Write Every Day: How to Write Faster, and Write More

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#Introduction

This is a book for people who want desperately to write novels.
You want to write them more easily.
You want to write them more quickly.

Most importantly, you just want to finish the book you've been working on, and then write a lot more of them.

Unfortunately, there's always something stopping you.

Maybe you don't have the time. Maybe you have the time, but you don't have the energy. Maybe you have the time, *and* the energy… but either you feel unfocused, or blocked.

You might blame yourself for being lazy or unorganized.

You might say to yourself:

"If only there was a boot-camp drill instructor kicking my butt, I'd get these books done!"

Or,

"If I could only find the perfect system, I'd finally be able to write those (however many) books a year!"

The pressure to write faster.

If you're a commercial genre fiction writer, there's a subtle (or not-so-subtle!) pressure to write more quickly. Generally speaking, publishing houses like to see a book out on the shelves every nine months. (That doesn't mean they'll guarantee you a publishing slot, but that's a different discussion.) If you have a book they like, and it does at all well, they're going to ask: "What else do you have?"

If you're planning on self-publishing, it seems like the most successful authors are also the most prolific. Consequently, the pressure to produce is there as well.

Go to a writer's chapter meeting for any genre fiction organization, and you'll usually get the advice: *You need to write more! You need more books out there! Why aren't you writing?*

A quick story about blocks, stress, and time management.

I wrote the first seven novels of my career while holding down a forty-hour-a-week day job. That said, there was a two-year gap between my first novel and my second where I simply couldn't, or wouldn't, write.

Frankly, I got scared and froze up.

I did finally manage to get over it and write several more. It still lingered in the background, and I still had gaps in my publishing history, but at least I was writing.

Then, in 2006, I had my son.

Instead of just managing a day job and the writing, I was now a work-at-home Mom. Despite the fact that I thought I'd prepared myself, I'll be honest: I wasn't ready for the combination of necessary self-direction and unavoidable sleep deprivation.

My energy, and my ability to focus, went right through the floor.

I was under contract for a trilogy, and I was freaked out about juggling everything on my plate. Considering my income now depended on finishing novels instead of just showing up to my cubicle and plugging away… well, needless to say, I was very, very motivated.

Despite this huge and obvious incentive, I still wrestled with another "dark period" of writer's block, in addition to suddenly having difficulty managing the baby, the house, promotion and proposals.

I had trouble finishing my novels and getting more sold. I went from writing and selling three books a year to struggling to complete one book in two years as bills piled up.

Searching for answers.

In the course of five years, I studied everything I could about time management, energy management, and creative blocks. I worked with coaches. I took classes.

I tried everything from the prosaic ("just get it done, stupid!") to the metaphysical (chakras-n-wind chimes, people. I kid you not.). It wasn't until I started putting all the pieces together that I started getting traction.

Finally, after a lot of experimentation and even more "failures," I was able to synthesize a process that helped me get my productivity back up, while keeping my writing quality high, *and* reaching some semblance of balance with my family, my creativity, and my business.

The result is this book. It won't necessarily work for everyone, and not everyone needs every element I cover here. But for some people, the approaches and solutions will provide a game-changer that will ultimately help you finish your novel and write more of them, in less time, with less stress.

What you will get out of this book.

This book is designed to do three things:

1. It will help you identify what, exactly, is in the way of you completing your current book and/or writing more books that you love, more quickly and easily.
2. It will help you pin down some solutions to those obstacles.
3. It will give you an action plan to actually get the writing done, as well as a suggested template to prevent future roadblocks.

That sounds suspiciously easy.

If you feel like you've been spinning your wheels, and you're simply not getting the books written, there are usually a lot of interlocking factors at work. It seems impossible to pin down what's stopping you – because it's as if *everything* is stopping you.

Let's say you've got a day job, and a family. You're serious about your writing: you want to complete at least one book this year.

But you've got an early meeting, and you've got a new assignment that's causing a lot of overtime. That's problem enough – except when you do get out of work, surprise! Your son has his karate belt test, and he's not old enough to drive. Your twin daughters need your help with homework. You're then scrambling to figure out something to cook for dinner, and realize that you've got nothing clean to wear tomorrow. And what, exactly, did the dog drag on the living room floor?

By the time the kids are asleep, and you've got some clean laundry and you're purposefully (if somewhat guiltily) ignoring the dinner dishes, your spouse is perhaps asking you to watch some TV with him and complaining that he never sees you.

By the time you've watched an episode of *The Walking Dead* on demand with him, it's ten or eleven, and frankly, your brain is tapioca. You've got a better chance of spontaneously flying than you do of getting a scene written. After a few half-hearted attempts at sentences, you crawl to bed, ready to do it all again tomorrow.

On the off-chance you get a free hour on a weekend, you feel the pressure of getting something, *anything* written… but you pull together a hash of notes, and realize it's been so long since you've written, you're not quite sure where to start. Besides, you're still exhausted, which makes everything that much slower.

It takes you an hour to get your bearings and feel ready to write.

At which point, you stare at the blank page, with a rising sense of anxiety. You know you *need* to

write… but where the hell are the words?

There are four main culprits at work here.

While the above seems like a big, hot mess of issues, the obstacles to writing basically fall into the four following camps:

1. Time: not having enough of it, or not managing it well
2. Energy: again, not having enough or not managing it
3. Fear: blocks, "stucks," and avoidance
4. Process: not being aware of what works for you, and not leveraging your systems and routines

You might have elements of all these obstacles. And yes, that's going to feel like one big, hairy, chaotic mess.

The good news? You don't have to tackle them all at once – and a little relief in one area gives you the wiggle room to improve the others.

Ready to make things better, and get some writing done?

Wonderful. Let's get started.

#Chapter 1: Identifying Your Issues

Take a deep breath. This section's probably going to sting a little.

What, exactly, is your problem?

That may sound judgmental or boot-camp influenced ("What's your problem? Why aren't you writing?"), but it isn't – and you need to do your best to keep judgment out of it, because continuing to beat yourself up is the least helpful thing you can do right now.

Assume for the moment that you have perfectly sound reasons for not writing. Pretend you're someone else: a curious detective, or a compassionate sociologist. Pretend you're someone who doesn't know you, but who is studying your life simply to fix a problem or "get to the bottom" of a case.

Assume that the detective *does not think you are lazy, crazy, or fundamentally flawed.*
Assume that the sociologist is *not* thinking: "*Oh my God, what is wrong with her? This is so simple – why can't she just sit down and write?*"

Assume that if you could've written these novels faster, you would have.

We'll be dealing with this more directly in the fear section, but it needs to at least be acknowledged now, or else it'll derail all your other attempts at actually fixing the problem. And if fear is a big portion of your writing obstacles, then you'll notice that your subconscious is going to do a full-court press to actively prevent you from figuring out that it's there at all. Trust me – it's sneaky, and very, very invested in keeping you "stuck." If you're feeling uncomfortable reading this, odds are good it's actually fear.

We're not going to tackle that head on at the moment. All we're doing right now is trouble-shooting.

If you find yourself having those creeping, insidious "this is a waste of time, I should just sit down and pound out those pages, I'm just lazy and unfocused and probably just a crappy writer" thoughts – take a deep breath, and notice that you're judging yourself.

Maybe look at your previous attempts at just "sitting down and pounding out those pages" and see if that actually worked for any length of time.

Then say to those judgmental thoughts "thanks for your input, we'll address that later" and *keep doing the exercises*.

This sounds simple, and possibly like a cop out. It's harder than it seems… and it's surprisingly

important.

Exercise 1: Track your time.

This probably feels obvious as well. It is usually considered boring. Also, it's a bit tedious. It's also, unfortunately, unavoidable if you're serious about finding out what's stopping you from writing.

Take one week, and write down what you do, hour by hour, all day long. Having a daily calendar is a fairly easy way to keep track of this. Just sketch in blocks, like "1 pm to 2 pm, got haircut" or "5-6, cooked dinner" or whatever. If you can have something small and portable to jot notes in, all the better.

Make sure you write it down as soon as possible when you do something. If you try remembering it all at the end of the day (or worse, several days later) you will miss a lot, I guarantee it. Just write it down for one day if a week seems like too much, but definitely do it.

What if you can't even track how you spend your day?

If you find yourself really railing against tracking your time, that says something, too.

Part of it could be that voice we talked about earlier – the one that's pushing you, the one that's saying, "You don't have time for this! Just sit down and write already! *What's wrong with you?"*

Honestly, if you've been seriously stuck and haven't managed to get your writing act together, another week in the interest of science isn't going to kill you or your writing project. This is important.

The real benefit is becoming aware of how you *spend* your time… and, just as important, becoming aware of why you might not want to know. It's like dieting, or budgeting. (I'm sure several of you are probably thinking "Oh, goody! Two other things I usually avoid like a syringe full of Ebola!")

But the fact is, if you don't pay attention to what you're eating, or what you're spending, you usually wind up with a nasty revelation when the consequences hit. For example, as you sit looking at a thousand dollar credit card bill, with several empty boxes of Thin Mints on your lap that you have no memory of consuming. (Those are extreme, reductive examples, but you get the drift.)

Accountability matters.

Just the act of being accountable suddenly changes your behavior. You'll realize that, where you used to sort of futz away the morning on social media or watching TV, you find yourself shying

away from putting "spent two hours on Pinterest" on your calendar.

Which, honestly, is why most people shy away from the time tracking exercise. It's not "boring" – well, it's not thrilling, but it only takes a few minutes at a time out of your day. So it's not really boring.

It's just scary.

A quick aside: if you work on a computer most of the day, and you really want to scare the hell out of yourself – sign up for Paymo Plus's time tracker. (It can be found here: http://www.paymo.biz.) It automatically records every single thing you do online, and how long you were on it. So if you think "I don't spend much time on Facebook" it might show you that you actually have it open five to seven hours a day, for example. Talk about accountability!
On the plus side, it might also show you that you think you're wasting time, but you're actually booked to an almost superhuman schedule. The key here is to *look at what's really going on*.
Make tracking as easy as possible. Be as gentle as possible: nobody needs to see how you spend your time *other* than you. Also, now's as good a time as any to start getting some support. Ask a few friends if they'll do the same. Say it's an experiment. They don't need to see the results, either, but knowing that you're in the same boat will give you confidence, and having to say whether or not you did the exercise at the end of the day might give you a boost to actually do it.

2. Review your time tracking.

Once you've got a week's worth of time tracking on paper, look it over. You're going to look for patterns. You're going to examine any blank spots. And you're going to look for commitments, routines, and roles.

Possible roles.

In addition to the role of "writer," most people have a diverse set of roles: employee, spouse, parent. Maybe volunteer, or congregation member. Friend. Write down which ones you identify with, and then look at your time tracking.

Commitments & routines.

If you have a day job, what are your job-related duties and time blocks?

If you've got family, what goes into your role there? Child care, time with spouse, household duties?

What got repeated in your week? What absolutely had to happen? And what happened unexpectedly?

Blank spots.

If you've got blanks or times when you feel you "didn't do anything" – when were they, and can you think of anything that was going on?

Did you have a purpose (i.e., "I'm just going to go online to check on something" that turned into two hours) or did you get sidetracked (you just wanted to clear out a desk drawer, but then realized that you needed to get out archive boxes to put away some of the things in the drawer, and got sucked into looking at old photos)?

Seeing the stress points in black and white.

Tracking your time will also illustrate the opposite time management issue: overbooking.
If you track your time, and discover that you have something you need to do from the moment you wake up ("walk the dog, 6-6:30 am") to the moment you go to sleep ("11:30 – 12:00 pm, prep for tomorrow's dinner, pack lunches, get ready for bed") you may simply have too much on your plate to try and shoehorn writing in.

This also shows you what you're not doing.

Looking at those blank spots, you might be thinking, "yeah – it shows I'm not frickin' *writing!*"
Or you might be looking at those much-touted "fifteen minute windows" where you're supposed to be scribbling down a paragraph or two, while you're waiting in line at the post office or waiting for your kid's carpool or whatever.

Are you seeing replenishment?

Look over your time tracking. Are there things on there that you can wholeheartedly say "this is where I take care of myself?"

Is there exercise? Meal breaks? Are you doing things for the sheer sake of downtime and relaxation?

Most importantly, *are they conscious choices?*

It can be easy to say "well, I just blew two hours on Pinterest, so trust me, I don't need any more relaxation!"

But in my experience as a writing coach, I've noticed that clients who do things like hang out on social media, or even watch TV, in a desperate attempt to tune out – but *feel guilty about it* – negate any relaxation benefits they might have gotten.

Unless you're consciously choosing a time and an activity and saying, "Okay, *I am not writing*, this is to recharge my batteries," you're probably not doing a whole lot of recharging. It's inefficient, and ineffective.

If you had time to write – did you show up to the page?

This brings up the third and fourth culprits.

During the week you tracked, did you have time that you told yourself you'd write? Did you perhaps actually sit down to your computer or notepad or what have you, and try and get some words down?

If you did – good for you, first of all! Even if it was just for a few minutes, that's a few minutes more than you had. We need to learn to celebrate our accomplishments, so our subconscious is encouraged to actually want to write more.

Second, and be gentle with this: how much writing did you get done? And how hard was it to actually do?

Now that you've gone over the basics…

…you should have at least a sense of whether you've got a time, energy, fear, or process issue. Or if you have a combination of the four.

- If blanks, gaps, and side-tracking is the issue, then yes, you've probably got a time management problem, specifically with focus.
- If you don't see any self-care, if you're overbooked, if you find yourself feeling exhausted and/or unfocused when you finally have time to write…then you've probably got an energy problem.
- If you discover that you had time to write, maybe even thought about writing – but then quickly distracted yourself or found that you got frustrated trying to put words on the page – then you might have a fear issue.
- If you sat down to write, and it took you an hour to get warmed up, to get your notes together, or to figure out what you were going to write, then you've possibly got a process issue.

Once you've got a sense of where you are and what you're up against, let's look at each element, and start targeting solutions.

#Chapter 2: Time

When I hear writers say they don’t have time to write, I find that the case is usually that:

1. They don’t know how they spend their time,
2. They don’t know how much time what they need to do actually takes,
3. They are horribly, cripplingly overbooked with stuff they don’t want to do
4. All of the above.

If you've gone through the first section, you've got at least a week's worth of time tracking on your hands. If that seems too painful, at least shoot for a day or two. Trust me, it's important.
How do you spend your time? Do you spend the bulk of your day at a day job? Are you a caregiver for small children? Do you have a lot of outside commitments: social, family, or something you feel strongly about (politics, religion, charity, etc.)?

Conversely, do you have swathes of time you can't really account for?

How much of your time was spent writing?

This isn't a time to feel guilty. Again, if you're trying to fix the situation, guilt is probably the least helpful emotion you can drag around. I'm giving you a permission slip: you absolutely do not have to write, much less finish a novel in a week or something ungodly, so relax. This is a fact-finding mission.

What did you expect?

Most people's unhappiness around "wanting to write more" is based on their expectations. They think they ought to be writing more than they are. They think that their novels should be completed faster. And they are unhappy because the reality is often very, very far from what they see as ideal.

So perhaps the better question is: when you say you "want to write more" or "want to write every day"... what does that look like? What does that mean?

If you were able to write one single page per day, would that satisfy the "write every day" desire?

If you're already writing a book every six months — do you expect to write a book every three?

Specificity matters.

It's just like an external goal for your protagonist. It's a lot easier to know when you've actually succeeded at something when you can measure it. So state what you expect from your writing in measurable, specific terms.

Don't say "I want to write more." Say "I want to write a novel in six months."

Don't say "I want to write every day." Say "I want to write a scene every day."

You can use whatever metrics you like, but you need to be very, very clear on what you expect.

Explore your expectations.

If you say something like “I want to write three novels this year” – ask yourself why.

Are you under contract with a break-neck deadline?
Have you been told that you need to be productive to have a successful career?
Do you simply write very quickly, and your expectations are in line with how much you’ve been producing?
Do you have a trilogy idea that you’re dying to complete?

I’m going to have you look at what your overall goal is for your writing career in more detail, but for right now, just gently explore what’s the source of your expectations. Why do you feel you should be writing more than you’re writing now?

Specific goals, part two.

If you've been exposed to goal-setting at all, you've probably heard of setting "SMART" goals. That stands for Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time Bound. You've got the specificity and the measurement. But what about the next two... attainable, and relevant?
That's where a lot of us fall down.

USUAL SUSPECT NUMBER ONE: Underestimation of time needed

I have a good friend and writing client who identified the biggest obstacle to her writing success as not being able to write more. After detailing a long list of roles and duties in her personal life (children/household, job, and several other commitments) she then said that she could only write about 800 words per day. She found this frustrating, because she wanted to write 3-4 books per year.

Needless to say, this isn't really reasonable — not at her current rate of production, and not with her schedule as booked as it is. Setting the goal of 3-4 books per year, right from the jump, creates an unrealistic and unattainable set of expectations that causes both time pressure and guilt. Neither of which are conducive to creativity!

USUAL SUSPECT NUMBER TWO: Overestimation of our capacity.

When I was much, much younger, I hit a "jackpot" day where I wrote 80 pages. That's eighty double spaced pages, approximately 250 words per page, in a single day. So about 20,000 words. I have not matched this output since.

But when I looked at deadlines, I'd quite often think "well, if I could do all that in one day, of course I should be able to write 25 pages a day, no problem!"

Or, using the same math, I'd say: "well, if I can write 25 pages in a day, then I can write this novel in two weeks, no problem!"

The thing is, you're never writing in a vacuum. It's inevitably when you're under deadline that the car breaks down. Or your kid gets stomach flu. Or *you* consequently get stomach flu. Whatever.

Or, worse, we use the same logic with more than one role. *Of course* we can write a novel in two weeks… or plan our child's birthday party in two weeks… or take on one more project at work in two weeks. Problem is, *it's the same two weeks*.

We plan every day like it's going to be our most productive day, then we're disappointed when we can't achieve the impossible. The miraculous suddenly seems sub-standard.
That's got to stop.

Now that we know what the culprits are, let's look at some possible solutions.

Solution 1: Develop a working knowledge of how long things actually take.

This is not just about your writing, although knowing how long it takes you to write how many pages in a day is a good foundation metric for a number of issues.

If you do anything on a regular basis — cooking, walking your dog, helping your child with homework, writing reports for work, checking email — do enough time tracking to get an average of how long it takes. I didn't realize I was spending two hours on cooking every day until I started time tracking, for example. It wasn't that I was creating these huge gourmet feasts, either. (More on solutions to this in the Energy and Process sections.) Putting my son to bed takes an hour.

I know that I can write a rough draft scene in half an hour. I also know that revisions take twice as long. Plotting, writing the scene outline, can take a few months, and I can't map it by hours.
Knowing those elements means setting a more realistic expectation.

Solution 2: Create a buffer zone.

Ideally, especially as you're getting used to the system — double the amount of time you're estimating for writing a novel. Hell, if you haven't written *and completed* five novels, I'd say triple it.

Why? Because it takes approximately five finished manuscripts under your belt to gain a workable competency. That's when you're able to develop your process. And that's when you're

really able to get a sense of timing.(I'd also add that if you haven't written a novel in over a year, double to triple your time estimation. It's like getting back in physical shape. Just because you used to run marathons doesn't mean you can just hop back out there and run a 10k after being sedentary for a year.)

Even then — odds are good, no matter how much time you allot, *you're going to be wrong*. The buffer zone gives you breathing room and time for "spillover." It also takes into account emergencies like the car blowing a head gasket or sudden crunch time at work, or (heaven forbid) your computer blowing up with all your backups on it.

What if you've overbooked yourself?

I admit: I am a chronic over-booker. Using the one-two punch of overestimating capacity and underestimating time needed, I can spend the same hour on three separate projects and say "sure, I can squeeze in one more thing" at least five times when left unchecked.

Sometimes, you can only negotiate and cull so much out of your schedule. You've made commitments, prior to your time epiphany, and you can't back down. Besides that, there are things that are very dear to you.

You've done the time tracking, and you see what you generally squeeze into a week. If you're feeling at the end of your rope, and unable to fit writing in, or rather you aren't sure how to fit writing in with everything else you're doing, you might need to think in terms of triage.

I worked with a fantastic time management expert who specializes in setting up systems and time management for artists and creative people. Her name is Cairene MacDonald, and she runs a business called Third Hand Works.

She had me do what she calls an Overwhelm Check. If you've ever felt like you had a thousand things to do, and no idea what to attack first, much less how to get anything done, you'd probably love her book.

I'd overbooked myself to the point where I was, as she calls it, "in quicksand." I had all this stuff I felt I "had" to do. Worse, it all seemed to need doing right this second.

As writers, I think this hits us harder because we think of *everything* that needs to be done for everything. We're supposed to be building our platforms and doing all this promotional stuff, even if we aren't published! We're supposed to juggle day jobs and families *and* creativity and the business of writing! We're supposed to write and revise and blog and tweet and ack ack ack ack…!

Mind dump: what do I think I need to do?

So I did a big, ugly list: *this is all the stuff I think I need to do.*
Then, I took each "piece" and answered a few questions.

1. Do I want to do this? Do I really need to do this? What are the consequences if I don't?
2. Is anyone else expecting me to do this?
3. When is this supposed to be done?
4. How much time will it take me to do, approximately?
5. If I could get rid of it, how would I feel?
6. Can anyone else do this?

It turned out a lot of the stuff I thought I "needed" to do (like platform-building) had long term consequences, but not necessarily short term. Things like contract deadlines or editing had short term consequences. Doing the dishes – not so much.

The ten things exercise.

My monthly writer's group – an informal group of five amazing women who drink wine, eat chocolate, and talk writing for a whole evening – did a little exercise where we wrote down the ten things we love to do most, and the ten things we do the most often.

If the lists don't match exactly, we look at the things we do the most, pick one thing we don't like…and then figure out how to get rid of it.

It was *amazing* how effective that was.

"But I can't drop anything!"

Maybe you feel like you've got too much. Too many people are counting on you; you have too many things that are important to you, and you can't possibly let go of any of them.

Maybe you've got a two hour commute to work, and you drive. Maybe you've got three kids signed up for four activities each, you're active in a volunteer organization, and you work sixty hours a week on top of that… and they'll fire you if you don't. Add to that a spouse that expects to at least spend some time with you, and the housework, and you're not made of money so it's not like you can hire a maid/cook/childcare/etc…

If that's the case, then I'd say: 1) the next section on burnout is probably going to sound really familiar, and 2) *what is the tragedy?*

Your new go-to question: "What is the tragedy?"

Just like checking the stakes in your character's story goals, you're going to ask yourself: if I don't do this, *what is the consequence?* What is the absolute worst thing that will happen if I do not achieve this?

Write it down.

Look at what the "tragedy" would be if you delegated or deferred or eliminated what you've got on your list.

What's the tragedy in pruning your kids' activities down to one each? Or having them arrange their own rides with some kind of rideshare if they're old enough?
What's the tragedy in asking to work from home a few days a week? Or looking for a new job? Or letting the housework slide somewhat?

There may be real consequences. Cutting your kids' activities might, say, lessen the chances of them getting into an important school, and that's where your priority is. Maybe if you get a new job, you'll lose a pension and benefits. Maybe if you let the housework slide… okay, I've got nothing on that one. <g>

But if you can't carve out a little time, then you've got larger issues than not writing your novels, I would think. You've probably got a breakdown on the boil.

Writing isn't just a possible business – it's a joy, a compulsion, something that drives us. If we can dedicate time to it, we're showing ourselves that what we need truly is important. The echoes of that decision resonate and usually provide some unexpected results.

Do the stuff: close some loops.

I had a list of things that remained. Looking at how long each took, I then started each day looking at what I needed to do, and picking what I could do given the time I had. I thought about blocking out time during the week, but time management was still sort of squishy for me. Also, I felt a little trapped when I blocked out every single hour.

Instead, I became a time management "pantser!" (Sort of.)
Rather than plotting my week within an inch of its life, I just had a vague idea, and then I plotted my day every morning. Slowly, things got done.

Overwhelm Triage is a temporary solution.

The whole point of writing down the big ugly list o' things to do is *not* to make this a regular practice. The idea is to get you out of overwhelm in a finite period of time.
It's a *turnaround,* not a permanent solution.

Once you get out of the feeling of "oh my God, *too much to do!"* the idea is to start actively planning how you use your time, rather than getting run over by it.

I gave myself three months to dig myself out of the Overwhelm I was experiencing. I dropped projects; I deliberately postponed projects, letting people who needed to know as necessary. I pruned activities that I discovered weren't helpful. I got help where I needed to.

I also wound up closing loops, which was enormously freeing, both in time and energy.
Once the three months were over, I had the postponed projects, and a much better sense of how long things took… and what I wanted to put back *into* my schedule.

Triage is not a way of life. It's a way of recalibrating… rebooting your system, as it were. Once you clear the decks, be vigilant about what you allow on your calendar in the first place. And don't say "yes" to anything without taking a pause and time to consider. It's easier to say "let me check my calendar" than it is to say "I have to back out of that thing I agreed to."

What if you're really just "wasting time?"

Maybe you did the time tracking, and you discovered that you can easily write, say, 850 words in an hour. You were able to repeat that a few times a week. The other days of the week, though — well, you had blocks of time where you *could* be writing, but you never actually seemed to.
It's really easy at this point to beat yourself up. Don't. Compassionate sociologist, remember?
Instead, dig deeper into what made you successfully write. Were there any common elements on the days that you did write? Were you at a cafe, maybe? Was it a weekend? If it was a weekend, was it the lack of pressure or exhaustion — or even the time of day — that allowed you to put in the writing time?

You might discover that you aren't "wasting time" at all, even if you aren't getting writing done. If you write best during hours that you normally spend at a "day job" (where, presumably, they would frown on you working on your novel) then the fact you're not writing during "work days" could simply be an energy issue. There's a big difference between waking up at ten a.m. after a full night's sleep and going to your favorite coffee house to type a few pages, and putting in a full day of work with a lousy commute and a bunch of household stuff, only to try punching out a few pages on a rickety desk while the TV's blaring. We'll discuss energy management more in the next section, but for now, just check to see if it's a possibility.

Solution 3: Create a time container.

It's not enough to simply track your time. (Although that's a huge step in the right direction.) You also need to figure out what time you have available as a result, and how to set things up so you can best use it.

If you find you're unfocused, and basically looking around at the end of the day wondering where the time went and how come you didn't get those pages done — *again* — then you might want to consider what Cairene Macdonald calls "creating a container."

(She knows that a lot of people get hives at the thought of using a calendar on a regular basis. I was one of them!)

To create a time container, first, you're going to look at the expectations we talked about before. Look at the things you *have* to get done. Now block them out on your calendar. I find it easiest to use both a week and a day calendar at this point, just so I have a bird's eye overview as well as a

"what I'm doing today" plan.

For example, if you have to get your kid ready for school and out the door, or go to work, or you have a standing evening meeting for a charity group that you are passionate about, look at your daily calendar, and then block out how long you assume each will take, and approximately when they need to get done. So "7:00 a.m. to 8:00 a.m. – morning routine, breakfast and son ready for school" might be a block. "7:30 to 8:15 a.m. – commute to work" might be a block. "8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. – work (day job)" might be a block.

Next, you're going to add in buffer zones. You're also going to block in self-care… more on that in the next section. But if you're going to write regularly, you need to replenish regularly, so block time in.

Looking first at things that actually replenish you, you might block in "12:00 p.m. to 12:30 p.m., walk during lunch" or "9:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m., watch *Game of Thrones"* or "10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m., read novel."

Things like cooking might fall under this category, especially if you find yourself eating a lot of junk food because you're in a rush. (That's not knocking junk food, it happens, but if you find yourself exhausted, blocking in the time to cook something healthy might be worth trying.)

Finally, *you're going to block in writing time.* Specific time. As in: "6:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. — write" specific. And knowing what you now know, you'll be able to say "6:00 to 7:00 p.m. – write 850 words."

Why does it make a difference?

I'm not a huge Tony Robbins follower or anything, but he does have a good point: if you talk about something, it's a dream… if you schedule it, it's real.

Just the act of *writing down* "I am going to write 850 words from 6:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m." shifts things from "I want to write more" to "*I am writing*."

Without setting a definite time block, you're going to keep pushing off writing as more urgent actions, or even simple distractions, crop up. That's when you get to the end of the day asking yourself what happened, finding that yet again you didn't "get a chance" to write.

You don't get a chance to write until you set the container. It creates a commitment, and it helps you get control of your day, rather than being at the mercy of it.

Use a realistic expectation here, as well.

Odds are good you're not going to suddenly become a well-oiled writing machine simply because you're using a calendar.

That said, once you start creating a deliberate space for writing, a specific time, you'll find yourself doing one of two things: either you'll start writing, or you'll balk. By "balk," I mean you'll either start actively avoiding or passively procrastinating.

When either of these rears its ugly head, then you've moved from a time issue to a *fear* issue. Which we'll deal with later. Still, try the calendar first.

Here's your motto:

Progress, not perfection.

If you only wrote once a week the prior month, and now you've bumped it up to twice a week — that's a 100% increase. That is *worth celebrating*. And it's easier to build on a success you recognize than to stay motivated when you keep kicking your own butt for not performing more dramatically.

Solution 4: Get an accountability buddy.

Every writer writes alone. No writer succeeds that way. The sooner you can build your support network, the better. A valuable member of your support network is an accountability buddy. (We're going to cover support networks in more detail later.)

There are several ways you can do this. If you have a critique group that meets weekly or monthly, incorporate a goal-setting and report out element. Personally, I think that weekly or even daily check-ins, even via email, can be helpful. There are several online groups that have formed for just this purpose. (I've listed several in the Resources section.)

Over the years, I've had weekly check-ins, just via email, reporting on what I did the week before and what I hope to do the next week. Yes, I missed a lot of deadlines and reported a lot of "I got nothin'" weeks when I was in the dark days of writers block and depression, but knowing that I was accountable did add a level of motivation.

The only caveat: make sure that your accountability buddy *is a writer*. Don't use a family member that doesn't write, don't rely on your spouse who doesn't quite get your "hobby", and don't ask a friend who doesn't know the first thing about crafting fiction. Why? Because they won't get it. They will offer advice that is well-intentioned but ultimately useless, and it will be a source of frustration for you both. If possible, get a buddy that writes the same genre. In my opinion, someone who knows what you're going through will be less judgmental and far more supportive, while still holding you to a certain level of rigor.

It may take a few tries to get an accountability group that works. Still — better to start now and keep searching than wait for a perfect group that never miraculously shows up.

Solution 5: Draw (and hold) boundaries.

What if it's not you wasting your time? What if you're letting someone else waste your time?
It's funny how you'll settle in, ready and eager to get back to your characters and your work in progress… and of course, that's the exact moment your youngest child wants you to help with a science project, or your spouse is asking you to spend time together watching a movie, or your mother calls up to chat.

It's hard to draw boundaries, especially if you aren't used to taking your writing seriously. It's hard to justify to non-writers that your time is valuable, your story is important, and you need dedicated time to get the words on the page in the hope of one day sharing it with readers.
That said, if you don't learn to hold fast and keep the container for your writing, you're *not going to write*. And yes, I hate to say, that will be your fault.

I know it's easier to say than do. It takes a heart of stone to turn away a child who's begging to play with you or a significant other that complains that you don't spend any time together. Guilt is a ravaging bitch, and sometimes it just seems easier to please everyone else and then cobble together a paragraph here and there, in the usual time management platitudes of "in the line at the post office" or "waiting in the carpool line."

But if you have to wait until you're making enough money or getting enough recognition to justify the time to write… *you're never going to have the time to write*.

Define what's important, and then make clear choices.

Your family is important. Your job is important. Your health is important. If you're going to write, you need to strike a balance.

It might mean you don't actually write every day, per se. But you do need to make sure you're writing on a regular basis — and that it's not during a break from the whims of everyone else's needs.

Explain to your family why it's important, and come up with a reasonable compromise. Maybe your child doesn't need to be in three extracurricular activities. Maybe you can watch TV with your spouse only three evenings a week. Maybe you can back off on volunteering. However it works out, make sure you're putting in the time for writing, and then communicate your needs and why they're important to the outside parties currently encroaching on your time.

Get ready for a tough transition.

Just like using a calendar won't miraculously mean you're productive, setting a boundary doesn't mean that your family and friends and employer will suddenly embrace your new "me time."
People dislike change. That's a given. So some people may love the idea of you pursuing your dream… until they realize that means you're not going to be able to babysit on a moment's notice or add "just one more thing" to your to-do list. Suddenly, your reasonable boundary is going to seem like a pain in their ass. And people tend to respond to this with subtle, or not-so-subtle, jabs.

The key: *let them*. And keep writing anyway. This will take practice, but each time you do it, you're training the other people in your life that your writing time is valuable, that your time is valuable, and you not only deserve to do this, you're going to keep holding the boundary no matter what they do.

Personally, I use the listening-agreement-continue technique.

If someone tries to "drop a guilt bomb" about my writing time, I listen to their complaint, then mirror it back, showing that I did, indeed, hear them. Then I say no, as politely and warmly as possible.

For example: "I agree: parental involvement in school projects can be crucial for a child's success. I wish I could devote more time, but I have a firm commitment that I just can't break. I appreciate you thinking of me, and hope that your project is a success."

If they ask you what the commitment is — and they rarely do, but if they do — you can say that you're working. Which you are. They don't need to know details. (And if they have the guts to push for details – "What could you possibly be doing that's more important than this?" – say that you made a commitment to finish writing. You can even say you promised your writing coach, *me*, that you would do it. If they don't believe you, tell 'em to email me. I've got your back.)

If it's someone you love, that's harder. You don't need to justify and you don't need to get defensive. If push comes to shove, borrow or buy a book like *When I say No I Feel Guilty* and just memorize the script. It's not complicated. It's not *easy*, but it's not rocket science.

Remember that support network I mentioned? I'd say start to set that up beforehand, for just these sorts of occasions. It's hard to stand up to someone you love and assert your right to writing time. Going to writers, and getting the admiration and acknowledgment of how hard it is from people who are going through the same thing, can be incredibly helpful.

Even more helpful? When you know you're going to have to tell someone "no" or turn something down, call a writer friend ahead of time to buck up, then call the person you're turning down, *then* call the writer friend back. It's called a support sandwich. Works like gangbusters.

Finally: track your results.

You don't have to track your time for the rest of your life. That said, there is a lot to learn from keeping a simple journal, keeping track of how much writing you got done, and when.

For one thing, celebrate your accomplishments, as small as they may seem at first. Learning to celebrate internal victories will help your mindset as you move forward in your publishing career. That way, you'll be less reliant on external kudos, reviews, and sales for a sense of fulfillment.

Another reason: you'll be able to see what worked, and what didn't. Improving your process might be the only thing you truly have control over in this crazy business. Knowing what absolutely has to be in place, and what you can tweak and possibly improve, can give you an amazing advantage and help with your productivity… essentially, help you write more.

We'll get to that more in the process section, but for now, keep track — and pat yourself on the back. You've got that time thing down!

#Chapter 3: Energy

Are you running on empty?

If you often feel exhausted, drained, and have all the creativity of a bowl of plain oatmeal, then you've probably got an energy problem. The usual reasons for this are:

- It might be an energy *management* issue,
- it might be a physical health issue,
- it might be a fear issue. (Fear often masquerades as exhaustion. It's actually amazing what your subconscious will do to you to keep you from moving forward. More on that in a bit.)

Recognize your exhaustion.

There two types of exhaustion. Let's think of it in terms of fitness. If you're a generally athletic person, there's a certain point where you've pushed too hard and you're injured and you're exhausted: you need to rest, and that can mean putting a temporary halt to your exercise regimen, or at least scaling it way back.

On the other hand, if you're currently out of shape because you haven't been exercising at all for years, then you're not going to leap in and run a marathon, but further rest isn't going to help your energy, either. You need some active, healthy "stress" to get your motor revving and gain some momentum, both literally and metaphorically.

So the question becomes: which type of "exhausted" are you?

If you wound up checking "overbooked" in the time section, then you probably need more replenishment. It's also probably contributing to burnout, and that may present in some weird and unpleasant ways.

"Ten Signs All Hell is Breaking Loose."

Cairene came up with this brilliant exercise, which I can't help but share. (Seriously: if you get the chance at all to work with one coach, and you're creatively inclined, Cairene is awesome.)
In another example of practicing self-awareness, there are clues that usually show up before you experience complete meltdown. These could include things like:

- Being short tempered with the people around you.
- Yelling at your kids.
- Craving fast food.
- Obsessively eating sweets.
- Obsessively playing Candy Crush or Bejeweled Blitz.
- Crying at television ads.
- Screaming at other drivers on your commute with a vehemence normally reserved for war trials.

- Hating your manuscript.
- Being convinced that your writing sucks.
- Fantasizing about changing your name and running away to Tibet.

Obviously, these are going to be different for different people. The key is to notice *your* warning signs before you hit rock bottom and things get totally chaotic. Cairene actually recommends writing a list of ten signs, and then carrying it in your calendar or putting it somewhere visible, as a reminder to check in.

It's not judgment: the best warning sign is when you're able to go "aha, I'm doing that thing again… which means trouble's coming."

Stopping the spin.

Then, you have another list. Cairene calls them "interrupter uppers," and I call them quick-fixes. They're ideally simple, relatively fast things that you can do to interrupt your negative spiral pattern before you devolve into a hot mess. If you're feeling really frustrated, exhausted, hungry, tired, you can do things like:

- Take a quick ten minute walk.
- Listen to a specific song that you know cheers you up and energizes you.
- Even better, *dance* to a song that cheers you and energizes you.
- Eat a healthy snack that you actually enjoy. (If you hate kale, for example, eating kale chips probably isn't going to help.)
- Drink a glass of water. That tends to help more than people realize.
- Smell an essential oil that perks you up: lemon, mint, etc.
- Or, conversely, smell something that comforts you. I've discovered almond extract or anything vanilla or cinnamon scented tends to calm me down.
- Journal for five minutes about what's bothering you.
- Watch a video of something cute or funny. *Have it bookmarked for just such occasions.*
- Read a passage from your favorite book. (Again: *bookmarked.*)

Again, keep a list of ten things you can do to stop the downward spin somewhere handy, maybe even right next to your "ten signs of hell breaking loose" list. And make the quick fixes as convenient and simple as possible. This is your "in case of emergency, break glass" scenario. If you're at a job and feeling stressed out, and you only wear dress shoes, bring a pair of sneakers so you can take that walk. Have a water bottle filled with ice water handy, instead of having to go across the room or the house or the office. Keep a small essential oil bottle nearby. Or have that playlist at the ready, and your iPod or phone or whatever nearby.

The key is awareness, then action. Stop the spin. Level out.

This is just to get your equilibrium back. A few sniffs of mint and a stroll in the park is not going to permanently cure burnout, any more than buying a calendar is going to solve your time

management problems.

Action plan to prevent burnout and exhaustion.

Once you're on a firmer footing, you can start to actually address the problem. We're going to revisit the time thing. I mentioned scheduling in replenishment when you're creating your weekly schedule. It's not enough to simply shoehorn writing into an already busy schedule. If you aren't consciously scheduling in replenishment, you're driving full speed towards a wall.
So what is replenishment?

Replenishment can be anything you genuinely find relaxing, or which you might not like, but which will actually help your health.

Now, I'm no exercise or nutrition guru. That said, I've done hardcore deadline madness, especially in my 3-books-a-year phase: a toxic combination of late-nighters (all nighters!) fueled by Mountain Dew and enough chocolate to kill a lab animal. Since having my son, I've tried the "drink water, walk the dog, and eat some veggies" approach.

While the latter is decidedly less fun, it is surprisingly effective.

That's not to say that chocolate doesn't have a place in creativity. It's a matter of conscious choice, though. There's a big difference between "I'm going to have this chocolate and then type ten pages" and systematically demolishing a five-pound bag of peanut M&M's as you type, without even recognizing what you're doing.

Writing is a competitive sport.

In Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz's book *The Power of Full Engagement,* they talk about the high performance model of professional athletes. They then point out that the performance demands of normal people is actually *harder* than pro athletes.

Why? Because apparently, the bulk of an athlete's time is spent training, with only about ten percent actually "performing." They also get about five months of "off-season" to recuperate.
As a writer, we never have an "off-season." We're constantly juggling the mental and emotional demands of the job. And while it seems the opposite of "physically taxing" to simply sit in a chair and type for hours on end, it does take a physical toll.

If you look at the list of quick fixes, you'll see that there are physical activities, like taking a walk or dancing. Those get you "in body" — they shake you out of your emotional and mental rut a little bit, and give you a little gap to observe your feelings, rather than drown in them. If you're a yoga or meditation fan, this is often called "being mindful" or "being present." It doesn't take long, and even a few minutes makes a huge difference.

Your body is integral to writing. The state of your body's health directly impacts your creativity and your productivity. So it's worth it to look into scheduling in things like cooking meals rather

than buying fast food, for example, or taking a walk rather than putting in another twenty minutes at the keyboard.

I'm not saying you need to train for a half-marathon, necessarily. In fact, it's usually that sort of black-and-white thinking— the "I have to do it all! Perfectly!" trap — that often gets you into either burnout or avoidance. So moderation in everything (even virtue). Just do a few minutes of something physical, make one healthy eating choice, and slowly, you'll start to see results.
There are recommended books in the resource section, as well as several websites. And I strongly recommend *The Power of Full Engagement*.

The sneaky (and necessary) reason behind most "time wasting."

If you're exhausted, physically or emotionally, your subconscious will try sneaky ways to get you replenished. Since you're essentially getting conned into it, you usually go into things that "will only take a minute" or otherwise seem innocuous.

Then, suddenly, you discover that hours have gone by… and you're mad at yourself and the lost time. You berate yourself and vow to "kick your own ass" next time to "force yourself" to focus. Yet next time rolls around… and lo and behold, you're back to playing the video game/watching television/reading magazines/whatever, and more hours are lost.

We often pop over to these "time wasting" behaviors because we're completely stressed out, and "they just take a minute," and we want so desperately to feel better that we turn to it. But they are what Jen Louden of Soulful Living calls *shadow comforts.* They seem like they'd help us out, but really, they just sap our energy even more. When I play online games, I get into a manic mode: *I'll just play five more minutes.* And when I stop playing, I feel exhausted. That's a shadow comfort.

If you're wondering if something is a shadow comfort, observe how you feel when you're doing it, and how you feel when you *stop* doing it.

For example: when I go to a writer's chapter meeting, I often feel drained — either because of the sheer number of people, or the stress of different agendas, or whatever.

When I meet with my writergirls (monthly "critique"-food-and-wine-with-friends gathering, just five people) I come home feeling energized and look forward to writing.

Both meetings appear to be the same (meeting with writers), but on closer inspection, they have different dynamics — and consequently, they have different results. **Replenishment is *always conscious*.**

Did you know you can "mindfully" watch TV?

TV can be a source of replenishment. If there's a show you love, something that makes you laugh or makes you cry or just kicks some ass, then choosing to watch it as a form of relaxation can be very effective. It can be *Game of Thrones* or *Downton Abbey* or *Scandal* or even *Phineas*

& Ferb – it's not the perceived "quality" of the show, or even "research potential" or anything similar. Its only qualification is that it helps you feel entertained and it takes you out of your head for a little while.

But that works *only if you're consciously choosing it.*

Like the chocolate example above, if you find yourself watching a reality show about transgendered Amish polyamorous couples trying to race across Siberia on roller skates, simply because it's the least crappy of the shows on – all the while feeling guilty because you know you "should" be writing – then I'm willing to bet you're going to turn off the TV feeling just as exhausted as you were when you first picked up the remote.

Take care of yourself.

Replenishment is *not* just "consciously doing stuff that's fun/indulgent/makes me feel better." As I mentioned earlier: your body and your mental state are crucial to both your ability to focus, your attitude (crazy-checking and writer's block, which we'll talk about in the Fear section) and your ability to simply bounce back when life inevitably throws a few curveballs at you.

Just like anything, it's a balance. You do stuff that's not fun, that's even a bit stressful (exercise, eating veggies) because it nourishes and strengthens your body, and then temper it with the stuff that is fun, which nourishes and strengthens your creative soul.

And the best way to do this is to block the time in first.

Containers, Part II.

Have you ever noticed that you can sit for hours at your desk at home or at work, and you can't get a word down… but you head over to the café or library, and suddenly you're writing like a fiend?

Or maybe you've been struggling on your own, but when NaNo rolls around, you're able to make your word count with time to spare?

There are elements to these things that add to your energy. It's not just about making a *time* container. It's about *adding things to the container that will contribute to your energy.*
Some things that could add energy:

- **Motivation.** Simply reconnecting with why you love something — what's motivating you to write it — can be a huge energy boost. I often tell my students to write down a paragraph or a page about why they love their particular project, then have them keep it by their computer or wherever they tend to write.
- **Environment.** Do you need quiet? Does certain music help your mood? Does it influence your scene? How about your desk — does a cluttered desk distract you? Or does a clean desk make you say "I don't want to mess it up" and keep you from

getting started? Do scents (scented candles, essential oils, etc.) inspire you or irritate you? Lit candle? If you're stuck, would switching rooms help loosen things up?

- **Location.** If just changing rooms aren't enough, how about a more drastic shift? Do you like privacy, or is the energy of having other people around inspiring? Library, coffee shop, park?
- **Clothing.** Do you like comfy clothing? Do you have a favorite shirt or hat or something that can help shift your mood enough to boost your creativity? Never underestimate the power of costumes and props. It's zany, crazy, and more than borderline woo-woo, but something as simple as wearing a lucky T-shirt or decoder ring or whatever can actually help you get in the right frame of mind.
- **"Cues."** I light a candle when I'm writing a draft (unless I'm in a public space.) I listen to a specific playlist. I have a big glass of water next to me, and if it's in the morning, a decent sized mug of coffee. All these things poke my subconscious, telling it "okay, time to write."
- **Time of day.** I write better earlier in the day, now that I've got my son. That said, I usually have coaching calls in the morning. I do know that I need a break after lunch, because I tend to have food coma which makes creative writing difficult. I don't write at night anymore if I can help it, because I'm too punchy.
- **Transitions.** Having a ritual or something to shift you from whatever else you were doing to writing is important, again. I've discovered just jotting down a paragraph or so of what I want to accomplish in my writing time, separate from "what am I trying to do in this scene?" helps enormously.

Heat mapping.

I got the term "heat mapping" from Charlie Gilkey, from the website ProductiveFlourishing.com. (If you're interested, the full article is here: http://www.productiveflourishing.com/how-heatmapping-your-productivity-can-make-you-more-productive/)

Charlie suggests looking at what parts of your day you're most likely to be productive, and what parts you're least likely. (He's very, very left brained and has lots of cool planner pages and such, if that works for you.) He's not the only productivity expert to comment on people being more productive at different times of day. He's the only one I know of that has a cute free print-out helping you track it, however.

A lot of writers I know mention that they aren't able to write creatively in their most energetically promising time of day – for example, they are most creative in the morning, but they need to go to work or get their kids off to school at that time of day. In that case, you might look at your next best time, or see if there's any way to shift your schedule/work from home/etc. Try to think in terms of "how can I get around this obstacle?" instead of "this is impossible."

Your energy budget.

Once you've figured out things that sap your energy, things that replenish your energy, things

that boost your energy, and best times to use your energy, you want to look at how you *spend* your energy. To do that, you need to know how much "energy" costs you're laying out.

This isn't something you're going to be able to quantify necessarily. But if you think about it, you know what exhausts you, and what energizes you. If you don't know, there are two ways you can find out. You can keep a little journal, noting how you feel after you do things — maybe not everything, but you can see how you feel after writing something, or after you have a meeting at work, or after you spend an hour playing with your kid or cooking dinner or whatever.

This is more of a fine-tuning element, but it can make a difference. Let's say you find you can't write at night, and the thought of getting up an hour early is brutal because you're already getting up at five a.m. to tackle the commute to work, and you're not really a morning person to begin with.

When you look over your calendar, you might notice that on days you have a two hour meeting after lunch, you aren't able to get much of anything done for the rest of the day. Or if you're spending two hours getting dinner together and riding herd on your kids after work, you're tapped out and exhausted… but on the day you grab dinner out, you were able to get a few pages written. That's not saying you should do fast food every night, but it's worth exploring: is there an easier way to streamline the dinner portion of your day, so you free up some energy?

You probably can't cut out the meeting altogether (when I was working in a cube farm, they tended to be prickly about that sort of thing). But if you know it's coming, you can either try to get writing done earlier that day (say, at lunch) or you can come up with a way to dictate during your commute, or you can talk to your supervisor about perhaps cutting the meeting down by an hour. (Yes, you can do that. They might say "no" but if you can make a good case besides "after two hours my brain is Jello and I'm useless" you might have a shot.) Or, you can say "meeting days are no-writing days" and then plan for deliberate and deep replenishment as soon as you get home.

This is especially true for specific trigger days or events. I'm an introvert: time spent with other people, even fun and entertaining times, tends to drain me. Things like the holidays are black holes, energetically speaking, so I need to make sure I don't schedule a deadline in, say, the month of December. I also make sure I schedule time to be alone and regroup when I'm at, say, a writer's conference.

There are a lot of options: play with them, give each a try, and record what happens.

#Chapter 4: Fear

So, let's say you've got a calendar in place. You've got your replenishment blocked in: you're getting enough sleep, you're eating reasonably healthy, you're getting a bit of exercise, you're even doing some fun stuff.

Wonder of wonders, you've still got some time left over to write. Huzzah!
But when you get there… you suddenly find yourself bumping into a lot of the old, procrastinating behaviors.

The whole reason you started doing the healthy stuff and getting a calendar was to actually *start writing*. So what the hell? Why are you suddenly struck with the overwhelming urge to alphabetize your pantry and/or watch a marathon of *Caprica* on the sci-fi channel?

At this point, it's easy to start beating yourself up. (Or, if you have an unsupportive group of people around you, you let *them* start beating you up.)

"Why are you so lazy?" you ask yourself.

"What have you *done* all day?" your spouse asks.

"Why don't you just sit down and write?" your helpful writing friend (who writes four books a year, not that you're comparing) says, sounding baffled.

Or the least helpful piece of advice I've ever heard:

"There's no such thing as writer's block. Just get your ass in the chair and write!"

Writer's Block: why "just get over it" doesn't work.

I hate when instruction books, blogs or well-meaning friends tell you "just get over it!" or "just write!"

Like that didn't occur to you.

Like all it would take is someone pointing out that say, you should just stop doing that thing you've been doing all your life.

"*You mean I should just sit down and write? My God, that's* brilliant*! Why have I not thought of this before? Thank you, oh sage guru!"* If you could just "get over it," you would have. Anybody who has ever tried to force themselves to write, and then dribbled out a stingy, sucky page that they then toss out can tell you — it's not necessarily helpful to force it.

Yes, there's starting friction: not every writing day is going to be an ease-filled joy, where you're "taking dictation from the Universe." (I don't think I've ever had a day like that, honestly.)

And yes, there will be days where you just need to put your head down and write, even if you toss it out. There is a worthwhile aspect to simply having a writing routine.

Just like time and energy, the key here is *self-awareness*. If you are mentally stuck in a project, and the words aren't flowing, you should be able to tell the difference between starting friction (as in, "I don't wanna write today") and true, genuine block (as in, "I want to bang my head against the desk repeatedly until I lose consciousness. *I should give up writing altogether.*")

It isn't like you haven't got motivation: you've got big dreams that you want badly enough to feel guilty when you don't write. Your esteem takes a major hit when you don't achieve what you feel you ought to.

You want to achieve writing success badly enough to buy this book, in fact.

YOU ARE NOT LAZY.

"I could write every day if I really wanted to… if I got my act together… if I were more organized…if I stopped coming up with excuses… *if I weren't so lazy*."

The thing is, it's not laziness. I am willing to bet that you can look back on your life and pick out events and achievements where you have absolutely kicked ass. If you were truly lazy, you wouldn't be reading this book. You wouldn't care if you achieved anything.

You're not lazy. You're afraid. There is a difference.

You guys know it's fear: some of you even have some suspicions of what, exactly, you're afraid of – albeit in a vague way, like "fear of success" or "fear of failure." Identifying it has not seemed to help, though… especially if the only process you have for dealing with it is "get over it!"

Further, you're not weak and indulgent because you can't seem to move past this fear. Odds are good you've got the fear because other people have beaten you down. Hell, *you've* probably joined the bandwagon, pummeling your ego with your internal monologue, probably on a daily basis.

The answer is not compounding the problem by punching away at an already fragile self esteem, which seems to be the writer's particular curse. Instead, I'm going to teach you several very weird but surprisingly effective methods of dealing with your fears.

Technique 1: "Meet Your Monsters"

I got this technique from Havi Brooks, who writes the incredible fluentself.com blog. She helps with what she calls "destuckification" and stumbling onto her site, among others, has really kicked my writing career into a different level. Every fear is a part of you, so don't think in terms of "getting rid of" your fear, "destroying" your fear, or anything of an equally violent and

emphatic nature. If you do, basically, you're fighting yourself… and that only works when you've got full energy, are almost maniacally motivated (to the point of hyper, out of fear of losing it), and can only be sustained when you've got enough energy to put pressure on yourself. In short: it never lasts.

To move forward, the trick here is going to be:

1. Identifying your fear, and "giving it a face,"
2. Giving your fear space, acceptance and attention,
3. Discovering what your fear is trying to protect you from, and finally
4. Negotiating a compromise that will give your fear some sense of safety without keeping you paralyzed.

To do this, here's the weird and slightly woo-woo part. If you meditate, it will probably help, but it's not necessary. Get to a quiet space. If you want to journal this, it can work, otherwise just being in a place where you can dream and imagine is fine. Just before bed might work. Say to yourself: I need to speak to the monster that's stopping me from writing. I need to speak to my fear. Then imagine what your fear looks like. It could be either be a literal monster, or maybe somebody from your past (Mean teacher! Harsh editor! Critical parent!).

Once you've got an image, start the dialogue. Ask your fear gently: what are you trying to protect me from? What are you afraid will happen if I keep writing?(Sometimes the image will change, too, as the "fear" reveals itself. I'm interested in seeing what you come up with, if you choose to do this exercise!)

Once the fear image tells you what it's afraid of, and what the worst thing that could happen would be, I'd say, "Thank you. It's a good thing to know." Then point out that you really want to write, that it fulfills you, and that by stopping you, your fear is inadvertently hurting you. So you both need to come up with something else.

From there, ask it what it would help it feel safer while you move forward. You'll reassure it that what it is feeling is valid, and that you'll do what you can to cushion the fears with concrete actionable steps.

An example…

I get into a meditative-ish state, and sit down with a spiral notebook or my laptop. Generally, I like to print my "part" in block letters and the fear's "answer" in cursive, to use different parts of my brain… or bold type vs. regular if I'm typing.

A while ago, I was feeling completely overwhelmed, unable to get moving on anything, because I was sure I ought to be working on everything. This is a common form for my fear to take: in order to prevent me from moving forward, I sink into this vague confusion where I'll pick up one thing, then my eye will "catch" on a different project and I'll think, oh, I ought to take care of that... and suddenly, I've got eight things out, seven of them aren't writing related, and I've gotten nothing done.

Anyway, I decided to call it "The Overwhelm." And I addressed that fear. To my surprise, instead of one monster, when I got it to slow down, it broke into a few distinct fears. One was the Money Fear, one was the Insecurity Fear, and one was the Burnout Fear. As it turns out, they were sort of working at cross purposes, so I had to deal with them one at a time.

To address the Money Fear, I pointed out that what it really wanted was for me to make a metric buttload of money, like J.K. Rowling money, in order to feel like I didn't have to worry anymore… that even if I then wrote a book that completely screwed up my career, or whatever, I wouldn't have to count pennies or be responsible or even vaguely accountant-ish.

It wanted to write successfully, but it wanted no risk.

I gently pointed out to the fear that this wasn't realistic. That said, it does feel terrible, to not be able to meet bills. I said that the absolute worst that could happen was we'd be late on bills, and that it was painful, but it wasn't that bad. We wouldn't starve. (Notice: acknowledged the pain, then used logic – a great fear-dissolver – instead of bullying tactics.) The compromise there: focus on making sure we had enough to pay bills. Have that dollar amount in mind, and relax when we knew it was made for that month. Pull the fear back from the doom projections into the future.

And focus on the fail-safes we had in place, to prevent utter disaster (starvation, homelessness) from happening. Next, I addressed the Insecurity Fear. That was a tough one. That was a slew of insecurities from my childhood. (Specifically named: You-suck fearbug, You're-a-flake fearbug, and You'll-never-get-it-all-done fearbug.)

In order to address these, I had to point out that this was all from the past. Several family members would tell me I was all of these things when I was growing up, and I internalized it. The answer this fear *wanted* was a constant stream of positive reinforcement: good reviews, great sales, never-ending success. It wanted all the success with none of the vulnerabilities.

Again, I gently pointed out that this, also, wasn't realistic. I then reminded the fear that I was told a lot of these things by people who were also insecure, and who had their own issues… including lying to make themselves feel better.

I pointed out that the easiest thing to address would be the fear of being a flake. Everything else was subjective: what I think of as "good" might get savaged by critics, what I think of as "crap" might make the NYT bestseller list.

Our compromise was then to shoot for getting something completed, as opposed to getting something perfect. Once we got some things completed, the fear of being a flake would also be addressed.

Finally, the Burnout Fear. I had a tendency of taking on projects (usually prompted by the Money Fear) that I didn't truly love, or worse, didn't think I was capable of. I then panicked and pushed myself into a block. I became convinced that "this will be the book that finally torpedoes

my career."

In order to push past this, I usually procrastinated right up to the point of my deadline, then I'd say "I have to turn it in!" and pulled all nighters, eating like crap and using stress as a form of fuel.

My Burnout Fear worries that this will be repeated. Since I was feeling disconnected from the trilogy I was working on, and since I needed to complete it in order to 1) get paid and 2) not feel like a failure/flake, it was causing considerable inner conflict. This was a very realistic fear, for me.

So I cut a deal with it: I agreed to limit my writing to only a set amount a day, but that I would write every day, in order to meet my new deadline. And I also agreed to do replenishing activities every day to compensate.

Every fear is there to protect you.

No matter how ridiculous the fear may seem, the whole point to a fear is your subconscious trying to protect you, even from yourself. It usually takes a good thing, and then goes a little to *wayyyyy* too far.

What's more, your fears are an integral part of yourself. Your defense system. They're a part of your psyche.

When you say "I'm going to kick fear's ass!" or "I'm going to demolish this block!" what you are essentially saying is: *I am going to kick my own ass. I am going to demolish this aspect of myself.*

Which creates a cognitive dissonance. Which, ultimately, can be more destructive to both your writing and your mindset.

Your subconscious does not speak English.

I tell this to a lot of my coaching clients. Stephen King wrote about the "Boys in the Basement" when referring to a muse in his book *Misery* (which I recommend to any and all genre writers). Other people personify their Muses, with names and even pictures.

The bottom line is, that shadowy part of ourselves, the one where our books come from, doesn't usually come out and say, "Hey, I'm scared to death you're going to embarrass yourself (like you did in a variety of painful ways that I remember in vivid, agonizing detail), or ruin us financially, and destroy your life." Instead, it manifests in weird and sneaky (or not so sneaky) ways that make no sense if you aren't aware of what's at work.

"Talking to monsters" may seem silly, and woo-woo, but it's just a different approach to talking to your subconscious. Identify your fear, acknowledge it with respect, look at what the purpose

is, what the protection is for. Then, come up with a solution that addresses both the fear and the underlying reason for the fear, and you'll find it a lot easier to move forward.

Along the same lines of "your subconscious does not speak English" sometimes rather than a fear, it's a problem with the project itself that you haven't been addressing… and which your subconscious can't seem to get you to understand.

Get quiet, get prepped, then pretend that your Novel is personified. then ask it the following questions:

1. What do you need?
2. What do you want to tell me?
3. What do you know that I don't?
4. What's missing?
5. What would help you have what you need, so I could keep writing?

This can be a surprisingly effective way to side-step a block.

Technique 3: Bright Spots.

If you are virulently anti-woo-woo, or if you think that it would take a decade of therapy to get through your fears of failure and a legacy of low self-esteem, there is another technique. (You should probably use it in tandem, even if you are pro-woo-woo.)

In the brilliant book *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard* by Chip and Dan Heath, they talk about "solutions focused therapy." Instead of digging back into your childhood for the roots of your problem, they look for "bright spots" — highlighting the successes, rather than the failures — and then look at how to repeat that phenomena.

The emphasis was on *small adjustments*. In this particular case, a therapist using solutions focused therapy might ask, "If you woke up tomorrow and your writer's block was completely gone, how would you know? What's the *first small thing* that you'd notice, that told you things were different?"

To which you might respond: "well, I wouldn't dread opening up my Word file." Or "I might feel really enthusiastic about getting started." Or "I'd go to a cafe and bring my laptop, and start writing."

Then they'd ask, "When was the last time you felt like that? Replay that scene: where were you, the last time you felt really enthusiastic? Were you with anybody? What were you doing? Were you acting in a different way? Were you in a different place?"

Digging that way, you might discover that the last time you felt energized was when you went to your last writer's chapter meeting, or met with your critique group. You can't necessarily meet with your critique group every day, but you might discover that what you really find valuable

was speaking with other authors. *Or* you could just like the sense of accountability.

So you can try replicating the environment, by checking in via email every day. Or joining a writer's forum, so you can "hang out" with writers at any time you need a boost.

You might find that the last time you felt hopeful and enthusiastic was after you'd read something really good. (Or, conversely, something so bad you thought "I can write better than this!") Those are both easy to replicate — you can read a little as inspiration, a boost, to transition you into writing.

You might find that you wrote more when you left your house. You weren't surrounded with things that trigger your fears, like "if I write more I'll be a terrible parent" every time you see your child's toys around, or "if I try to write a novel we'll starve and fall into financial ruin" every time you see a bill. Again, tiny bright spot. You can go to a cafe, the library, whatever. (This ties into the "Containers" portion of the Time section.)

Look for what worked. Look at the qualities and essence of the thing that worked. Even if you can't replicate the circumstances perfectly, odds are good you can re-create the internal quality on a daily basis, in a way that works for you. It's a matter of identifying, experimenting, and tracking the results.

Technique 4: Motivation

Sometimes, instead of looking at what's stopping you, it helps to look at why you got started in the first place.

In my particular method of writing, I emphasize finding your protagonist's goal, motivation, and conflict (based on Debra Dixon's seminal reference book *GMC*).

There are two GMCs: an external, and an internal. The external tends to focus on tangible events: we know when an external goal has been achieved. The internal GMC tends to be more intangible — a desired emotion, or a state of being (i.e., "security" or "power" or "success").
You can give a character just about any goal, *as long as it has powerful motivation*. To test for motivation, you ask the question: "So what? Why does it matter if this guy gets his goal or not?"

Why does it matter if you write your book?

If you're already feeling down in the dumps, you may start to feel despondent, saying "it doesn't matter if I write this book." We're writing novels, not finding the cure for cancer, after all.
That said, the motivation does not have to be tied to the world at large. The motivation has to be intensely personal: it needs to matter why *you* care. Why does it matter *to you*?

A different way of looking at it:

If I were to take your idea, and give it to a bestselling author, and he or she then butchered your

book, making a bunch of weird changes and then publishing it… how would you feel?
What if a total newbie writer stole your idea and then wrote it?

If you're angry, then I'll guess that *you* writing this book, *your way*, is important to you. Which is a good start.

Re-connect. Do a page or two of free writing:

- Why do I love this book?
- Why is it important to me?
- What inspired me to start writing it?
- What are my favorite parts about it?
- What makes me happy about it?

When you're done, I'd print out the motivation and put it somewhere close to where you write. (If you write in cafes, I'd print an extra and put it in your laptop case or your purse or whatever you travel with.)

When you're feeling down, take a second to reconnect with your motivation. It can make a difference.

Technique 5: Micro-actions.

Small business coach Naomi Dunford of Ittybiz.com says that you can't kill fear, and you shouldn't. But you can *starve* it.

What does fear eat? *You*.

How do you starve it? By taking action.

For a less cannibalistic analogy, if your fear is there to protect you, what you need to do is show the fear that no, you won't die if you do whatever it is the fear is certain will destroy you. The best way to do this is to take small steps. (Those are usually the compromises that you come up with during the Meet Your Monsters technique.)

For those in the "just get your ass in the seat and write" camp, this is usually where their advice comes in.

But instead of "Just get in there and write *the whole damned book*" you're going to set the bar very, very low.

"I'm going to get my ass in the seat and *write one scene.*"

"I'm going to get my ass in the chair and *write one page."*

"I'm going to *write one paragraph.*"

Hell, even "I'm going to *write one sentence*" might be enough. (Generally, you'll feel pretty foolish writing one sentence and as long as you're there, you might as well write another one, right?)

The key is to make a tiny promise to yourself, *and then keep it*. Remember: **tiny.** You can always do more later.

You want to train yourself to think "I can do this" rather than "I keep failing." The key to trusting yourself, and training yourself, is small steps, carried out.

Consequently, the key to beating the fear, and building the trust, is *micro-actions.*

BONUS: It's harder than you think to completely screw up your writing career.

One of the most specific fears I hear from clients, the one that tends to lock up their writing like Fort Knox, is the Fear of Destroying Everything With One Wrong Move. (I'm sure there's a shorter name for it, but there we are.)

For example: "What if I turn this in, and my agent suddenly realizes that it sucks? What if she regrets signing me? What if my editor discovers I'm this terrible fraud? What if they decide never to sell another one of my books? *What if I write this and it sucks and everyone who gets the chance to read it decides that I am the worst writer in the history of publishing and I never sell another copy of a book again???"*

Needless to say, it's really, really hard to stay motivated and keep writing when you're faced with this possible end scenario. Why in the world would you want to move forward towards the likelihood of shame, misery, and failure?

If you're dealing with these specific fears – a combination of perfectionism and imposter syndrome – here are some logical points to help talk yourself down off the ledge.

- **Your draft is not as bad as you think.** If you're really that concerned, give it to a trusted beta-reader for a crazy check. If you think it's too terrible for even a beta reader to look at, then you *definitely* need to hand it off, because you've lost perspective. A little support and some fresh eyes is probably just what you and your draft need right now.
- **Your agent signed you for a reason.** It will take more than one bad draft to send her running for the hills. In fact, if one bad draft *does* send her running for the hills – you have the wrong agent.
- **Your editor also signed you for a reason.** While publishing professionals do want the most polished product possible, and they don't have the same amount of time and energy to edit your work as they may have in past decades, they're still there to edit. They expect to send you a revision letter. They're not going to sign you up, then get a draft with some character inconsistency or a plot hole and then say "oh, well, this was a huge mistake"

and burn your contract while blacklisting you to everyone in publishing.

- **One "bad" book is not going to kill you, or your career.** A lot of publishing advice makes it sound like a tightrope: you need to get absolutely everything in line, and everything needs to work in perfect synchronicity, or you will fail in a spectacular fashion. Actually, the opposite is true. It's really, *really* hard to fail completely. Writers who got washed out in a mid-list bloodletting, who were dropped by agents or editors for "not making their numbers," often manage to revive their careers or discover the genres they write best as a result. I know of several authors who were dropped by their publishers, only to hit the NYT bestseller lists years later with different houses, writing different material. You have more time than you think. Also, failure in our business isn't being hated – it's being ignored. If your book tanks, it's not because you're reviled for your horrible writing and you'll forever wear a scarlet letter – maybe "S" for "SUCKS?" – as a result. If you put a book out, the worst that can happen is it gets some bad reviews and doesn't generate momentum in sales. You can, and will, bounce back – if you keep writing.

#Chapter 5: Process

Every writer has a process.

I was sitting with one of my best friends, and she talked about how she's tried something different every single book. In various drafts, she'd used the Snowflake method, she'd tried the *Save the Cat* beat sheet, she'd tried a long variety of different plotting techniques (including my own *Rock Your Plot*).

When I questioned her a bit further, she looked stunned as she realized no matter which techniques she tried… ultimately, she wound up opening a word document, and writing her own outline. That was her process.

If you're fairly new to writing, you're probably experimenting more. Once you've gotten several novels under your belt, you will probably find that, even as you try out new and more complicated writing techniques (multiple story arcs, perhaps more ambitious world building, a huge series) the process that you use to approach your writing starts to settle into a familiar routine.

The connection between commercial fiction and process.

If part of your stress in writing is the fact that you feel the need to be more productive (which may be the case if you're reading this to write more), then having a process can be a game-changer.

I've written and published seventeen novels with major publishers — Avon, St. Martin's, Harlequin to name a few — and I'm just starting to self-publish my own fiction. When I started writing for Harlequin, I asked my editor what she suggested would help me the most in being successful.

"Easy," she responded. "Write at least three books a year."

(This was completely in earnest, by the way. If you look at the publishing schedule for a Harlequin category line, you'll see authors with three to six releases out in a single year.)
While I have not been able to replicate the three-books-a-year productivity she's talking about, especially not after my son was born, I have definitely seen how prolific authors have a leg up on sales. When you get a reader, especially for genre fiction, if she enjoys it she'll quickly look for your backlist, so it behooves you to have a good deal of backlist for her to choose from. Also, if the reader quickly devours your entire catalog, it's always good to be able to provide her with a new read in a timely manner.

To create this catalog in a timely manner, identifying and honing your process helps enormously. For an example, I strongly recommend the book *2k to 10k* by Rachel Aaron, which outlines some simple principles in looking at your process.

Track effectiveness.

If you want to write more, or write regularly, you need to — wait for it — track what's happening. (Yes, I will make you calendar-junkies yet.)

In the book *2k to 10k*, the author looked at how much she wrote, and when, and under what circumstances. While she'd always assumed she was productive at a certain time, she discovered the opposite to be true. And she was able to see what her baseline for productivity was.

I have my coaching clients and students go through something similar, tracking how much they write every day for a week. They usually see how much they can write in one sitting. Once you have a sense of how long it takes you to write a scene, and how many scenes you can write in a day or a week, you have a basis for comparison, and you can see if the tweaks and processes you put in place actually make a difference.

Outlines.

I bet some of you out there are wincing at that word. Still, rather than simply squirming away in a knee-jerk reaction of revulsion, if you haven't at least tried an outline, it's worth the attempt.
Most people who shy away from outlines do so because they fear outlines stifle creativity. It might help to think of a scene outline as a "living document." It will change as you go. It's just a sketch, a back-of-the-envelope roadmap that your friend gives you, not a carved-in-stone set of edicts you must slavishly follow. There will be plenty of surprises, and plenty of adjustments to be made. But if you have an outline, you'll be able to leap into your writing much more easily, without trying to get your bearings and figure out where you want to go every single time. It saves both time *and* energy that way.

Pre-writing.

One of the other elements that is mentioned in *2k to 10k* is writing a description of the scene you're about to write, in the barest of terms, just to "warm up" instead of diving into the scene and figuring it all out as you go. While some might protest "but that's where the good stuff is!", I guarantee that you will still have plenty of surprises as you type the draft. But it's sort of like how you spend your energy: do you want to get surprises from the character development and the story arc, or do you want the "surprise" to be figuring out where the hell the scene takes place?

Lightning Drafts & Revision Rounds.

I am a big fan of the lightning, or really rough, draft. Similar to pre-writing, it takes the internal editor out, and it's definitely more of a warm-up. You can be as bare-bones as you like. I have written rough drafts with (and I'm not even kidding) the phrase:

[insert sex scene here]

And then gone on my merry way, knowing I was writing to figure out the mechanics. I was creating a *prototype*, not a working model, so I didn't have to worry how pretty it looked, or how well the wordsmithing went. I would catch that in revisions, after I was sure that the overall structure was sound.

This doesn't work for everyone. I know several authors who absolutely cannot move forward in a manuscript until they're happy with the polish of their previous scene. You do need to respect your process. That said, you also need to see if your process is actually one that's working for you. If you're polishing a scene to a mirror shine, only to cut it later and rewrite a new one as different developments change what happened prior, that's a lot of hours lost. Again, if you feel you couldn't figure out what the story needed without writing the scenes you wound up cutting, it's not time wasted. But you might consider trying a little more planning, or a little less polishing, and see if it improves your process.

Tweaking your process.

Let's use the example of deciding you want to try writing a lightning draft, after being a hard-core "polish-as-you-go" type. The problem being, every time you open your manuscript, you find previous pages catching your eye, and the next thing you know, you're revising and rewriting like a mad thing.

Trying to force yourself *not* to look, and to have the discipline *not* to go back and revise, is a huge, ugly energy suck.

Instead, tweak your *method*. Don't rely on your self-control. Create structures that make it easier for you to do what you need to do without needing self-control at all.

In this example, instead of opening up a single document, you might consider creating a new document for each scene, and compiling the entire draft at the end. You won't be tempted if you're not looking at the prior scene at all. If you like to have a few sentences to lead you into the new scene, just copy those few sentences into the new document, and then save it, making it ready to go for your next writing session.

If you find that you're stressing over the perfect word choice or sentence structure, you might try something like Write or Die (writeordie.com), which is a simple word processor that will make your computer glow red if you stop typing. You get so fixated on not seeing the red (if you're hard core, it will also play a distracting noise and/or start erasing words if you stop typing) that you don't worry about the fine details. You just throw words on the page. (This is for lightning/rough draft, obviously!)

There are always ways to create support structures for your process. Investigate, and experiment.

Example process: *Rock Your Plot* & *Rock Your Revisions*.

I am compulsive enough to have written two ebooks, *Rock Your Plot* and *Rock Your Revisions*, detailing exactly how I go about writing my books. They go from premise to character development to plot to scene outline, and then go into the specifics of the revision process. The systems are succinct and only go over process, not really into theory. (They are the first two books in the Rock Your Writing series.)

When I started writing with an eye towards publication, around 1996, I didn't have a process. I'd been reading some writing reference books for a long time before then (since junior high!) and I'd plunked away at several manuscripts, never getting past chapter seven. The first book I ever completed is… burned, I think, or shredded. (And rightfully so: it wasn't salvageable, despite being an excellent learning exercise.)

I had a half-assed process when I completed the first book I sold, and that was largely to address revisions that the editor had asked me to make (in a matter of weeks, as I recall). When I sold the next book on proposal, I had to come up with a way to figure out how much I'd have to write per day in order to meet their six-month deadline while working at my forty-hour-a-week job.

It was this need to meet deadlines without going nuts that created my scene outlining process. I still wound up refining and tweaking it, using elements I liked from different writing resources. The transition rituals I use to help me "click" into writing mode were a direct result of having my son, and needing to gear up to write in a relative hurry (and with sleep deprivation, no less).
I would not have been able to write as much as I have, much less raise my son and run my writing coaching and editing business, without the processes, routines, and rituals I developed.

Reduce your decisions.

Every decision you make in a day takes energy. (Which is why, when evening rolls around, something as simple as deciding what to cook for dinner can seem positively Herculean.) The more decisions you have to make, the more energy you're spending, whether it's deciding which cereal to eat for breakfast to which car you're going to buy.

Writing is no different. The more decisions you have to make, simple or complex, the more energy you're exerting.

Routines.

How do we conserve energy? Through *routines*. You don't need to think about things you do on a regular basis. There is really little energy consumed in, say, waking up and brushing your teeth. If you've set out clothes the night before, even less time and energy is spent. If you eat the same bowl of cereal (or maybe mix it up between two types) every day, *and* you make sure you have that cereal on hand… even more streamlined.

The trick then becomes instituting routines… and sticking with them long enough to get them set in *habits*. This is probably not a mind-blowing epiphany for anyone, I realize. But the trick is to look at what you routinize.

Basically, instead of saying, "I'm going to write every day from two thirty to three thirty" you might just need to buy three boxes of cereal.

You're going to start smoothing the rough edges off of the elements of your day that don't work, in order to create more space for the things in your life you want to work better.

For some creative people, this can seem off-putting. Perhaps some parts of your life are already so regimented, the thought of *further* "systematizing" your life makes your soul want to curl up and die. If you're already scheduled within an inch of your life, then yes, routines aren't going to be the solution. (If that is the case, I'd revisit the sections on replenishment, actually.)

Creativity flourishes in constraint.

I am a sucker for reality cooking shows. They take these world-class chefs, then give them bizarre ingredients and terribly tight time frames, and see what happens. Sometimes, it can be a disaster, but more often it brings out a brilliant creativity, simply because the chef must use his or her imagination to overcome the obstacle.

Just like in fiction, character grows through conflict.

While routines can seem like a conflict to creativity, it's actually the right amount of constraint to get you to be more imaginative when you are able to write.

To use another writer's metaphor, routines are *revisions*. As you look at your calendar and track your actions, you're able to *revise* the things that are repetitious, wordy, or bloated.

Do you really need to pick out what you're going to wear just before you go out the door, for example? Is it making you happier to figure out what you're going to eat after a full day at work? Is it helping your creativity (or book sales) to haphazardly tweet, post, or blog when the spirit (or a publisher's nudge) moves you?

In my experience, developing routines can be the difference between having a sustainable commercial fiction career, and having a herky-jerky, "binge and purge" writing style that is both exhausting and ultimately counter-productive.

It's an iterative process, and it takes time. But it's time you'd spend anyway. If you take a long view, you can start the foundation and set, test and tweak your routines until your life, and your writing, moves much more smoothly.

Track your process.

Experiment. Pretend you're a scientist. Instead of trying to throw a bunch of things together at once (well, actually you can do that too, but it makes it harder to figure out what's working and what doesn't) take a few minutes after you're done with your writing and write down:

- What did you want to happen?
- What worked?
- What didn't?
- What might I try differently next time?

See where you can shave off time, too, if you're trying to squeeze in too much at once. Play with it. Then write it down. Write down what you try, and how you approach the story. You'll eventually absorb a process, but documenting always beats "I'll remember it." The best part is, if you're ever in freakout mode and nothing seems to be working you can look back at your notes and say, "Ohhhh, right. I'm freaking out because I haven't *set my container*. I haven't looked at which environment energizes me, I haven't reconnected with my motivation, I haven't set a time and place for writing." And you'll have a ready-made list of things to try.

Transitions.

Have you ever driven a stick-shift car?

If you're going very fast, and you have it in fourth gear, then you suddenly shift into first gear, the engine freaks out. You hear this high pitched screaming sound, and possibly a clunking sound.

Do this enough, and you will experience "stripping your gears." It's costly, painful, and ultimately something you want to avoid.

Remember how I mentioned that different energy is involved in doing different things? Well, let's say you've been working on your taxes all morning. Or you've been running around doing errands all afternoon. Either way, you find yourself with a fifteen-minute window.

A lot of bloggers and writing pros advocate taking every spare second to write. Bring a notebook! Write when you're waiting for your kid at the bus stop! In line at the grocery store! While you're waiting for a prescription to be filled!

For some people, this is very effective. I'm not one of those people. If I have a fifteen-minute window, it would probably mean more like a ten-minute window for writing, because I'd need five minutes to transition into it, and that's with previous prep.

That doesn't apply to *plotting*, for me, or maybe doing character work. But if I'm write even lightning rough draft, I need some transition time. Otherwise, I "strip my gears" while shifting from one kind of activity to another and back again.

Even when I have a good solid block of time, I still need transitions. It's a matter of getting my head in the right place, getting grounded in the story, getting my bearings about the scene I'm going to be working on. It doesn't mean I need to do an hour of meditation and then a quick round of yoga and have the perfect environment. But I do know what works best, and what doesn't, and I streamline rituals and routines so it only takes me a few minutes to snap into place.

Process helps with that.

Creativity + Routine = Rituals.

Routines don't need to be boring, static, or left-brained.

If you add fun and creative elements to your routines, then they can become *rituals*. Remember how I said your subconscious doesn't speak English? Well, it speaks "ritual" fluently. If you use the same cues, and you have real thought, engagement, and fun with your routines, as soon as you start in on one, your subconscious goes "oh, right! We're doing this now!" and you become able to snap into whatever it is with a minimum of fuss, friction, or energy loss. It takes a while, both to plan it and to "set" it, but when you do, it's totally worth it.

#Chapter 6: Support Network

"Isolation is a dream killer." – Barbara Sher

Writing is a solitary profession at heart: no one else can write your book or come up with your story ideas. That said, I firmly believe that you cannot pull off a writing career alone. For those of us who regularly suffer blocks, or who can't keep a steady writing schedule, I think it's even more crucial. Without at least a skeletal support network, fixing any of the other issues becomes nearly impossible.

Here are some key people that can make a noticeable difference in your writing productivity.

A Cheerleader.

My best friend, Rina, is my biggest fan. She's not a writer, although she is an avid reader. She's been my best friend since college: she introduced me to romance novels. (I still remember staying up until two in the morning reading *The Lion's Lady* by Julie Garwood on her couch.)

When I'm feeling down, I call her, and she'll say the same thing she's been saying for seventeen novels. "Don't worry, Cathy. *All does not suck*."

When I'm writing, she's the person I think of as my Right Reader. The important thing is I know there's someone out there who believes in my writing.

Sometimes, when I need it, she believes enough for both of us. They can be hard to find. In a pinch, it can be simply someone who believes in you, even if they don't like reading novels of any sort. The key is to find someone who believes in you. They are worth looking for – and holding on to.

Your Critique/Support Group.

I've always been a proponent of critique groups. I think that it's important to get comfortable sharing your work, and I think that meeting regularly with the incentive of showing pages will actually help you write pages. Critiquing gives you skills that you can apply to your own work. (Normally, anything you're telling other people is something you need to work on, strangely enough!) Years ago, I got in a horrible slump (even by my cyclic writer's block standards). Showing up to crit group with no pages, *yet again*, was depressing, and sometimes I'd skip it.

There was another published writer in the group, but for the most part, we were largely unpublished, and I wasn't sure if that was helping or not. But I kept showing up. Sometimes, we'd just talk about what was going on in our lives, barely touching on what we were working on. Sometimes we'd gossip about the publishing industry.

In retrospect, I see that the majority of us were stuck in some kind of sucky situation – a lot of

personal traumas and disasters — and as in anything, what was happening in our lives was spilling over into our fiction. Seeing each other face to face, giving input on the pages people were turning in, helped enormously. We were all friends. We loved each other. We celebrated each other's triumphs, consoled each other over our losses. We kept each others' secrets.

I now realize that it's the friendship, more than the "critique," that's going to get you through this. You can always hire an editor: you can always find some beta readers, people who aren't familiar with your work, for fresh eyes and a new perspective. If you form a critique group, it's crucial for you to have a group that are also your *friends*, people that you enjoy spending time with and talking shop with. Notice that Nora Roberts has had the same "critique" group all these years – despite the fact that they haven't reached her same level of success. (Although, seriously, who could?) She didn't "trade up" to hone her writing skills with people who were "a level higher." She kept, and values, her friends.

Once you've got your group of writer friends, I'd further suggest two more things: the weekly check-in, and the monthly face-to-face.

Monthly Face-to-Face.

I meet with four other Seattle writers once a month — my "writergirls." We do a potluck dinner, and wine and dessert are often involved. We catch up on each other's lives, tell bawdy jokes, and generally have a girl's night out.

That said, writing is discussed: we talk about what we're doing, and sometimes we'll do career planning. One month, we did the "ten things you do most/ ten things you want to do" exercise. In January, we did goal planning and made a collage "vision board." We celebrate birthdays. We don't often trade pages – we tend to do that online, if ever – but afterward, I always feel relieved, happy, and inspired. I don't know that doing it more often would help, but I do know that once a month is my absolute minimum. It gives me something to look forward to and celebrate.

Weekly Check-In Group.

I do this online with the "writergirls." (I've done this with other writer-friends, as well, and I provide something similar for several of my coaching clients.) Every Tuesday, we email each other what we'd like to accomplish this week, and how we did on last week's goal. Doing this on the same day every week helps establish it as a routine.

Ideally, if one person keeps track and can post a "here's what we all said we wanted to do" email, it *really* helps… but it's sort of a pain in the butt. See if someone will volunteer, or maybe trade off monthly. You'd be amazed at what this little level of accountability will do for your productivity. Also, it's nice to see other people progressing, and getting the support when you do – or don't – meet your goals.

Having a network of friends for psychological support is important, period. In our case, I think having writer friends is key because they will understand what you're going through when other

well-meaning friends simply can't. They might not make you a bestseller, but you will definitely be happier with where you are, and they'll make the journey of your writing career a hell of a lot more fun. That might be the game-changer you've been missing.

Online still counts.

While there's a lot to be said for face-to-face, and I highly recommend it, you may be living somewhere remote – a tiny tropical island, or a rural community, or whatever. There may not be a lot of writers, because there simply aren't a lot of *people*, period.

Or, maybe you have mobility issues. You can't drive four hours to meet another writer, and you certainly wouldn't do it every week if you could.

Remember that writer's group I mentioned? Where we meet every month? There have been times when one of us has been sick, or had a car in the shop, or whatever. We wound up having a Skype session with the person missing. If you want, you could do a Google plus chat, so everyone could see everyone. Skyping one person is free – if you wanted to see more than one person, Google would be free, as well. It's the near occasion of face to face, and it doesn't take a ton of technology to pull off: just a computer and a web-cam.

If you feel awkward about video conferencing, just checking in with people on a regular basis via email or through a group forum can also be very helpful. I've been on a writer's loop for over ten years – we all wrote for the same line at Harlequin – and we've become very close. I have only met some of these people once or twice! But we've seen each other through very tough times – divorces, illnesses, you name it. Just because we're not in the same city doesn't mean we don't care about each other. Don't let anyone tell you differently – online friends can be a huge source of support.

When the people who should be supportive, aren't.

In a perfect world, all the people around you would act as cheerleaders, writing groups, and generally helpful people. Unfortunately, that's rarely the case.

Not everyone gets on board with your writer's dream. When these people are close to you, their lack of support can feel like a stumbling block – or, an insurmountable barrier.

Sometimes this is family. Your practical spouse, your children, your parents. They probably aren't writers, and they don't understand what's driving you. They also don't understand writing, period – they wonder "why aren't you done yet?" and "why aren't you published?"

What may seem like a casual statement to them can feel like a crushing blow.
"Honey, don't you think it's time you focused on getting a real job?"
"This just doesn't seem very interesting or exciting."
"Maybe if you focused more, and sat down and did it, the book would be finished much faster."

They (probably) don't mean to be hurtful – in fact, many less-than-supportive statements are said with a lot of love and concern. It doesn't take the sting out.

There is a statement I learned a few years ago that covers this phenomena perfectly: *Don't go to the hardware store for bread.*

If you want support, you need to turn to supportive people – people who understand – to get it. Your family can love you, and vice versa. They may have their own worries. But if you're going to build a support framework, *make sure it's really supportive*, even if that means looking outside your normal circle. If your family, spouse, or friends *aren't* supportive of your writing career, then make sure you have a group of writers and friends that *are* on board. And then talk to *them* when you're feeling down.

In a similar vein: I recommend that you *not* use your spouse or family members as a beta reader unless you know you can trust their opinion. I do know some people who say "my sister/daughter/mother is my first beta reader" and they get good feedback, but too often, people push work on their spouse, and then get frustrated or feel disappointed by the critique. I love my husband dearly, but other than reading one of my books when he was dating me (which worked, actually!) I've had him steer clear. He likes stories that end in lots of death and mayhem. His recommendations for my romantic comedies, bless him, would be a little less than helpful.

Critique partners that don't work.

Like dating, it takes a while to find a critique partner or group that works for you. Here are some things I can recommend:

- Find people who write in or near your genre. There are conventions that are fairly genre-specific, and people who write in other genres will give you critiques that may not be helpful as a result. A high fantasy writer who is used to huge and sprawling story arcs that cover several books, and who love intricate world building, may get unhelpful feedback from someone who writes category romance, and vice versa. I once got feedback from a man saying of a romance novel: "it was cute, and funny… but it might be better if they both died at the end."
- Find people who are at a similar level of writing proficiency as you, more or less. If you can find a group with people who are a bit higher in the writing tournament, they should be able to give you advice and show you the challenges you'll (presumably) soon be facing. If you have a group with people who are a little less experienced than you, you can solidify your skills by teaching them through your critiques. But if you have a group with someone who publishes eight books a year and someone who has never completed a novel, you'll find the meetings unproductive and uneven at best.
- When you're starting a new critique group, *give yourself a trial period and an escape clause.* Say that you'll meet four to six times, and after that, if it doesn't seem to be working for any reason, you can "table the group" for an indefinite period of time, or shut it down completely. There are a lot of different critiquing styles: what's harsh to you might seem namby-pamby to someone else. Better to figure that out in a trial period and

then stop meeting, rather than commit to something painful.

The energy vampire.

There are some people – writers and non-writers – who suck the life right out of you. They could be good friends, or family members. The most dangerous energy vampire, in my opinion, is the fellow writer – and especially critique partner.

These are people who are eager to complain (or brag) about what's going on in their lives, but when the conversation shifts to you, they become uninterested and suddenly need to go. They are jealous of your successes, and they try to deflate you when you're feeling good, usually under the guise of "protecting you" by "being realistic." They can be clingy, needy, and they tend to have drama and disaster following in their wake like a wedding train.

Energy vampires tend to do things like expect you to critique their 400 page manuscript as soon as possible, because "there's an agent I promised it to a month ago and *I need to send it now!*" They can then get very, very angry when your critique isn't glowing. They often ignore your advice or rail at you for "not getting it." Or, conversely, they will melt down and weep: *"My work sucks and I'm a horrible writer and I'll never be published and my life is over!"* They expect you to then praise them effusively and care for them until they feel ready to write again. Strangely, when you get a rejection and are feeling crappy, they don't take your calls or they run over your story saying, "yeah, *when that happened to me*…"

If you have these people in your life – *run*.

In all seriousness, people like this can be horribly damaging to your writing and your mental and emotional health. Because fiction writing can be intensely emotional, and personal, their sabotage and passive-aggressive actions (as well as energy-sucking drama) can derail your writing attempts. If you want to write more, and write better, stop thinking people like this can and will somehow be supportive. They aren't. Odds are good, they simply can't be.

If you can't or don't want to cut these people out of your life, the other option is to hold a strong boundary. Talking to them about your writing is like Charlie Brown running toward the football Lucy is holding: you're setting yourself up for a fall. You know what happens. Don't give them the opportunity. And don't let them run roughshod over your needs and boundaries, either. (See: *time saboteurs.*)

You'll notice that once you start holding your boundary, they get upset. They will probably badmouth you to others who are still on the crazy train. Eventually, they will drift away and find new hosts to feed from.

Let them.

Check your network.

Look at the people in your life. Do you have people who understand what you're doing? Do you have someone you can call to read something and give you a "crazy-check" if you've lost perspective? Do you have someone who believes in you no matter what's going on? Do you have someone who will tell you what you need to hear, even if it isn't what you *want* to hear?

At the same time, have you taken steps to minimize or eliminate the influence of people who don't support you, and who in fact drain your time, energy, and motivation?

If you feel like you've gotten your other issues in hand, having the right support network might be the element you've been missing.

#Chapter 7: Action Plan

You've gotten the high level view of what's stopping you from writing, and how to address it.

Here's the concise action plan to pull it all together.

1. **Track your time**. Find some way to "capture" that works for you – regular calendar, notebook, whatever.
2. **Review your time findings.** Check for patterns and pitfalls, as well as "bright spots" where things are working.
3. **Get and use a calendar**. Find or make one that works for you. Block in the external commitments (commute, day job, childcare, promotion) and the replenishment. Then block in time to write.
4. **Triage.** If you find you don't have time to write, you may be overbooked. What can be reduced, what can be delegated, what can be eliminated?
5. **Streamline.** Of the things you can't delegate or eliminate, is there a routine or process that can make the necessary things more simple, quicker, and/or easier?
6. **Plan and track your writing.** Don't just say "I will write this much this week." Every morning, have a plan for *what* or *how much* you're going to write in a specific block of time. Keep this goal low when you're initially starting out. Then, when you do write, jot down when, how much, and what you managed to accomplish.
7. **Review your writing time.** After a week or two, see if you're actually meeting your goals.
8. **Tweak for time.** If you aren't meeting your goals, see if unexpected things cropped up. If so, look at what they were, see if there are ways that you can prevent or prepare for them in the future, and make sure you've got buffer built into your schedule.
9. **Tweak for self-care.** If it's a problem of focus, or simply energy problems, find out what replenishes you – and then block it in.
10. **Tweak for mental game.** If it's a problem of block, do the "meet your monsters" exercise from the fear section. Or, try a "bright spots" exercise, and tweak your container (where you write, elements to how you write).
11. **Tweak for process.** If you have the block handled, you've got the time, and you're rested and focused, but you're still not writing, go back to process. Is there character work you can do? An investigation into the foundation of your novel, the GMC, the plot? You can always try approaching it like a game, like Write or Die.
12. **Tweak for support.** Still not writing? Get an accountability partner, or simply find a supportive writer to talk to (and to talk through your stuck). Sometimes, a sympathetic ear is all it takes to shake something loose.

That, in a nutshell, is the action plan.

Conclusion

There is no perfect system.

I'm a plotter. I will spend more time on my scene outline than I will on my rough draft on some novels. I like having a roadmap, and a compass, when it comes to both my writing, and my life. That said, I understand that all writers are different. What works for one will fail miserably for another.

This book isn't about a rigid, proscribed route for beating writer's block, and it's not a death march through a weekly calendar. This book covers common elements, and provides (hopefully) helpful techniques, as well as an effective, logical sequence for use.

Nor will any system work perfectly.

Even if you find a system that you feel is "perfect" for you, it's never going to run like clockwork.

I've been guilty of making this assumption. I used to hunt around until I found a time management system that seemed foolproof… and then, for whatever reason, I'd find myself missing a day here, a day there. Slowly, I'd fall off the wagon, and ignore the system until I was hopelessly in the weeds again. I'd then assume that either I was hopelessly useless at systems, or that it was the wrong system for me and I'd go off and try another "perfect" system.

What I learned was, really, it's not the system. Sure, there are some approaches that are going to be a better fit for you than others. It's like plotting, or writing: you have your process.

But the thing that's going to help your writing in the long term isn't finding a new plotting system or a new critique partner or another reference book. The thing that is important is that you keep writing… and, instead of beating yourself up when you fall off track, you recognize what the issue is and slowly get back on track, with the help of your support network.

Your results may vary.

Because *people* vary. If you try something and it doesn't work, it doesn't mean that you're "doing it wrong" or that you're not trying hard enough or simply don't have the aptitude. Yes, things take practice and time, but above all, these techniques and approaches take *self-awareness.*

Even the most avid plotter needs to go with his or her gut and work with the subconscious. That means being attuned to instincts, perhaps more than most. When it comes to writing more, and writing more effectively in a limited time, figuring out what feels right is going to be a big help.

Test, track, tweak.

Alas, sometimes, your gut is wrong.
You may swear that you are a slug after lunch, only to track your time and find that you write your best and most consistently right after your noon meal. You might think that you write best when you have big blocks of time, and then discover that those two pages you wrote in the half hour after your kids went to bed added up to a ten-page block, as opposed to the seven pages you wrote in the one week you waited until you had a full four hours to devote to your work in progress.

The only way to really know is to keep track of what you're doing, test little variations in your process, and tweak when you know the results.

Make it yours.

I went through countless planners, electronic and printed, before I finally tweaked a week and daily calendar that worked for me. It includes check-ins on Wednesday and Friday. Because I want it to be cheerful and something I like looking at, I've even decorated the binder that I keep the sheets in. I also gradually incorporated some of the other useful routines in the binder, like a meal plan and a shopping list.

For those interested, I've included copies of my daily, weekly, and routine calendars on my website, http://rockyourwriting.com/free-downloads/.

I made it mine, and I made it fun. That made it easier to use, and I was more enthusiastic to check in. Being enthusiastic about using useful tools has made a huge difference.

Let me know how it goes.

I love hearing stories from people who work with my systems, whether it's plotting, revisions, or time management. My mission is to help commercial fiction writers become more successful. Drop me a line at cathy@rockyourwriting.com, and let me know what's working (and not working!) for you.

Further Resources

BOOKS:

Time Management

The Now Habit, by Neil Fiore
How to Get Out of the Quicksand of Overwhelm, by Cairene Macdonald
The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, by Stephen R. Covey
Time Management from the Inside Out, by Julie Morgenstern

Energy Management

The Power of Full Engagement, by Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz

Fear Management

The Procrastination Dissolve-o-matic, by Havi Brooks
Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard, by Chip Heath and Dan Heath
The Emergency Turnaround Clinic, by Naomi Dunford

Process Management

2k to 10k: Writing Faster, Writing Better, and Writing More of What You Love, by Rachel Aaron
GMC: Goal, Motivation, Conflict: the Building Blocks of Good Fiction, by Debra Dixon
Story Engineering, by Larry Brooks
Write Away, by Elizabeth George
The Weekend Novelist, by Robert J. Ray

Support Network

The Gentle Art of Verbal Self Defense, by Suzette Haden Elgin
When I Say No, I Feel Guilty, by Manuel J. Smith
How to Say No Without Feeling Guilty, by Patti Breitman and Connie Hatch

WEBSITES:

RockYourWriting.com
Thirdhandworks.com
Productiveflourishing.com
Thefluentself.com

Ittybiz.com
Flylady.com
Paymo.biz

FREE DOWNLOADS

I've included sample calendar pages, container notes, and other helpful complementary material here on my website:

http://rockyourwriting.com/free-downloads/