

Keeping Your Writing Resolutions

by Christina Hamlett



Now is the accepted time to make your regular annual good resolutions. Next week you can begin paving hell with them as usual. – Mark Twain

Ah, January! A new year, a fresh slate, a virtual meadow of pristine winter white that stretches for miles in front of us. Where oh where do we put our first footprint or make that first goofy snow angel?

If you're like most people, this is the month for throwing oneself with gusto into an aggressive self-improvement program involving the words "diet" and "exercise."

Remember all those glam party invitations last month you couldn't say 'no' to? Remember the steady arrival of gift baskets laden with signature chocolates, crunchy nuts, imported cheeses and stellar wines that beckoned through festive cellophane? Remember all the holiday dinners where you needed no coaxing to maintain membership in The Clean Plate Club?

Speaking of food for thought, remember when you promised yourself this time last year (or was it the year before?) that you'd really get serious about your writing? If the s(c)ales still aren't tipping in your favor, there's no time like the present to trim the distractions that are keeping you from the keyboard and establish a rigorous routine to whip your projects into shape.

Resolution #1: Find the 25th Hour

If you sat down with an accountant to fix your budget, she'd tell you to keep a running tab of your expenses for a month to identify where your money's been dribbling off to. If you queried a trainer or a dietician about to slim your silhouette, you'd be asked to account for every nosh and nibble that passed through your lips. But who's the gatekeeper of your writing agenda? Have you ever caught yourself saying, "If I only had an extra hour each day."

Once upon a time when authors were forced to compose everything on typewriters, it was incumbent upon them to force their wits into some kind of order and generate a staccato rhythm at the keys. Otherwise, the silence would betray to anyone within earshot that they weren't actually doing anything. The advent of computers, however, allows us to fritter away countless hours on nothing and yet so rivets our focus on the screen that casual observers assume we must be doing something that forbids interruption.

For the next week, keep a time-entry accounting of how many times you open/read/write emails, play games, troll chat rooms, surf for celebrity gossip, and/or shop online. This log will not only reveal patterns of when you're the most vulnerable to diversions but also challenge you to cobble together 60 "free" minutes by whittling down the percentage of time you've been spending each day on non-project pursuits. You still, of course, have the same 24 hours as everyone else but this kind of discovery is as cool as finding loose change in your couch cushions.

Resolution #2: Get a Workout Buddy

Motivating yourself to go to a gym is easier if someone is meeting you there and expecting you to show up. The same with starting a new story or maintaining your momentum on an existing one. As solitary a craft as writing is, it's altogether too easy to let your progress slide on a spec script if – unlike school homework – you're under no pressure to finish it by a given date.

The solution to beating your procrastination habit is to tell a handful of friends that you're writing something and instruct them to ask you every 1-3 days to show them what you've done. I discovered this strategy back when I was writing romantic suspense novels for HarperCollins. I was working full-time in a legal office and chose as my test readers a couple of coworkers whom I saw every day. Since my style has always been to end every chapter with a cliffhanger, I didn't dare show up empty-handed on a Monday morning after having kept them on pins and needles since Friday.

Related Products

Movie Girl (Fiction) \$11.95

The first book in the new fictional series by Christina Hamlett, the author of Screenwriting for Teens.



Screenwriting for Teens: The 100 Principles of Screenwriting Every Budding Writer Must Know \$18.95

This book gives teens—who go to the movies more than any age group in the world—the tools to do more than just watch those movies: it gives them the tools to write their own films. Each chapter defines a concept, illustrates it with examples of current and classic films, and challenges its readers with creative writing exercises.



Could it be a Movie? How to get Ideas out of Your Head and up on the Screen \$26.95

Is there a movie inside of you that's been yearning to get out but you don't know where to begin? This book is a roadmap to determine if film is the best destination for your creative ideas. It will teach you how to identify whether your plot packs enough punch to be a hit movie!



If your project is targeted to young adults, recruit a teen or two to egg you on. They're not only brutally honest in critiquing your work but – by putting them in the role of a teacher - also a lot more persistent than adults. My book *Screenwriting for Teens*, for instance, would not have been finished in less than a summer without the unrelenting push of a young man named Nick; *Movie Girl* was penned in half that time with a lot of impatience on the part of a tween named Emily.

Resolution #3: Reinvent a Rhino

My friend Kari collects rhinos, a hobby I've been contributing to every birthday and Christmas for years. This obviously makes her a tad harder to shop for than friends who collect more pedestrian creatures like cows, owls, cats or little pink pigs. My husband can attest to the delight with which I pounce on virtually any rhino-related item I can find, no matter the size, price, or inconvenience of transporting it home. The rhinoceros, after all, is a largely underrepresented breed when it comes to wood, ceramics and stuffed toys.

I've always wondered whether she'll start collecting something different by the time the *rhino d'art* supply is depleted or if I'll have to start duplicating what I've already given her. Such is the conundrum of writers who have zeroed in on only one outlet for their talent. Do they ask, "Haven't I already done this before? Are there no new ideas left to capture? Was this, perhaps, the last one left?" If they have purposely narrowed their focus to just one species, they have only themselves to blame if/when it eventually joins the endangered list. The solution is to either start viewing rhinos from a different perspective or consider putting them against the backdrop of a more expansive savannah.

Take that RomCom screenplay you've been unable to sell and experiment with another medium by adapting it to a short story, a novel or something for theater. Have you become stuck in a rut of writing in only one genre? Make this the year to try something totally different. Looking for inspiration to push your mental margins? Tape a soap opera for five consecutive days, then develop a synopsis that turns all its characters and storylines into an old-fashioned western or SciFi thriller.

Resolution #4: Exercise Poetry in Motion

A common struggle aspiring screenwriters have is in distilling their plot into a one page (or, better, one paragraph) synopsis. Great as they may be in crafting dialogue and scenes, when it comes to explaining what their film is about, there's a tendency to ramble *ad nauseum*. Such meandering is the kiss of death when there's only a short window of opportunity to pitch a concept on paper or in person.

Here's a twist that reinforces the importance of making every word count; specifically, resolve this year to initially draft every synopsis as a 12-lines-or-less poem. It can be silly, sentimental, serious, or Thurberesque. The idea is to strive for rhythm and rhyme that embraces brevity.

Example:

*Her life in Kansas was a snore,
Her nemesis: a bitch.
And then a storm shook roof to floor,
And killed a wicked witch.
A yellow road of bricks and bends
And dangers to the max
Will teach the girl and her new friends
The price of what each lacks.
A heart, a brain, and courage, too—
How far they had to roam
To learn the lesson, pure and true:
There's just no place like home.*

Exercise your new-found poetic license with movies you already know. This will help you develop a cut-to-the-chase approach in summarizing major plot points. Here are a few to dabble with: *Somewhere in Time*, *Die Hard*, *The Matrix*, *Dances With Wolves*, *Casablanca*.

Resolution #5: Get Inside Their Heads

Back when I ran a touring theater company, I always had each actor fill out an interview questionnaire from the viewpoint of the character he/she was playing. This approach to studying a role was to illustrate that acting wasn't just about memorizing lines and delivering them at the right time but about really understanding the character's emotions and motivations. In tandem with improvisational warm-up exercises at the start of each rehearsal (i.e., "Pretend your character is arguing her way out of a speeding ticket"), the ability to

channel the fictional persona from the inside out decreased the likelihood of an actor ever freezing up on stage and falling out of character.

This exercise also works well for screenwriters who spend more time trying to put the right dialogue in their players' mouths than in understanding the layers of experience that have brought them into the plot. It derives from the secret that every successful journalist knows about prepping for interviews: Go beyond the 90 percent background everyone is already familiar with and encourage your subjects to divulge the 10 percent "unknown." For your heroes and villains, it's that 10 percent which ultimately influenced the choices you're having them make in your screenplay.

How would your main characters react to hypothetical scenarios? The best way to find out is to develop character profiles by "interviewing" them. Must-have books to get this process flowing are Barbara Ann Kipfer's *4,000 Questions for Getting to Know Anyone and Everyone*, Malcolm Godwin's *Who Are You? 101 Ways of Seeing Yourself*, and James Saywell and Evelyn McFarlane's *If: Questions for the Game of Life*.

Resolution #6: Keep to the Code

Psychologists have determined that in order to break an annoying habit or to incorporate a new one, you need to do it for 21 days straight (including weekends and holidays). If you miss a day, the 21-day cycle has to start over. Just like sabotaging a diet by sneaking a cookie, the promise you'll counteract the damage by eating less the next day rarely works. As humans, we're more attuned to rewarding ourselves than imposing penalties loosely predicated on the honor system.

I use this in workshops when students tell me they haven't started writing their screenplay or novel yet because they're waiting until (1) their kids leave home, (2) they retire from their job, (3) they pay off their mortgage, (4) they pick up the dry-cleaning, etc. A similar litany of excuses is advanced when it comes to why others haven't finished the projects they were once so excited about.

This last resolution for 2009 is a two-parter. First of all, you need to make writing a regularly scheduled activity in your daily routine. Ideally, it should be at the same time and place every day and should be treated like a class or appointment that you can neither be late for nor skip. If you can do this for 21 days straight, it will be a fully ingrained part of your psyche by Day 22.


Secondly, you need to commit to writing a minimum of one fresh page per day (editing and rewrites don't count toward this quota). Considering that the average length of a screenplay is 110 pages (the average length of a novel is 320), starting – and finishing – your story in less than a year will no longer seem quite as daunting. One word of warning, though. On the days when you crank out 7 pages instead of 1, this doesn't mean you can then goof off the following week. Come tomorrow, we'll expect you back at the keyboard as always.

And now if you'll excuse me, I need to finish off the last of my '08 Godiva truffles so they won't get in the way of my diet resolutions for '09.

Former actress/director Christina Hamlett is an award-winning author, ghostwriter, and script consultant whose credits include 26 books, 127 plays, 5 optioned feature films, and hundreds of articles and interviews. For additional information on her work or to inquire about script consultation services, visit her website at authorhamlett.com.

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