



# A no-fret, no-sweat plan for getting it

# DONE

Writing in blocks of time helps you overcome doubt and meet deadlines

BY DAVID TAYLOR

**O**THER THAN AN empty mailbox, the most frightening sight for a writer is the blank page. Sometimes I even hate finishing a page because I know another one awaits, its vastness daring me to fill it with my puny thoughts and meager vocabulary. How could I produce anything worthy of the writers who have gone before me? I used to make C's in high school English!

And so goes the constant babble of recrimination spewed by the monster of self-doubt.

The source of this monster's power is not merely the risk of humiliation every time we write. There's also the mystique surrounding creativity. Humans have explored deep space and the enigma of DNA, but we still know little about creativity—except that some of us have more of it than others, and that if we study our craft and work real hard, maybe, just maybe, the magic will happen, but maybe not.

It's that possibility of not measuring up, of Monster Doubt's voice drowning out our own, that makes some of us write not at all, others of us write less than we would like, and many of us write at a lower level than we want. But what if sitting down and doing it were not so anxiety-ridden?

When I first began to freelance full time, I was forced to deal seriously and quickly with issues of self-doubt and procrastination and their effect on my daily output. Out of necessity, I developed block writing, a technique that helps me overcome self-doubt, especially when it's time to create that crucial first draft. Here's how it works:

### The block-writing regimen

To begin block writing you need a timer, preferably with an alarm, to divide your writing day into 45-minute or one-hour blocks, each followed by a short break.

The goal is simple: to put der-

riere in chair and not get up until the end of the block of time. Eventually, doing this will become automatic. You just do it—without the complaining, the hesitation or the extra push of will.

And when things aren't going well and the demons of doubt snarl their loudest, you simply can tell yourself: "Well, I could sit down for at least *one* block."

There are three essential rules to follow while block writing:

**Accept the 'law of regularity'**  
Tell yourself: "If I sit down for enough writing blocks, eventually the work *will* get done." Avoid goals like, "During each block, I will produce two pages of copy." It doesn't work that way. You never know what's going to happen once you sit down. You could produce 20 pages or two pages or none at all. Each outcome will have occurred for a legitimate reason. All you know is this: Spend enough time in the chair and eventually it will get done.

**Commit** Like any regimen, whether a weight-loss diet, exercise program or good dental hygiene, block writing will work only if you give yourself to it and play by the rules. That means no matter how much you dread writing that day, no matter how unprepared you feel, no matter how frightened of failure you may be, no matter how sleepy you are, the simple act of putting your tush in a chair and starting the timer becomes the most important thing you can do to ensure your eventual success. It means you're acquiring a writer's discipline.

**Trust** You must believe that during each session, something will get done. Even an hour of false starts is important. Sometimes you have to write stuff you won't use to clear the way for stuff you will, or say things the wrong way in order to find the right way. But most of all, you must trust that if you simply sit down for your time in the harness, eventually the work will get done.

### Benefits

Imposing artificial structure on the creative act of writing seems counterproductive. I remind you, however, of the formula for classical Greek tragedies, from Sophocles to Euripides: the fall of a flawed protagonist in a high position and use of dramatic irony to evoke pity and fear. Structure and pattern have the power to free our creativity. Here are other benefits of block writing:

**Defined limits** For writers plagued by doubt, simply sitting down isn't enough. Without a tight seat belt, it's too easy to spring back up at the first itch of doubt, the first wretched paragraph or unyielding problem. By allowing yourself to get up in frustration, you reinforce failure—not success.

**Artificial pressure** Full-time writers have no problem staying motivated. If they don't write, they don't pay the bills. Simple enough.

But as a part-time freelancer with a full-time paycheck, you have little to lose besides pride. Sometimes we need the motivation that real-world pressure provides—whether it's making the mortgage payment or an editor's deadline. Writing blocks apply pressure that feels familiar, especially to the procrastinator in us, who depends on outside pressure to get things done.

**Sharper focus** I used to watch college students make this mistake every day: "I'm going to the library to study for three hours." Well intended, but few students know

how to break long study periods into effective blocks with specific, achievable goals. The result is sadly predictable—wasted time despite honest effort, ending in frustration and disappointment.

But writing is like a construction project, and from foundation to rooftop we must constantly ask, "What comes next?" Writing in blocks of time encourages focus on one thing at a time: an effective lead, a main character's backstory or a bridge section between main points.

**Required rest** How long you can sustain concentration and remain efficient is an individual call. But one truth applies: Going beyond your productive limit eventually leads to frustration, which can become its own problem. I have found 45-minute to one-hour blocks to be the most comfortable work period for me. The key is to be disciplined and give up romantic notions of working furiously while in the breathless grip of inspiration, losing all sense of self and time, emerging with masterpiece in hand. On some days that may happen;

when it does, feel blessed and know it was possible because you treated the other 364 days like a job, complete with coffee breaks.

**Concrete goals** Vague dreams lack the juice to sustain us through the tough work that a writing project requires. You may "want to be published." Fine, but as a binding contract with yourself, that's a little soft around the edges. You need to set specific goals for each block. All of these things help bind us to the ultimate writing contract: to write our best, to grow from the challenges we've set, and to be proud

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that we're doing it—not merely dreaming about it.

### Lessons

Over the years, block writing has taught me the following lessons, without which I don't think I could make a living doing this:

- To write, no matter my mood or level of fear.
- To keep my head down and butt in chair, ignoring the long, arduous road I must travel to produce final copy.
- To derive primary satisfaction from the actual process of creating, not its outcome.

While I always hope that the final product will be one of my best, I know that there will always be successes and failures and things in between, but the satisfaction and joy of my craft will never abandon me. #

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Read more about block writing at *The Writer* Web site, [www.writermag.com](http://www.writermag.com) (click on Online Extra).