriMo.

Stop Writing

If you've already flamed out in your writing, then your best course of action is probably to just lay your pen to the side and walk away from your writing desk for a bit. While you're gone, you can try out a new hobby or just embrace your inner couch potato. Eventually, your writing muscles will start to itch and twitch again, and you'll know it's time to get back at it.

—

Writing is as addictive a “hobby” as there is, and it’s easy to let your enthusiasm drag you under a mountain of projects that seems unconquerable. By taking preventive steps early on, you can hold off burnout for a long, long time and maybe avoid it completely.

Sometimes, you just have to back off for the sake of your own health and your long-term progress.

Randomize

Having a “To-Do” list is great and can be a boon to productivity if you nurture it. You have to [prioritize](#), and then [re-prioritize daily](#). You have to be ruthless in saying “No” to requests that have no business on your plate *and* in pruning your list when a task becomes unnecessary or undesirable.

Even with all this list farming, though, things can get stale and good stuff can fall through the cracks.

Farm Your To-Do List

Take a look at your “To-Do” list right now

It’s probably as long as a Stephen King novel and has items on there that you really want to do but that are buried beneath the things that became more urgent somehow. At the rate you’re going, you’ll never get to those gems, and you’ll be mired in the daily grind of whatever your daily grind is. Maybe you’ll occasionally knock off a few items from the top of your list, but that’s about it.

For the most part, that approach keeps you on track.

But if you want a break from the monotony and a chance to tackle something that’s important to you but that may not be *urgent* ... randomize!

Shake It Up -- for One Day

By “randomize” I mean take your writing “To-Do” list, or your *mental* writing “To-Do” list, and pick an item at random one morning. That day, you’re going to work on that item until it’s done or until your creative day ends.

How you randomize is up to you: roll a dice, close your eyes and point, number your tasks and use a [random number generator](#) to pick one. You might consider eliminating the top 10 or so items on your list from consideration because the goal here is to get you working on something you normally wouldn’t touch for awhile.

The potential benefits of randomization run the gamut from combating boredom to shrinking your “To-Do” list by one to reconnecting you with something you love to do but have let slide in the face of other pressures.

The potential pitfalls are that you’ll punt a day of work at the top of your list,

and you may be inclined to branch off more fully into whatever new endeavor your randomization lands you in. Fight this urge and get back to your tried-and-true prioritized list the *next* day, and you'll be fine on both counts.

Of course, it could be that this exercise will reveal, or remind you of, priorities that you hadn't considered before (or for awhile).

Either way, this type of "controlled randomness" can do wonders for your state of mind and your overall writing productivity.

Resonance

Do you remember how it felt when you first decided you wanted to be a writer?

You had dreams about what your life would look like when you made it, when you finally became a real writer. Maybe you'd spend long hours at your desk each night, smoking a pipe and rubbing your elbow patches in between chapters.

Or maybe you'd stay in your pajamas all day and bang out your stories on an old manual typewriter.

Whatever your vision, you had a vision.

And then, when you decided on what your first novel would be, you had another vision.

You could see the finished book, with its perfect cover and gleaming white pages.

You could feel the sense of accomplishment that comes with knocking off a major life goal.

Maybe you even imagined your readers cuddled up with your book or the sales numbers rolling up month after month.

It was great!

Writing Is Hard

But whether you have attained any of those visions or not, you eventually stumbled into the dark reality of writing ... it's not all glamor and unbridled creativity.

In fact, the "job" of writing is much like any other job in that you must endure a lot of tedium and supply a ton of brute force to finish the gig. There are plenty of days when the last thing you want to do is slog through another half-chapter or edit another batch of blog posts.

Your enthusiasm wanes and, with it, your productivity. You start putting off what you need to do because it's not so fun, and then that non-fun work starts to pile up. Before long, you flat-out dread your next writing session and your word

count slows to a trickle.

It's at this point that remembering and recapturing your early idealization of the craft can make all the difference. So ...set aside your current tasks for a few minutes, and forget about how hard it is to get writing right.

Reclaim Your Vision

Here's how you can use visualization to help you recapture that magic.

Sit in a quiet place with your eyes closed or with your vision fixed on some immovable point without much around it ... like the cover of an old book

Now, think about your top writing goal. Is it to write or finish a book? Is it to become a Terre Haute Tribune Bestseller? Is it to write the screenplay for a Star Wars movie? Whatever it is, bear down on that thought and try to block all others from your mind.

As your target crystalizes in your thoughts, imagine the BIG milestones you'll need to go through to achieve that goal: the book outline, the rough first draft, the edited manuscript, the book cover, etc.

When you get to the end of your imagined journey, stop. Linger in that space where you've just tackled — and achieved — your most sacred writing goal. How do you feel? What's happening around you? How is the world different than it was before?

Luxuriate in the exhilaration of achievement for a few minutes. Doesn't it feel great? Won't it BE great when you get there?

Visualize Your Rewards

Finally, walk your visualization back a few steps and stop at the milestone where your current writing task belongs. That really tough chapter you're plodding through? It's going to get you that much closer to your finished rough draft ... and to your published manuscript.

Zero in on that chapter and see the finished document in Scrivener or Word. Won't it be great when it's finished? Aren't you excited to get it to that point?

I know I am.

Now go write it. In your mind, it's already done.

Glittering Prizes

Most authors, most of the time, will be intrinsically motivated to write.

We love the craft and the process, and we write because we're compelled to do so by something deep in our souls. Our first reward, and sometimes our primary reward, for finishing a book or blog post is the joy of creation and the satisfaction of accomplishment.

Sometimes, though, we bite into an assignment that just doesn't gel with our moods or short-term *intrinsic* goals. Maybe you're a sports blogger who needs to cover the baseball Hall of Fame elections, but you can't identify with any of the candidates. Or maybe your readers have been clamoring for the next book in your vampire series, but the whole story arc feels stale and unexciting to you.

You soldier on because it's part of the job of writing, but procrastination and dread drags down your productivity. Wouldn't it be great if you could recapture your enthusiasm and get moving quickly again?

Maybe you can, but it's likely going to require some sort of *extrinsic* reward in order to spark your interest again.

That is, you can't always rely on your love of craft to make you a productive writer. Sometimes, you need a "prize" for doing the work.

Building a Structure for Self-Reward

So, just what kinds of rewards will work for you? Can you really decorate yourself and feel good about it, or do your prizes need to come from *external* sources in order for you to feel good about them (a salary, for example)?

I think you *can* effectively reward yourself, but you have to be honest about the things that really matter to you AND you need to engage in a little self-deprivation most of the time.

Here are some ideas that check both boxes for a large swath of authors:

- Have a bowl of your favorite ice cream every time you publish 10 blog posts, but never eat ice cream otherwise.
- Take your wife out to a fancy restaurant when you finish the first draft of your book, but stick to fast food for your eat-out treats the rest of the time.

- For every chapter you finish in that sequel that you don't want to write, spend an hour researching sources for your pet writing project.
- Buy a new writing toy when you finally reach a major milestone on your "undesirable" project — Scrivener and leather-bound notebooks are always good candidates.
- Read a guilty-pleasure book to celebrate the end of your own hate-to-write book.

You get the idea.

The key is to identify a list of things you'd like to have or do and put it away somewhere. Then, when you find yourself seriously lacking in motivation and sabotaging your progress, pull out your dream sheet and pick your reward.

Set a date for accomplishing your goal and write that date next to your prize. If you hit your target, you get the reward.

Otherwise, the bauble goes back on the list for next time.

Of course, you should strive to work on projects that stimulate your enthusiasm and don't require much in the way of external motivation.

No matter how well you plan out your writing career, though, you're bound to trip into the muck at some point. If nothing else, success in one area will create demand for more of the same. That's great for your ego but can blunt your fervor and leave you struggling to finish.

A golden ring hanging just beyond "The End" can help you find the oomph to move forward again.

Optimization

There is probably at least one area in life where you would consider yourself an expert.

For example, hopefully, you see yourself as an expert in some aspect of your chosen career field. Maybe you're really good at computer programming or project management or driving a truck.

Or maybe it's writing.

Whatever it is that you're an expert at, are you the absolute best in the world at that activity? And if you *are* the best in the world, could you be even better?

I have no idea whether you're the G.O.A.T. — Greatest Of All Time — in any given field, but I can answer that second question for you: *YES, you can be better than you are now.*

Everything you do in life can be optimized beyond what you're doing now. Although it doesn't make sense to try and squeeze every last drop out of every activity (see [Pareto](#)), it *does* make sense to hone in on those areas that are most important to you.

Like your writing.

Tweak Techniques to Fit *You*

If you've read this book cover-to-cover, I thank you, but I also invite you to not consider these techniques and ideas to be one-and-done propositions. Applying any of them will gain you some degree of enhanced writing productivity, but you shouldn't stop there.

Pick the ones that resonate with you and give them a whirl. If they pay you dividends in terms of an increased word count or better prose, keep them in your writer's tool chest. If they don't, consider jettisoning them.

But you might want to have a closer look before you cut ties with a method forever, just to make sure that a slight tweak wouldn't make it work for you.

For instance, I talk a lot about breaking your writing tasks down into nuggets that you can knock off in one sitting or one day. That will work well for most

people, but maybe you know from experience that you write best when you drag a long chapter out over the course of a week or more. Maybe you need the time in between for your thoughts and prose to gel, and shorter atomic units just feel choppy to you.

In that case, [setting daily goals](#) might not be the best approach, but setting *weekly* goals could get you humming along.

Optimize to Make the Best *Better*

And if you find a technique that does work well for you, that doesn't mean it couldn't work even better with a few adjustments.

Maybe you undertake a 30-day challenge to write for an hour every morning before you go to work. To begin with, you set your alarm 30 minutes earlier than normal and write during that extra time PLUS while you drink your morning coffee, time previously reserved for surfing the net. The experiment goes splendidly well, and you find that, by the end of the month, you're getting up early on your own, and you hardly ever need an alarm clock.

You decide that, when a challenge really motivates you toward the achievement of your goals, you're able to adopt a new habit pretty quickly. You look at your list of other things you want to start doing and zero in on two biggies for the next month: exercising every day and giving up sodas.

The first week is a struggle, but you push through, and by the end of the month, you're a writing, exercising, soda-free fool!

Maybe the third month, you try three challenges at once, or maybe you cut the challenge time down to 15 days rather than 30. You keep pushing until you run out of improvements you want to make, or until your returns diminish. At that point, you've found your sweet spot and optimized the 30-day challenge technique for you.

The point is, you can almost always get better in almost every area of life.

And don't be satisfied with *better* when you can make better even better.

Measure Your Results

In order to make this work and keep it from bogging you down, you need to be ruthless in your evaluation and follow-up actions. If you find an optimization that

nets you a 25% increase in words written per hour, exploit it to the fullest. On the other hand, if you're spending a lot of mental energy to squeeze out one or two percent increases, it might not be worth the effort.

Move on to the next technique.

Whatever you do, don't ever stop trying to improve.

Intuition

A lot of what passes for writing advice, and much of what I've written in [this series](#), falls squarely into the category of planning. And that's for good reason.

You won't get very far in life or in your writing career without a plan of some sort. And, unless your brain works like Stephen King's, you'll probably be better off planning your novels rather than *pantsing* them, too.

But planning and plotting do present a very real problem ...

Paralysis by Analysis

When you get really good at breaking down a problem into its constituent parts, there is always a temptation to *keep* breaking it down until you've analyzed every atom of the thing. That's a great approach if you're building a spaceship or trying to solve a complex crime, but it can become crippling in other areas of life.

When you're buying a house, for instance, you can blow out the inspection report to a thousand-point bulletin of all the deficiencies you want the seller to correct before you sign on the bottom line. Generally, this will raise the seller's hackles, and he'll probably reject all or most of your asking points. You're ticked off, he's ticked off, and the relationship has instantly become adversarial.

You begin looking for any little reason to kill the deal.

Suddenly, you find yourself deciding whether to buy your dream house based on that one linoleum tile in the guest bathroom that's missing a corner about the size of your thumbnail. It's ridiculous.

The same thing can happen to you as an author ... in a *flash*.

Derailed by Details

One day, you're plotting out your groundbreaking western alien-zombie romance story and, the next, you're mired in the details of whether the villain sheriff should have four tentacles or eight. Or maybe five would work better?

You start doing some Internet research into the benefits and drawbacks of octopus arms for Old West lawmen with deep space origins. You make a spreadsheet listing pros and cons of each configuration, along with the relative

probabilities of each evolving naturally in the vacuum of space. But then you remember that maybe — maybe — your gunslinger has alien ancestry but grew up here on our own rock. How would Earth's environs change his development?

Sounds crazy, right?

Maybe it's a little off the rails, but only a little.

I would bet my next chapter that you've been dragged into the muck of analyzing, in minute detail, every aspect of at least one of your stories, from cover font color to character names to minor plot points to back cover blurb. All of these are important to some extent, but Holy Crap, none of them are worth spending more than a few minutes on (usually).

Analysis is great and useful, but too much can kill your progress.

Luckily, you're an author, which means you always have a powerful tool at hand that you can use to slay analysis paralysis any time it threatens you: intuition.

Instinct as Tie-Breaker

Truth be told, I'm not sure I even believe in intuition as a "sixth sense" or an innate knowledge of what is best. It's not some mythical entity that steps in to save us from the disaster lurking beyond that next corner.

But I do think we all have, to some extent, a natural grasp of aesthetics as they appeal to our own tastes and values. And that sensibility presents itself to us almost immediately in most cases if we're willing to let it.

That old house on the hill with 10 acres of woods will be perfect for the gentleman's farm you want to build. Who cares if it's going to take a bit of work?

Of *course*, the ET sheriff is going to have an even number of tentacles! Why would any sort of nature unbalance him? Unless, of course, he's a villain.

We're writers, so our intuition for setting and characters should be fairly well-developed, and it's something we improve all the time. After your 50th short story or your 10th novel, character names and predicaments should roll off your fingertips as you slice into your next work.

Do your research where necessary. Agonize over your choices to make sure they're the best they can be. But don't spend too much time.

Your intuition — as we've defined it — will lead you in the right direction and let you move on with your life, and with your *writing*.

Cone of Silence

Writer's have faced a myriad of distractions for centuries, but the modern breed is arguably more besieged by distractions than any of our predecessors.

From televisions to screaming children to cell phones to the lure of the Internet on our laptops, the next writing roadblock is never more than a couple of keystrokes away.

We have to be intentional in order to overcome this sensory barrage and stay focused on our work. We need to actively build an environment in which we have no choice but to focus on getting words on the page.

How do we go about that?

Cone of Silence

The answer could be different for everyone, but here are some suggestions for creating your own "cone of silence."

- Find a quiet location, preferably with a door that closes.
- If you can't lock yourself away, then at least go someplace where people you know won't find you — the library, a Starbucks on the other side of town, your car.
- Use the restroom and get any needed victuals BEFORE you sit down to write.
- Turn off your cell phone.
- Turn off your tablet (assuming you write on your laptop).
- Open ONE document you want to tackle in your editor of choice — Scrivener, Google, a physical notebook.
- Turn off your Wi-Fi and other network connections.
- Set a timer for the amount of time you have available and write until the timer goes off.
- Write until the timer goes off.

There are also more high-tech ways to help you block distractions, stay focused, or track your activities. Some popular tools in this genre include:

- [Self-Control](#)
- [TrackTime](#)
- [Focus](#)

- [Notational Velocity](#)
- [FocusBooster](#)
- [FocusWriter](#)
- [Freedom](#)
- [StayFocused](#)
- [Time Out](#)

Some of these are free, some paid, some apps, some Chrome extensions, but they can all be useful in your quest to get more writing done.

You can get even more extreme by turning off the distraction of on-the-fly editing — you know, agonizing over every word and possible misspelling as you type them out. Nothing kills your productivity more than backspacing every few characters to correct typos. There are applications that obscure your words as you type, or you could simply turn off your screen or look out the window.

Don't Forget Your Writing Schedule

Absolutely key to *any* of this working for you, though, is to [schedule your writing time](#). If you don't own that hour when you're trying to knock out your next chapter, there's no way in the world you can keep yourself from checking email and text messages constantly.

You know, just in case something big comes up.

But if you take the time to stake out your territory — your writing schedule — *before* you sit down to create, you can take control of your word world with complete authority and zero guilt. Just be aware that, even *with* a clear schedule, diversions can wreck the best plans.

Get rid of all your distractions, though, and you might be amazed at how many quality words you can bang out in a fraction of the time you usually spend staring at a blank screen.

Nuke Obstacles

No matter what your goals are in life, you're going to encounter obstacles.

If you want to become a doctor, for instance, your list of hurdles might include:

- Pulling good grades in high school
- Nailing the SAT
- Getting into a good college
- Financing college
- Getting good grades in college
- Nailing the MCAT
- Getting into med school
- Financing med school
- Surviving med school
- Finding a good residency
- Not killing too many people
- Getting a job

Whew! And that's just the obvious stuff. To these, you can add complicating factors like bad girlfriends, commute time if you study or work in a city, hangovers from undergrad parties, hangovers from grad school parties, fatigue from too many extracurricular activities, intense elective courses that sap your energy and suck your time, and on and on and on.

Milestones or Obstacles?

That's a whole heap of obstacles standing between you and your stethoscope ... maybe you should just give up? *Not on your life!*

If your dream is to be a doctor, then you'll make it happen, obstacles be damned.

The first step here is to realize that most of the items in the first list above are more properly viewed as a series of milestones. They're not really *blocking* you from becoming a doctor but are instead *preparing* you to become a doctor.

That second set, though? And the financial burden of college and med school? Now *those* are obstacles. But while you have to deal with some of them head-on — hello, Mr. Student Loans — you have the power to obliterate most of them.

Have a history of hooking up with the “wrong kind of girl”? Put off dating until you’re further along in your training.

Do you tend to drink too much at parties? Um, don’t go to parties.

And, yes, that’s easy for me to say since I’m asking *you* to make changes, but the point is that many roadblocks in life are within your control.

Life Doesn't Want You to Write

The same goes for writing.

Let’s say you want to write and self-publish a book this year. Between now and then, you’re going to have to deal with:

- Picking a topic
- Writing your first draft
- Editing your first draft
- Getting your book professionally edited
- Revising your book based on first edits
- Going back for another round of edits
- Developing or buying a cover for your book
- Formatting your book for publication
- Publishing your book on the major platforms (Kindle, Barnes & Noble, iBooks, etc.)
- Promoting your book

As with the example of our aspiring doctor above, there are plenty of obstacles that will slide in between these major milestones and try to trip you up. For instance, maybe ...

- You decide to undertake a home improvement project that eats up all of your weekends for six months.
- You start a new fitness regimen that requires you to double your gym time.
- You start dating a new girl and spend your evenings in "woo" mode.
- A significant family member passes away.
- Your child decides to pick up a new sport, and you’re on the hook for driving him to practice every day.
- You take several vacations throughout the year and don’t write during any of that time away.

Pick Your Writing Fate

Clearly, you have to hit your milestones if you want to actually publish your book, but, once again, you have the power to kill many of the real *obstacles* in your path.

If your book is truly important, building a deck can wait.

Is it more important to enter your first marathon than to write your first book? Only you can decide that.

Ask your new friend if you can scale back a bit on your dating schedule.

Again, it's all up to you.

Will you ruthlessly nuke the obstacles in your control, or will you let them slay your writing goals?

30 Days

I don't often proclaim my affections in public, but ...

I love NaNoWriMo!

(“[National Novel Writing Month](#),” if we're being formal.)

There.

I've said it.

In case you're not familiar with this beauty, NaNoWriMo invites you to spend the month of November writing the first draft of your novel. In order to “win” the challenge, you need to crank out 50,000 words over that 30-day span. And, if you live by the spirit of the beast and not just the letter, you need to make sure that your *story arc* is completed in that span.

You Can't Write a Book in 30 Days ... Can You?

Now, for most of us, writing 50,000 words in a month is a monumental challenge, and there is little hope that what we write will be our best work. That's why you should consider it a draft.

That's OK, though, because the satisfaction of completing your book, *finally*, and in any form, is extremely gratifying.

I've participated in and “won” the last three NaNoWriMos, and I've self-published one of those books. The one I wrote in November 2016 (last year, as I write this), will hit the e-bookshelves this year. My very first NaNoWriMo book is still in editorial shambles on my Dropbox account, but it, too, will probably see the light of day ... someday.

But as great as it is to say that I got off the snide after decades of dreaming about writing a book, NaNoWriMo is much more important than that.

It teaches you what you can do when you have laser focus on a goal that has deep personal meaning to you. I was dubious that I could write 1667 words a day, every day, for 30 days in 2014 when I undertook the challenge for the first time. I mean, my job was a hassle, the kids had the flu, but it's been sure nice talking to ... oh, sorry, wrong song.

She Didn't Write Her Story

What I mean is, I was daunted. So daunted that I skipped the first day. And the second.

By the time I woke up on November 3, I was almost 3400 words behind the pace I needed to maintain. But then I ran across a picture of my grandmother, who had died the year before. She lived to be 93. Standing next to her in the photo was my aunt, who died nine months before her mother.

My aunt was an educator and an intellectual. She loved to teach and to learn. She co-authored several textbooks.

To the best of my knowledge, however, she never wrote a novel, though she probably had the best author's mind I've ever known personally.

She died on her 67th birthday.

Not young, exactly, but not old enough. And she left the world without giving us her stories.

That's when I decided that, *for sure*, I was going to write my book.

Motivated to Catch Up

I found nooks and crannies in my schedule that November 3 and did the same the next day. By the morning of November 5, I was right on target, having penned about 7000 words.

Then I kept at it.

I woke up a little before my family and plopped down a couple hundred words. I wrote during my lunch hour. I took my laptop with me to my son's Spell Bowl competition. I watched a bit less TV at night. I figured out [how to use "sprints"](#) in my writing and how powerful [freewriting](#) can be.

I worked hard, and I got tired. But I kept bobbing and weaving, hitting the pockets -- the pockets of time I never realized existed before.

As Thanksgiving week dawned, I was within 10,000 words of my goal. How sweet would it be to put my first novel to bed -- granted, in first-draft form -- before

I bellied up to the table on Thursday?

That thought motivated me, and I stayed up late on Sunday ... and Monday ... and Tuesday. And I finished.

The holidays were free and clear, and my book was done! (In a NaNoWriMo sense.)

NaNoWriMo Changed Me

As awesome as it was to write a freaking novel, it was even better to know that *I could do it*. And ... to know that I could do it *quickly*.

And, while I took some time to decompress from the flurry and stress of NaNoWriMo, it didn't take long before I was itching to write again. I was anxious to refine the techniques I had learned during November and figure out whether I could use them during "normal" writing periods.

It turns out I could, at least most of them. In fact, when I started writing again in early December, I really didn't even have to *think* about crafting chapter beats, setting a timer, or writing while I ate breakfast.

I just *did* those things.

They had become **habits** for me. They're *still* habits for me, years later.

And I picked them all up during one *intense* 30-day period.

What Can You Do in 30 Days?

Prior to that 2014 NaNoWriMo, I never put much stock in the 30-day challenges you see everywhere, but I've had to rethink that stance.

If you throw yourself into something for 30 days, the results can be dramatic ... but you need to keep some things in mind:

- You have to commit, **hard**, if you expect to make a real change.
- The habit you're trying to instill in yourself has to hold huge *intrinsic* value for you. If you don't believe being fit is important, 30 days of exercise won't mean much to you.
- Be prepared for your life to change, in some way, after the challenge is finished. If you don't want to spend a lot of time writing over the next several

years, taking 30 days to write a novel and learn about yourself as a writer is not time well spent.

- Don't expect miracles. You won't become Mr. Olympia in 30 days, and you won't write *Harry Potter*.
- On the other hand, aim high, because you can probably do a whole lot more than you *thought* you could.
- If your new habit sucks at first, don't worry, because it's only 30 days.
- Still, 30 days is long enough that habits can start to "stick."

Getting Started

So, how do you go about tackling your own 30-day challenge?

Simple ... just pick a goal you want to achieve or a habit you want to adopt -- or break -- and **bust your ass** for 30 days.

Read what you can about your topic and start where you are, but don't be afraid to tweak along the way.

At the end of the month, you'll have either failed or succeeded, and then you can decide if the new habit is right for you.

And if, like me, your target habit is to write more and your *goal* is to write a novel, keep the story of my aunt close to your heart as you slog through late-night and lunchtime writing sessions.

She'll never have a chance to write her novel, but you sure as Hell can write *yours*!

Seriously!

Look, I get it -- you're a creative person. You're a *writer*, for Pete's sake!

You want to tell stories and birth characters and *create entire worlds*. Maybe you outright begrudge the other things that modern writers "have to" do: *building a website, engaging in social media, making book covers, compiling and uploading your book*.

It's all perfectly dreadful tedium for many of us, but you slog through them because they're part of the "business" of writing in the 21st century.

The *last* thing you want to hear is that writing -- the actual butt-in-seat, belly-to-desk act of writing -- should be a business, too.

But, as unsavory as it may sound, there are plenty of good reasons for you to approach your writing sessions like you would a business meeting.

Writing Is Serious -- and Sacred -- Business

You may enjoy your writing.

In fact, writing may be the *most enjoyable* part of your day. It ranks right up there for me, and I hope it does for you, too.

But just because something is fun or fulfilling doesn't mean it's not serious. In fact, you might say that those activities that bring us joy should be among the *most serious* topics in our lives.

After all, there are enough irritations and stressful situations in the average day to send us screaming into the hills. We need whatever enjoyment we can squeeze from life, but if we don't take those opportunities seriously and don't protect them, "real life" will eat them up.

That's precisely why we need to be so vigilant with our writing sessions.

And, by treating them like we would any important business meeting, we can impart to them the proper gravitas.

Here's how.

Schedule Your Writing Time

Scheduling your writing time is absolutely essential to achieving your goals. I have [written extensively](#) on this topic before, but scheduled writing can do all kinds of things for you, including:

- Preserve specific times for you to write
- Impart an urgency to your writing sessions
- Loop in other people to your plans
- Help you ferret out "hidden" writing opportunities in your day

If you're not scheduling your writing time, particularly if you have an outside job, you're not really serious about your craft yet.

Have an Agenda

Have you ever been to a meeting that has no agenda?

I'm sure you've been to *plenty*, and I'm also sure that most of them were a waste of time at best and outright train wrecks at worst. You can't hope to get any real work done in a meeting or during sports practice or during play rehearsal if you don't have a plan.

The same thing holds true for your writing sessions.

Know what tasks you're going to tackle before you sit down to write, and your time will be well-spent. "Wing it," and you might as well not even start.

Be Punctual

Other big meeting killers are stragglers, at both the front end and the back end. You wait around for the late-comers to show up and then the meeting drags on as someone filibusters his point for what seems an eternity after the ending bell has chimed.

Over time, you can predict which meetings will start late and which will end late -- they're often the same meetings. Those are the ones you really start to dread.

The best managers and meeting facilitators recognize this and always keep their meetings on track. They're not afraid to start a meeting with a small crowd while stragglers straggle in, and they're not timid about cutting people off at the end of meetings.

Do the same with your writing sessions.

Start them on time and end them on time, every time. Doing so conditions you to get in and get writing quickly, and to wrap up your thoughts as your clock runs down.

Punctuality imparts the urgency that your writing so desperately needs, and it sets you up for the most productive writing sessions possible.

—

Never forget that writing is *important* to you, and it's serious business in your life.

Treat it as such, and approach your writing sessions like business meetings.

Soon, your word count will be climbing to new heights.

Peak Times

Sometimes you don't have much choice about when you can write.

If you work two jobs and are a single parent and have to schlep three kids around to after-school events every night, you're going to squeeze in your snippets of prose wherever you can. If that means dictating into your cell phone while you wait for soccer practice to finish, so be it.

But most people, in most circumstances, have *some* options. And when you do, make the most of them by fitting your activities to your mood and "flow."

Peak Times Mean Better Production

It may sound mystical, but it's an observable fact that we're better at certain activities during certain times of the day.

Many people are most creative early in the morning, says [Kevan Lee at Buffer](#).

And the capacity for physical work and athletic performance generally peaks in the late afternoon or early evening, according to Professor Michael Smolensky at the University of Texas (Austin), via an [article in the Wall Street Journal](#).

Assuming you have *some* flexibility in your schedule, make the most of your talents by matching your peak times with the activities you have planned.

If you write fiction, for example, try cranking out your daily word count before lunch and save your busy work for after dinner. It's much easier to answer emails and Tweet about your book when your attention is broken by the cheer of a crowd or whooping 10-year-olds than it would be to write a short story under the same circumstances.

Finding Your Own Peak Times

If you're not sure when your peak times are, you can make some guesses and then inch your way toward what works best for you. Here are some tips on how to do that:

- Start with the standard ideas by scheduling your creative work during the early morning hours.
- Measure your performance at each session:

- Jot down when you started writing and when you stopped.
- Tally the number of words you wrote during the session.
- If you have a longish session, note how many breaks you took.
- Later on, edit your work from each session and make general observations about the quality of your writing -- how were punctuation, grammar, word choices, sentence constructs, overall flow?
 - Continue writing at the set time for a number of days -- a week is probably a good first target.
 - Once your week is up, pick a different time of day to write and repeat the process.
 - Do all this for each time block that you regularly have available to you.
 - When you have worked through all possible session times, evaluate the results and figure out which slots are your most productive

This exercise can take some work and might take a month or more to complete, but it has (at least) two benefits:

- It reinforces the habit of daily writing.
- It will help you find your most productive writing times.

Both of these will pay big word-count dividends over the long haul.

And if you already know your peak writing times? Well, then you're all set!

All you have to do is dig in and use your golden windows to get more writing done than you ever thought possible.

Delegate

One of the most important things any of us can do to become more productive is to simply cut out activities that don't bring any return on our time investment. That's why there is an emphasis on "Stop Doing" lists around the new year, and writers would do well to [jump into that fray](#), too.

Try as we might, though, there are all kinds of tasks that we *must* get done in some way or another but that don't contribute directly to increasing our word count.

Some of these, like writing book blurbs, building an author website, or going through the mechanics of posting your book to KDP or other self-publishing platforms are at least *related* to your writing career. Others, like washing the car, shopping for groceries, and paying bills won't ever help you write or sell a book, but still, they're vital to your survival and/or happiness.

So what's a time-crunched author to do?

In a word ... delegate!

That's Not My Job!

The fact is, *all* of the tasks on the list above and most of the activities that eat away at our time every day *could* be accomplished by someone other than you.

You don't have to build your own website ... you can hire a consultant to do that.

You don't have to publish your book to KDP ... your virtual assistant can do that.

You don't have to shop for groceries ... your spouse could do that.

Now, of course, there are tradeoffs. It costs money to get outsiders to do work for you, and it costs other chores and favors to get *insiders* to do your work for you.

Barter for Your (Writing) Life

But, as in the example of your spouse shopping for groceries, you can get creative with delegation. Maybe your wife hates to walk the dog, but you enjoy the quiet time alone. Why not make that "your" chore in exchange for her always

buying the weekly vittles.

Similarly, if you have a child or an associate or — again — a spouse, who is good with computers, you could offer to write or edit copy for their website in exchange for their setting up your website. Heck, if you're really close, they might oblige you without the need for a *quid pro quo*, just because you're such a lovable sort.

Here are some other ideas for how to delegate work that doesn't contribute to your writing goals:

- Get your high schooler to do extra house chores in exchange for gas money.
- Hire a local teen to mow your lawn.
- Call in professionals to work on plumbing and electrical problems -- they can be a huge time sink (and money) if you don't know what you're doing.
- Trade copywriting services for tax advice from an acquaintance or colleague.
- Use [Fiverr.com](https://www.fiverr.com) to buy artwork for your books and for other tedious parts of the publishing pipeline.

I'm sure you can think of all sorts of other tasks that you'd like to offload, and there are probably as many -- or more -- ways to *actually* offload them.

However you go about it, delegating the activities that are not in your wheelhouse and only slow you down can do wonders for your peace of mind *and* your word count!

Thank You!

I really appreciate your taking the time to read *Get Your Butt in the Chair*, and I wish you well in your writing endeavors.

If you liked this book, I hope you'll consider leaving a review and telling your friends about it.

Thanks again, and happy writing!
Adam Hughes

Crush Writer's Block Forever ...

Finding time to write can be tough, but what's worse is when you *waste* those precious hours and minutes. When you sit down to write and ... nothing ... happens.

That's the scourge of writer's block, and it seems to infect nearly every author at one time or another.

But that's good news for you — the fraternity of sufferers, and *former* sufferers, is huge, which means there is no shortage of advice about how to break through the block.

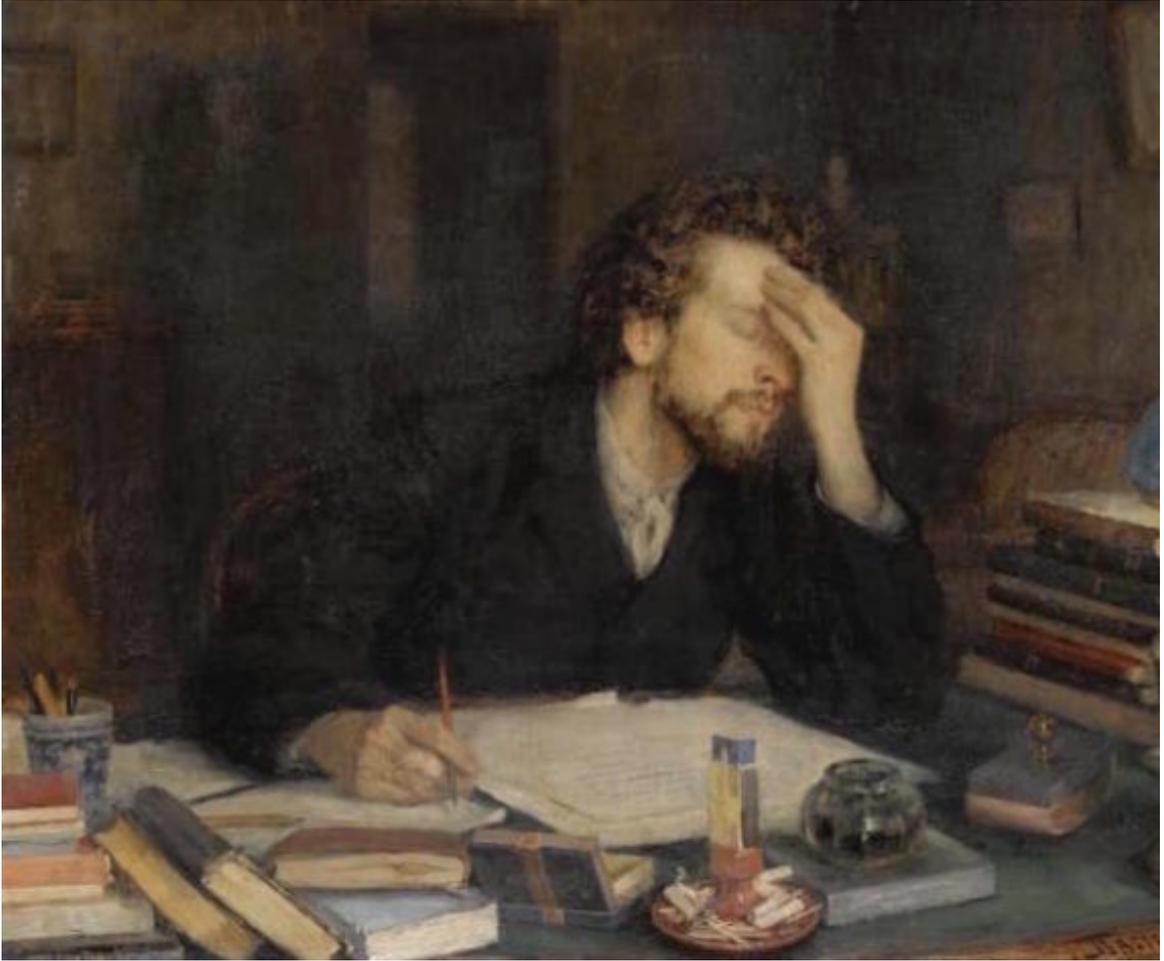
The tough part is knowing which tips are right for **you** and which are just fluff. You need a distilled version that presents just the *best* information available.

If this all sounds way too familiar, then I invite you to download [*The Ultimate Guide to Overcoming Writer's Block*](#) now, for free. It's a compilation of 89 of the best bits of advice about writer's block on the web, organized into categories to help you pinpoint and overcome your own affliction.

It's my gift to you for taking the time to read this book and for supporting my work.

Grab your copy now at the link below.

<http://themoonlightingwriter.com/the-ultimate-guide-to-overcoming-writers-block-download/>



<http://themoonlightingwriter.com/the-ultimate-guide-to-overcoming-writers-block-download/>

Break Through the Horrors of Writer's Block ...

Sometimes, writer's block is about not having a story idea at the ready — all you need to get moving again is a little push ... a *prompt*, if you will.

If **you** are ready for a frightening little nudge, I invite you to download [51 Terrifying Writing Prompts](http://themoonlightingwriter.com/51-terrifying-writing-prompts-2/) now, for free.

It's my gift to you for taking the time to read this book and for supporting my work.

Grab your copy now at the link below.

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