

in the April or May issue. Keep in mind that some magazines have long time lines. At *Yankee* our standard deadlines fell five months prior to publication, and it wasn't uncommon to ask for pieces a full year or more ahead of time. Fortunately, we could pay the writer on acceptance of the manuscript—as do most good magazines.

All but the most successful freelancers probably need to write for a variety of magazines and accept a mix of assignments, not just serious narrative journalism. My goal has been to increase the narrative part of the mix over time. If you are devoted to the craft, an increasing amount of your work will be challenging and rewarding, both personally and financially.

Not Stopping: Time Management for Writers

STEWART O'NAN

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Joseph Conrad, a prolific writer, said there are only two difficult things about writing: starting and not stopping. That's absolutely true. Sooner or later almost every writer takes on a large independent project. To succeed, you must find the time or make the time or even steal the time. Precisely because the project is independent, no one else will help you with it, or pressure you to complete it. To have any chance of finishing, you have to make your own rules—rules to *not stop*.

When I was just beginning to write, while still working full-time as an engineer, I often lost interest in my short stories and novels halfway

through and abandoned them. As a writer you should finish things whether or not you like them. Even after you have fallen out of love with your project, you can go back and improve it. Abandoning projects can become a bad habit; avoid it altogether.

I learned from David Bradley, a great fiction writer, that all first drafts are crap. Sometimes that's hard to realize about your first draft. You have been inching forward, writing very carefully, putting well-crafted sentences and marvelous images on the page, creating the right mood. It's still going to be a crappy first draft, but that's okay. You can fix it later.

I studied novelist John Gardner's personal papers and looked at early drafts of marvelous novels like *Grendel*. They were terrible. Like most good writers, he couldn't write, but he had the energy and determination to *rewrite*. He wrote each novel over and over until it became the vivid, continuous dream that I loved to read. How can we emulate that? How can we keep the work rolling even while working for somebody else?

The first rule: Make yourself accountable to yourself. Some writers write themselves contracts: *I will deliver my book by xxx date*. One writer I know, Chip Scanlan, actually signs these contracts and pins them to his office wall.

Second rule: Keep the manuscript with you at all times. I always carry the pages that I'm working on. Whenever I have a few moments, I can move it forward. Even if you just take the very last sentence you wrote on an index card, you can take five seconds to look at it and ponder what to write next. I used to go to my engineering job each day and say, "I'm going to write one sentence today."

An actors' trick is to keep their scripts with them at all times so they are always delving more deeply into the character. Do that with your manuscript so you can move more deeply into the material. Somehow, keeping the work physically close to me helped me stay connected to it even when I was immersed in my job, my family, my two-hour daily commute.

Third rule: Take your lunch hour. Take your sick time. Sit in the bathroom and think about your writing. Take *all* the time you are entitled to at your job.

Fourth rule: Always have a notebook and pen with you.

Fifth rule: Carry your characters with you. I often put on the mask of my main character and try to slip into that person's point of view. I'll go through my day trying to imagine how what I see would strike that person. If my main character is a woman waiting twenty-five years

for her husband to get out of prison, I'll walk into a hotel lobby and think about everyone there enjoying their freedom.

Sixth rule: Never let the project sit for too long. If you go for several weeks without working on it, you'll never finish it. Now that I'm writing full-time, I aim for one page each day. When I had another job, a paragraph was a good day. I can't write more than five hours a day no matter how many hours I have available. I spend my best hours writing and then use the rest of my work time revising, doing research, or fact-checking.

Seventh rule: Write, don't talk. Try not to talk too much about a project that you are just beginning. Sometimes you can talk the matter out of a project and lose your passion for it.

Eighth rule: Ask people what they know. If you need information or sources for your project, ask everyone you encounter about it.

Ninth rule: Isolate yourself. Spend your lunch hours where no one can find you. Stay at your desk after everyone else has gone home, or show up before anyone else arrives. Use that time for your own project.

Tenth rule: Budget your time carefully. If you're self-employed, give your best hours of the day to your big project and your less-alert hours to the stuff that just pays the bills. Figure out your peak alert and try to arrange your schedule so that you can give those to the work you care about the most.

Eleventh rule: Give your best effort and your best turns of phrase to your own project. Do a good job for your employer, but do a better job for yourself.

Twelfth rule: Never force yourself to begin from a dead stop. The way to do this, of course, is never stop. Keep the project in mind. Each time you leave the writing, give yourself a note or a prompt to get you started the next day.

Thirteenth rule: Get it on paper. All the research and reporting in the world are meaningless without the words coming one after another on the computer screen or on the page.

Fourteenth rule: Take extreme measures. I actually used to tie myself to my chair with a piece of yarn to force myself to face the cursor. When revising, I find that I keep as much from the days that felt awful as from the days when the writing seemed to flow easily.

Just sit there for as much time as you have. Put maximum pressure on yourself to get into the chair. Once you're there, ease off the pressure a bit. Robert Frost said, "The best time to write is when you're not sitting at a desk." I've found that to be true.

Fifteenth rule: Write down your dreams. I've woken up in the middle of the night and had entire short stories announce themselves.

Sixteenth rule: Find the time and the space. Your writing desk must welcome you. Use lighting, music, a warm blanket, or noise-canceling headphones to make your desk a comfortable place to spend time each day.

Seventeenth rule: Enjoy yourself. You can't be sure that the book you're working on will make it. You must enjoy the time you spend writing it. Everything that happens after that manuscript leaves your desk is not real. Everything that happens at your desk *is* real. If your book wins the National Book Award and makes millions of dollars, wonderful. If it's a complete flop and goes out of print within six months, wonderful. Either way, the book is no better or worse by one word.

Lessons from the Jury Box

JACK HART

As usual, the feature writing jurors for the 2002 Pulitzer Prizes were the last to leave their meeting room at the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. On the final afternoon, after we had picked the three finalists, we sat around the table, exhausted. The also-rans were stacked in a huge pile under the table. All the finalists were narrative pieces, as were about half of all the entries.

Jim Warren, a *Chicago Tribune* editor, posed a question to the rest of us: "What did we learn about feature writing as a result of having gone through this process?" Here is the list of tips that we produced:

1. Have a point.
2. Be skeptical of victim stories.
3. Have a narrative structure. Read a screenwriting book.
4. Strive for clear organization.
5. Have a dramatic engine.
6. Don't be conventional.
7. Think about your story's selling point. How will the story benefit readers?
8. Don't create false heroes.
9. Don't be afraid to show complexity or ambiguity.