



# Maximize Your Writing Productivity

By Leslie J. Wyatt

Unlike many professions, freelance writing has no crisply defined boundaries. For most of us, our schedule is our own, with no office expecting us to appear and spend a clearly allotted amount of time. If we want to rise at 10 AM and type in our PJs while sipping a bottomless cup of coffee, or stay up until the wee hours churning out our next novel, we can do that. Our time is our own. We get to create in the anonymity of our own environment, far from the tyranny of time clocks and rush hour traffic.

Yet this very freedom—the privilege of ordering our own day—can be one of our greatest challenges. Indeed, time—that “illimitable, silent, never-resting thing . . . rolling, rushing on, swift, silent, like an all-embracing ocean-tide,” as Thomas Carlyle wrote—can swallow us up. If we are not intentional in our writing, we find ourselves at the end of the day with disappointingly few words committed to paper. We must find and use techniques to enhance our output.

## Ever Increasing

One of the primary ways writers can boost their productivity is by setting goals. At first glance, this may seem to rob the concept of *free* from the word *freedom*. Without a firm and realistic picture of what we plan to accomplish, however, we may circle around

# Time-Saving Tips

- ~ Set goals, short and long-term:
  - word counts per day or week
  - projects or chapters completed per month
  - queries or manuscripts sent out per week or month
  - earnings per month, per year
- ~ Review how you divide and schedule your writing tasks:
  - the writing itself, and the various projects you are working on
  - research and idea generation
  - career considerations: finances, promotion, etc.
- ~ Determine your most productive work times, each day, and throughout the year. One highly successful author, Sneed B. Collard III, divides the year into writing seasons and marketing seasons.
- ~ Be willing to change your goals and schedule to adjust to changes in your life and work. Author Emily McIntyre calls this *recalibration*.

and around like a piece of driftwood caught in an eddy. Christina Katz, a.k.a. the Writer Mama ([christinakatz.com](http://christinakatz.com)), is a national speaker, instructor, and author. She advises, “Create a vision of what ongoing success would look like for you, and then go for that. Don’t dwell on or pursue other people’s glory.”

Kansas City-based freelancer Emily McIntyre, whose work appears in such publications as *Missouri Life*, *Rails to Trails*, and *KC Parent*, agrees. “You don’t have to please or imitate anyone else when it comes to any aspect of your writing career. You can decide where you want to go and the steps you must take to get there. . . . If you fall short, you disappoint no one but yourself, which means that you have the right and privilege of adjusting your expectations when you need to.”

A per-day or per-week word-count goal works well for some writers. Sneed Collard III, author of more than 60 acclaimed books for young people, including *Lizards* (Charlesbridge), and

the middle-grade novel *Double Eagle* (Peachtree), says, “I feel productive if I complete at least one good chapter in a novel. Sometimes, I can do more than that, but a chapter a day is satisfactory progress.”

Others want or need to earn a minimum amount per month. When asked about the single most important productivity booster, Collard states, “Bills!” and Jody Feldman, journalist, speaker, and author of *The Seventh Level*, and *The Gollywhopper Games* (both from Greenwillow), says: “Quite simply, treating it like a job.”

Rather than targeting word count or income, some writers aim for spending a certain amount of time on separate aspects of their freelance load—perhaps querying a new publication, making progress on a favorite fiction project, or putting X number of manuscripts in the mailbox each week. These are not absolute rules, but rather motivation for working on idea generation and productivity.

“I consider my writing to be three-phased: my novel, nonfiction, and short stories,” says McIntyre. Endeavoring now to adjust her expectations while meeting the demands of being a stay-at-home mom with a newborn, she says, “If I am able to pay significant attention to two out of three of these [categories], I consider that a productive day.”

What works for one person may not work for another. And we may each need to shake things up once in a while. What works for us today may not work next winter or even next week. We change, and what it takes to keep us writing at peak levels may very well change too. So tap into your own rhythm. Are you most creative in the morning, afternoon, or at midnight? Schedule your writing tasks to maximize your window of productive potential.

Deadlines can be a powerful motivation. Katz says, “Without deadlines I am essentially lost. By having deadlines and meeting them, I have learned the basic rhythms of successful writing for publication.” She continues, “At some point I started putting

deadlines into effect in every area of my career. Anywhere I am successful today, whether it's as a teacher, coach, speaker, author, or journalist, you can be sure it's because somewhere out there is a deadline with my name on it."

### **Productivity Pirates**

Since freelance writing is by nature self-directed, it comes with its own unique set of challenges. Goals, deadlines, and a business-like approach can set us up for success, and we must be wary of time-eroding possibilities. Perhaps the biggest one is procrastination in its various guises. One of the worst is the Internet. "I wish I could be more original here, but the universal truth is the Internet is a veritable time vacuum," Feldman says. Collard agrees: "Do not get distracted by Facebook, the Internet, phone calls, etc. This is not productive time. To paraphrase Stephen King, you've got to sit your butt in the chair and turn off all outside distractions. Do not start the day by checking out Facebook. Reward yourself at the end of the day, after you have completed your hard work."

The key is self-regulation. Although Feldman once had a mantra of *none before noon*, referring to email, she says, "I don't fight it anymore. I will check my email when I first turn on my computer." She scans those messages that may be too interesting or important to wait, and holds the rest in reserve for the afternoon when productivity naturally wanes for her.

Internet activities, games on your smartphone, or *Downton Abbey* are not the only time pirates. Other people can undermine writing productivity. Yes, even those we love. They do not always understand that writing is serious business. Once people realize that we are at home (albeit working), we are often fair game for whatever they need at the moment. It is up to us to communicate that writing is our job. Feldman says she has had to help people understand that she is serious about her work. "I don't do lunch. I don't sit all day eating bonbons and watching soap operas. Yes, I am in my house. Yes, I set my own hours. But no, I am not

bored and am not waiting for the phone to ring.”

About that: Let your answering machine or voice mail screen phone calls. If people do not leave a message, they must not need you very badly, and if they do leave one, you can determine at your leisure whether, when, and how you want to respond. Katz says, “I get a steady stream of unrequested time inquiries. If I were not selective and discerning with unsolicited time requests, I would never be able to meet any of my paying deadlines. So I’ve learned how to say no and how to say it regularly.”

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Besides the Internet, people, and phone calls, countless other time-frittering occupations abound. Take household tasks. It can be mighty tempting to trade a particularly stubborn chapter or plot point for the instant success of folding a load of laundry, sweeping a floor, or waxing the car.

To counteract procrastination, McIntyre sets small writing goals and forces herself to complete them even if working feels futile. “Often I find upon reviewing my work that it wasn’t that bad, and it gets me out of the funk I was feeling,” she says. “A thousand words on my book, for example, or spending just 15 minutes plotting a short story, or locating one expert for an article” are ways to boost both confidence and productivity.

“It used to be when I hit rough spots,” says Feldman, “I would often decide that I desperately needed to dust under my bed or

rotate my hangers or run to every supermarket until I found something as essential as kumquats. Funny thing, the problem areas wouldn't disappear. So now I have an unwritten rule to face them head on, get something down in print that might work. Then, when I hit a natural stopping point or have accomplished some mini-goal, I can take that break."

Even writing-related activities such as research and marketing can be counterproductive if they take us away from keyboard or pen for extended periods of time. The most necessary of these must inevitably yield to the act of writing itself. Collard divides his year into *marketing seasons* (fall and spring), during which he is on the road speaking much of the time, and *writing seasons* (winter and summer), during which he tackles and finishes projects.

### Customize

Solid goals, specific deadlines, and a big dose of self-discipline go far toward boosting writing productivity. But like some New Year's resolutions, goals that do not fit your individual personality and vision or that impose too many limits, may fade away—or even sabotage your levels of production.

"Taking time to re-evaluate every once in a while has greatly boosted my productivity as a writer. I call these times *recalibrations* and use them to assess my goals and the daily efforts I'm making toward them," McIntyre says. "Every once in a while I find that I'm lacking motivation and not really accomplishing anything in my work. These times usually coincide with changes in my personal life—moving, having a baby, starting a new job, beginning school." If not under a deadline, McIntyre gives herself a break, then as she feels motivation returning she will sit down and harness it, making new weekly goals and starting a new to-do list. This allows her to plunge back into writing renewed and rejuvenated.

Katz explains about her own ways of working, "I'm very right-brained and because of this it might be easy to be scattered.

What helps is viewing my job as providing services for people rather than seeing myself as a content-generating machine.” This viewpoint enables her to focus on her readers rather than on efficiency, which she finds boring. “Committing to the ongoing, steady evolution of my ideas takes more time and effort, but has paid off in the long run, since I am a niche writer.”

When asked regarding elements that have been important in boosting his writing productivity, Collard replies, “Having wide-ranging interests helps create an endless supply of projects I am eager to work on.” He advises writers to give themselves plenty of raw materials to spark interest and keep themselves motivated.

It may appear counter-intuitive at first glance, but spending too much time at the keyboard can hinder production. Turning back to writing after an intense session of other activities can help recharge your energy. Try walking or biking. Read. Spend a bit of time in a flower bed or hanging out with friends or your favorite animal. Feldman shares that when she comes to a natural pause in her writing she will allow a short, specific time for checking social sites. “Like a corporate coffee break,” she quips. “Five minutes, 10, depending on the workload. It’s enough to satisfy my curiosity, and it works to let me refresh and hit my story with a little more energy.”

For optimal productivity, strive for balance. Collard advises fellow writers to “take time to go out and explore new things, read a lot of nonfiction books, and take notes about everyday life. All of these give you the raw material to write, and when you get enough of it, well, you just can’t help yourself. You’ve got to sit down and let it out by creating a new literary masterpiece!”

“Work hard, but not too hard,” says Feldman. “Find things you love and live them. They’ll not only give you a release, they’ll enrich your life and inform your writing.” As McIntyre puts it, “Look inward, not outward, for direction, and you will find your writing journey to be deeply satisfying.”