

Time Management for Writers



HOW TO:

- WRITE FASTER
- FIND THE TIME TO WRITE YOUR BOOK
- BE MORE PROLIFIC



SANDRA GERTH

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INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, publishing a book is easier than ever, but finding the time to write a book is becoming progressively harder. For many of us, the hardest part of writing is actually finding enough time to write. Most authors I know have day jobs, so they juggle work, family obligations, household chores, hobbies, friends, and other responsibilities.

At the same time, publishers and readers expect writers to publish multiple books every year. According to the *New York Times*, “in the e-reader era, one book a year is slacking.”

Authors are also expected to improve their writing skills and to market their books through blogging, social media, interviews, newsletters, and many other promotional activities. It seems as if there just aren’t enough hours in the day to do it all, even for full-time writers.

Even if you find the time to write, you might get less words onto the page than you wanted because you stare at the blinking cursor or get distracted by research, e-mail, or social media.

If any of this sounds familiar, this is the book for you.

Don’t shy away from this book because you think time management is boring or restrictive or might even get in the way of your creativity. I know most writers and other creative people groan when they hear the words “time management.” Right-brain-dominant people often don’t do so well with to-do lists, linear schedules, or rigid structures. But that doesn’t mean that creative types don’t need time management—quite the opposite. Having enough time is essential if you want to write. So

what you need are more flexible time-management strategies that are geared toward writers. That's what I provided in this book.

Whether you're writing fiction or nonfiction, whether you are a multipublished author or a beginner working on your first story, this book will help you to:

- find enough time to write, even if you have a day job and can't write full-time;
- use the time that you do have wisely;
- get your first drafts written more quickly while still writing well;
- find your most productive writing times and environments;
- avoid time traps;
- delegate or outsource tasks, even when you think that's impossible;
- avoid the bad kind of multitasking and do the right kind;
- find your ideal writing speed and planning style;
- work with your biological rhythms;
- use rituals to create a powerful writing habit;
- decide how much time to spend writing versus marketing;
- tame your e-mail in-box;
- use music to enhance your writing;
- beat procrastination and avoid the staring-at-a-blank-page syndrome;
- conquer fears and self-doubts;
- overcome writer's block;
- deal with distractions and interruptions;
- participate in writing challenges to become more productive;

- use your computer more efficiently;
- manage your time as a full-time writer;
- discover tools and resources that help you focus on your writing.

WHO AM I?

In case you're wondering who I am and why I think I'm qualified to write a book about time management for writers, here's a bit about me:

I have worked as a psychologist for eight years before giving up my day job in 2013 to make a living as a writer and editor. I wrote and published my first five novels (as well as several novellas and short stories) while holding down a stressful full-time job as a traffic psychologist and also taking on responsibility as the senior editor of a small but fast-growing publishing house.

By the time this book comes out, I will have published a total of twelve novels (under my pen name, Jae — jae-fiction.com), two nonfiction books for writers, and two dozen short stories. I have also translated six of my novels into German, my native language. I'm not telling you all of this to brag, but to show you that it's possible to write a book, even if you're living a full life with several other important responsibilities.

HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF THIS BOOK

If you're reading this book, chances are you feel you don't have enough time to do everything you want to do. So instead of reading this book straight through intending to go back and implement the tips and advice

later, stop after each chapter and take action immediately or you might never get around to it.

At the end of each section, you'll find exercises that will help you incorporate what you just learned into your daily life. Get a notebook and write down your thoughts on each exercise. By the time you finish this book, you'll have a time-management system in place that is custom-made for you and your situation.

There is no one right way that works for every writer, but this book can help you put together the right combination of strategies for your specific needs. Keep an open mind, give each strategy I mention a try, and then decide what works for you and what doesn't. Feel free to modify each suggestion to fit your personality and your life.

Tip!

Download the workbook and clickable list of resources

If you'd like to have a clickable list of the resources mentioned in this book, you can download it at <http://sandragerth.com/resources.pdf>

On my website, you can also find a workbook of all the exercises in this book. You can print it out and do the exercises as you go along:

<http://sandragerth.com/exercises.pdf>

Happy reading and writing!

Sandra Gerth

PART I

Free up time to write

Part I is devoted to helping you find more time to write by exploring different strategies that work for different writers. You will find out why it's so important to set up a writing schedule and create good writing habits instead of waiting for the muse to kiss you. This section also discusses whether it's necessary to write every day.

I'll show you how to identify and get rid of your biggest time wasters. You'll discover how to say no and how to delegate and outsource tasks to someone else, even if you think that's impossible.

Finally, I'll show you what you *shouldn't* do to save time—multitask—and point out better options.

By the end of this section, you'll have found ways to free up the time you need to get some writing done.

1. Find the time to write

Most writers don't write full-time. Most of us have day jobs or are stay-at-home parents. We have work, household chores, family obligations, friends, and hobbies, so finding enough time to write can be tough. Even if you are a full-time writer, you'll spend a lot of time building a platform and promoting your work.

How do you find enough time to write? Here are a few ideas:

- **Write in the mornings:** For many writers, mornings are the most productive time of day because you're still fresh and have more energy. You could try waking up half an hour—or even an hour—earlier to get in some writing before work. The advantage is that there'll be fewer interruptions because everyone else is still asleep. No matter what happens during the rest of the day, you already got some writing done. You'll start the day with a sense of accomplishment. Even if you're not a morning person, I'd still advise you to get your writing done as early in the day as possible, before all the other things in your life require your attention.
- **Write in the evenings:** Other writers write in the evenings; some even find that they are most productive at night, when everyone else is already asleep and there are fewer distractions around. Writing after work has been my routine for many years. But I know that some people are just too exhausted by the end of the day to get any writing done.

- **Write during your lunch break:** If your work situation allows it, you could also try writing during your lunch break. Pack a sandwich and use at least half an hour of your lunch break to get some writing done. I heard of a writer who locked herself into the restroom of her company during her lunch break and wrote for an hour every day.
- **Write during your commute:** If you can, use public transportation and write during your commute. Scott Turow, for example, wrote his first novel, *Presumed Innocent*, on the train to and from work. I wrote on the train during my daily commute for years. I put my headphones on and with no Wi-Fi on my laptop, commute writing was pretty productive for me.
- **Write in the office:** Try writing at your place of work. I'm not talking about writing during work hours. Take your laptop to work with you and either go to work early and write before your co-workers arrive or stay longer and write after everyone else left. This advice is probably only helpful if you have your own office and know your colleagues and boss will leave you alone outside of your normal working hours. Otherwise, you might end up working overtime. If you don't have an office of your own, you could write in your parked car. The advantage is that you're driving to work and home at different times than anyone else, so you won't get stuck in rush hour and can save some time. Also, in the office, there tend to be fewer distractions around than at home.

- **Write instead of doing other things:** Sacrifice or at least limit other activities so you have more time to write. Take a long, hard look at how you spend your time. Is there anything you'd be willing to give up? For me and many other writers, it's watching TV. If you give up just one TV show a week, you gain an hour of writing time. At the pace of 1,000 words per hour, that would mean you'd write an additional 52,000 words a year. That's almost an entire novel! If I do watch TV, I either record the programs or I watch them on DVD, which saves fifteen minutes of time because there are no commercials. Other writers give up part of their income and go part-time so they can have a writing day. Just don't overdo it and sacrifice everything else in your life.
- **Write instead of doing chores:** Try to reduce the time you spend on chores. When you cook dinner, make extra portions and freeze them for a quick meal another day. Personally, I no longer iron most of my clothes, which saves me about an hour a week. Admittedly, that might be easier for people who work at home, as I do, and whose work uniform consists of jeans or shorts and a T-shirt, but if you look at your list of household chores, there might be one or two that you don't need to do as often as you do now.
- **Write while you're waiting:** Make good use of little nuggets of time. Even if you don't get long blocks of uninterrupted writing time, you can still write a book. Carry a notebook and a pen—or a digital device—with you everywhere you go and turn idle time in between appointments or other tasks into

writing time. Even if you can just grab ten or fifteen minutes here and there, that time adds up. Most writers can write about 250 words within fifteen minutes, which would mean you'd finish the first draft of an 80,000-word novel in less than a year. So find and use those little pockets of time, usually time when you wait for something—for a doctor's appointment, for the bus, train, or plane, for dinner to cook, to pick up your kids, and so on. However, some writers simply can't write if they have only a few minutes. Writers such as Steve Windsor, author of the *9 Day Novel* series, consider two hours of uninterrupted writing time the absolute minimum. If you are one of those writers, use those little pockets of time either for writing-related things such as choosing names for your characters, doing a little research, or scheduling tweets, or use those spare couple of minutes to take care of your to-do list so that won't be cutting into your writing time later. But give writing in small chunks of time a try; the more you practice it, the easier it becomes.

- **Write on weekends and days off:** Other writers prefer long writing marathons. They might not get much—or any—writing done during the week, but then use weekends and vacations to go on writing benders and write for hours without coming up for air. If that works for you, try to take care of other obligations during the week and then hole up somewhere and write on weekends.

These different strategies are not mutually exclusive, of course. Truthfully, I have done all of the above on a regular basis. The more flexible you are and the more strategies you use, the more writing you'll get done.

At the same time, try to be realistic. What kind of writing schedule works for you depends on your personality and your daily responsibilities. If you're a night owl, getting up at 5:30 a.m. to write probably isn't realistic. But give each strategy a fair try before deciding it's not for you. You might be surprised to find out that things you thought wouldn't work for you actually do!

Recommended resources:

- *How to Find Time to Write: Overcome Writer's Block, Start Writing and Write Faster* by Mike Fishbein
- *The Write Time* by Brandy Miller

EXERCISE #1:

- Take a look at the above list of strategies. Decide on one that you want to try for the next week. Pick one you haven't tried before or haven't tried in some time. If you have always assumed that you can only write if you have a long block of time ahead of you, see if you can scribble down bits of dialogue while you're waiting for the bus. If you have been writing mostly in the mornings, give writing at night a try. If you've been a night-owl writer so far, try writing before work.

2. Track your time

Let's imagine for a moment that you have financial problems and want to improve your spending habits. What would be the first thing you'd do? Right. You'd probably start by analyzing your expenses and how you're spending your money.

If you want to manage your time better, you should do the same. The first step of time management is to become more aware of how you spend your time. Many people have no idea where their time goes. Some think they know, but then are very surprised when they do a time audit and find out how they *really* spend their time.

WHY YOU SHOULD TRACK YOUR TIME

Doing a time inventory will take some work, but it's worth it. Tracking your time will:

- Reveal how much time you spend on the things that are important.
- Show you time stealers and habits that kill your productivity.
- Identify things you need to do more—or less—of.
- Keep you accountable and make you less likely to waste your time.
- Reveal tasks that are taking you too long and that you might be able to outsource.
- Give you more realistic expectations of how long things take, which helps you not to take on too much in the future because you underestimate how long a task will take.

There are many good reasons to track your time for a while. Read on to find out how to do it.

HOW TO TRACK YOUR TIME

There are different methods you can use to track your time. The three main options are:

- **Keep a time log for a week.** Break every day into fifteen-minute segments and write down what you're doing during each block of time. You can either use a daily planner, print out a time-log sheet or use a blank sheet of paper. Write down everything you do from the moment you get up to the moment you go to sleep. Be honest about it, and don't leave anything out. Try to write it down as soon as possible instead of trying to piece it back together at the end of the day. Admittedly, tracking your time that way can be a hassle, but the insights it provides will make it worth your while. Read on for other options.
- **Use a timer app for a week.** If you spend most of your time at your computer, you can track your time with the help of apps such as Toggl. The app allows you to enter the name of a task, and then you simply click the start/stop button when you begin and when you're done. There's a free version, and it's available for Windows, Mac, Linux, iPhone, and Android.
- **Use time-tracking software for a week.** If you think you'll forget to start and stop the timer each time you switch tasks, use time-tracking software that automatically tracks what you do on your computer and gathers the data for you. The most popular piece of

software is probably RescueTime. It runs in the background and keeps track of how much time you spend on certain applications and websites. It runs on Windows, Mac, Linux, and Android. The lite version is free.

ANALYZE THE RESULTS

Once you have kept track of your activities for a week—or longer, if you want—look at your data. Check for patterns:

- **Is there anything that you spent more time on than you think you should?** For example, are you spending two hours on Facebook each day when you thought it was just a few minutes? You'll find more information about this common pitfall in the chapter on time wasters (chapter 4).
- **Are there any tasks that take an inordinate amount of time?** That could be a sign that you're getting distracted or that you're struggling with a particular task. You'll find solutions for these problems in chapters 12 and 13.
- **Is there anything you think you should do more of?** For example, did you take the time to exercise? Are you sleeping enough? If you're not taking good care of yourself and your body, you won't have the energy to write, even if you finally find the time. More about this in chapter 23.

I suggest you repeat this time tracking at least twice a year to make sure you're not falling back into old habits.

Recommended resources:

- [*Time Tracking: The One Thing That Will Tell You Exactly How Productive You Are... Or Aren't!*](#) by Aaron Lynn

EXERCISE #2:

- Install Toggl or RescueTime or print out a time-log sheet.
- Track your time for at least one week.
- Analyze your results as described above.

3. Make the time to write

Despite the title of chapter one, time isn't found. It's made. If you wait until enough time to write magically falls into your lap, you'll never get your book written. If you wait until you have completed all the other things on your to-do list, you will never get around to it. There's always something that'll get in the way. The only way to make your writing dreams come true is to *make* time for your writing.

Many times, you might not be able to make writing your top priority, but it shouldn't always come last either. If you want to be a writer, you have to take your writing seriously and make time for it, just as you do for all the other important things in your life.

I want to learn how to play the guitar and I would like to learn another language, Spanish, but apparently I don't want either badly enough to make time for it. I keep putting it off to "someday, when I find the time," but I don't want to treat my writing the same way.

SET UP APPOINTMENTS FOR YOUR WRITING

Get out your daily planner and take a look at your schedule. Considering your other responsibilities, what block of time could you set aside for your writing? Make it a specific time—if you can, the same time every day or at least several times a week—and put it in your calendar.

Write it down the same way you'd put down a doctor's appointment or a meeting with your boss. That way, you're sending a signal that you're taking your writing seriously. It doesn't have to be two or more hours in

a row. Even if you can squeeze in just fifteen minutes here and there, that time will add up.

DON'T WAIT FOR INSPIRATION OR THE PERFECT TIME

If you wait for perfect conditions such as having several hours blocked out for writing or having done all your chores first or being in the right mood to write, you will never get much writing done. There'll never be a perfect time, so stop waiting for it. Put your butt in the chair and your fingers on the keyboard no matter what, even if you don't feel inspired or the weather is great and you'd rather be outside.

It's probably not a coincidence that many prolific novelists such as Jack London, Ken Follett, Gabriel García Márquez, or Mark Twain got their start in journalism. As journalists, they got used to writing even if they didn't feel particularly inspired. As Jack London once said, "You can't wait for inspiration. You have to go after it with a club."

CREATE A GOOD WRITING HABIT

Instead of only writing when you feel like it, make writing a habit—something that is a regular part of your weekly schedule. I know many people might view habits and routines as something that kills creativity, but it's in fact just the opposite. The right habits can actually help you think more creatively and make writing easier.

Once writing becomes a habit, it won't require as much willpower and effort to get started. You won't be dependent on your mood, but will be

able to write consistently. You'll feel less anxious and more confident about your writing, and it won't need as much brainpower.

Forming a productive writing habit can be hard in the beginning. Before it becomes second nature, you might have to struggle and fight to overcome old, less productive habits. Luckily, if you stick with it, you'll eventually form a new writing habit that will make writing easier.

Each habit consists of a three-step loop:

- **Trigger:** A trigger is a reminder or cue that initiates a certain behavior because it has become strongly associated with it over time. For example, play a certain song or drink a certain beverage each time before you sit down to write.
- **Routine:** The routine is the action you take when the trigger occurs. Since we're talking about writing habits, the routine would be writing.
- **Reward:** The reward is something you gain from your routine. It can be an intrinsic reward—feeling good because you have completed your writing session and made your daily goal—or an external reward, for example, going to see a movie or buying yourself a new book if you meet your goal every day for a week. Reward yourself in some small way after each writing session.

To create a new writing habit, all you have to do is to repeat that sequence of trigger, writing, reward often enough. Contrary to popular belief, it takes longer than twenty-one days to create new habits. Depending on the person and the habit, it can take several months. But

you'll get to the point that your brain will automatically switch into writing mode as soon as your chosen trigger occurs.

Two other tips that might help to make sure you can form a new writing habit successfully:

- **Start small.** If you go from not getting any writing done for weeks to trying to write 3,000 words each day, you're setting yourself up to fail. Start by setting the bar so low that you won't have any problem achieving your goal and will feel good instead of frustrated—that's part of the reward. For example, you could try to write for ten minutes before work every day.
- **Set reminders.** In the beginning, you might have to remind yourself to start your new writing routine at the appropriate time. If you want to form a habit of writing in the morning, you could put a sticky note on your bathroom mirror or the coffee machine.

COMMIT TO YOUR WRITING SCHEDULE

Set an alarm on your phone or your computer to remind you when it's time to write. Let your friends and family members know your writing schedule and ask them not to disturb you during that time. When your scheduled writing time comes, set aside everything else and write. Don't accept phone calls or answer e-mails or do anything but write during that time, just the way you wouldn't do anything else during a doctor's appointment or a meeting with your boss.

You don't need to feel guilty or think you're impolite. It's a sign of mutual respect if your family and friends don't disturb you during your writing

time—and you in return focus exclusively on your friends and family when you're with them instead of daydreaming about your writing.

Also, make your writing schedule public. Hang it on the fridge or someplace where your entire family can see it. Post it on your blog or social media so that everyone knows when not to interrupt you.

SHOULD YOU WRITE EVERY DAY?

There's a big debate about whether writers should write every day. Remember what I said before: There's no one-size-fits-all approach to writing. Different creative processes work for different writers, so you'll have to find out what works best for you personally.

Some writers swear by writing every day. If they don't, they get out of the habit and then it gets harder and harder to get any writing done. For the past few years, I forced myself to write every day, no matter what was going on in my life, even if it was just a paragraph or two. Now that I'm a full-time writer, that habit serves me well.

If you can't write every day, don't beat yourself up about it. I, too, had years in which I might go several days without writing when life got too busy. I know a lot of writers that are successful without writing every day. In fact, for many writers it might be a good idea to take off at least one day—or maybe two—per week to recharge their creative batteries. Thriller writer and writing coach James Scott Bell recommends writing six days a week, for example.

Experiment to find out what works for you, but try to write regularly; otherwise, writing doesn't become a habit. The longer the break between

writing sessions, the more you lose momentum and the harder it becomes to get back into the story. Ideally, don't skip more than two days of writing in a row. You don't need to write for hours each day, but try to at least write a few paragraphs or reread the last scene or plot ahead in your head or jot down some notes, keeping the story and the characters fresh in your mind and making it easier to jump back into writing. If you want to build momentum and train your writing muscles, consistency is key. Write whenever you have regular time to sit down—if that means just Sunday afternoons, make the most of those Sunday afternoons.

There are a few “binge writers,” who don't write for weeks or even months and then crank out hundreds of pages in a week. Reportedly, Elizabeth Gilbert wrote *Eat, Pray, Love* that way. But for most writers, that approach won't work. Like all people, writers are creatures of habit, so keeping up a writing routine is important.

If you want to write every day, you might find the so-called Seinfeld Chain helpful. Comedian Jerry Seinfeld used this method to encourage himself to write new material every day. Here's how it works: Get a wall calendar that has a whole year or at least one month on one page. For each day you write, put an X or a sticker in the box for that day. After a few consecutive days of writing, you'll have a chain, and you won't want to break it by missing a day of writing. That's a great motivation.

You can either buy a calendar or print one out. For example, Karen Kavett offers a free [Don't Break the Chain calendar](#) every year, or you create your own with the [Chain Calendar](#) website. If you have an iPhone, there's a [Chains](#) app you could use.

Recommended resources:

- *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* by Charles Duhigg
- *The Writing Habit: How to Stick to a Daily Writing Routine* by Sheryl Jacobs

EXERCISE #3:

- Get out your daily planner and look at tomorrow's schedule. Where could you squeeze in thirty minutes of writing? Put that appointment down in your planner.
- Set an alarm on your cell phone that will remind you of the appointment.
- Think about how you'll make writing a habit. Will you write every day? Five days a week? On all days of the weekend?
- If you plan to write every day, print out a calendar for the next year or month and start a chain.