



Step-by-Step to the Writer's Space

free from the clutter of duties, distractions, and
difficulties getting started up

The 10-Step Full Version!

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*Step-by-Step to the Writer's Space:
free from the clutter of duties, distractions, and difficulties
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Hello there Writers!

What follows here is a gold mine of very practicable steps and actions that can be taken to turn your writing life around.

Establishing a superior writing habit, even in the midst of duties, obligations, and all the tugging things in life, is nothing to shy away from. It's not necessary to wait until "the right time" to start developing a habit, such as during a vacation period. Some of us even need to ask, when was the last time a vacation period was a vacation period, and not a time to "work more" anyway? Developing a writing habit right in the midst of all the action IS A GREAT WAY and THE PERFECT TIME to start. Then you know that the writer's momentum that you build is fire-proof, tested and true.

And if you find a window of opportunity to work really hard for long hours is coming up, and you can't resist (I am the same), then you will know you will hit the ground running, the habit and momentum that you built before is there to catch you and take you up into it.

So, these 10 Steps are all about practical ways to light the lamp and keep it lit, always, so that the writing side of your life is healthy one and always taken care of, not a great worry or burden, so that it might also take care of you a bit too.

See you next time,

Alan

WRITING IS AN ART OF ATTENTION

It may feel to us academic writers that the art of writing comes down to finding a way to squeeze writing into our busy schedules. There are so many duties, applications, teaching, advising, emails, courses, and people asking everything and anything of us. Just juggling all that seems like as much as we can handle, or more. How are we supposed to also write on top of all that? Let alone...

write openly, creatively,

in the clarity that an uncluttered mind radiates?

This is obviously so very crucial an issue. But my answer, actually, is going to start with turning this whole business on its head. I am going to be blunt, and perhaps harsh, and to the point, but my purpose in this eBook is to shake things up a bit, and show you specific actions you can take right now, step-by-step, to overcome inertia and get into a state of writer's momentum.

And so let's start with these kind of questions instead: why is writing not coming first? Why is it not the priority?

Writing is the source of our livelihood. And while teaching and discussing and hob-nobbing can be satisfying and productive for creativity, for the creative academic writer there is nothing quite like writing for feeling... *well*.

And almost as important: for an academic writer with creative or artistic aspirations, the state of not-writing, or not writing well, is a kind of hell, really. Or at least a purgatory. It's necessary to be that blunt.

When we come out of that purgatory, as I am sure many of you know, we truly realize how bad it was. While we are in it, we may or may not be aware of how wretched it is.

Just like when there's a loud, continuous sound in the street, like jackhammers. When it suddenly stops, at that moment there's this release and we suddenly recognize how clenched up we were that whole time, but didn't realize it before. It's the same when you come out of writer's purgatory— only then do you realize how bad it was.

And, how much better it is to be out of all that.

So I am going to turn things on their head a bit and propose a different sort of look at this:

A lot of the hectic calls on our attention coming from duties, teaching, people asking things of us... it's not something preventing you from getting into a writer's space,

it's what your attention is magnetically drawn to because you are
not in a writer's space,

because to be in the not-writing state

without all that busy-ness

would be unbearable.

You would feel writer's purgatory more clearly and vividly

without all that clamor to distract you from it, and that would be just not tolerable, not to someone with a creative urge. To someone with a creative urge, not creating is not easy to tolerate. It may seem like we are tolerating not-writing, but in fact the pain is numbed. *Distractions don't take us away from writing, they take us away from not-writing.*

And I would even propose it's the same for the writer who is only doing it for a living and nothing else: the weight of the burden of not-writing is made more bearable by experiencing that pain as coming from external circumstances, and having the attention fixated on these circumstances becomes an effective distraction from the pain of this burden.

Now I know all kinds of objections spring forth out of the mind at this point. That these duties and obligations and distractions really are there, they really make writing difficult or impossible, and they take time.

And yes, there is a sense in which this is true, and it is absolutely to our benefit to recognize this side of things and—read on—start applying the precise skills and tactics that deal with these

influences. But there is a whole other side to this. Hopefully we are here together to at least experiment with the art of attention and at least explore what might be possible if we start to see things in a new way. If things are not working out as well as you hope right now, then why not just try this frame-shift—you have nothing to lose. If you are on-board, we can look into this together and I think you will find this shift in mindset very useful.

With this shift in attention, we are no longer asking the question “How do I fit writing into my busy life?” We are asking instead, “How is it that writing is not front and center, and the other things arranged around it?” Or even...

Why isn't an unstoppable writing momentum carrying me along?

There is a practical question there, of how to establish that momentum and not have it derailed, and also the deeper question of what is going on in our attention such that things have gotten turned wrong way around.

As you might be catching on at this point, I like both aspects of this question a whole lot. But leading with the heart and with

passions is best, so let's go there first.

And that will come down to the fact that, for every successful writer, **WRITING IS A PRIORITY** plain and simple. **Successful writers don't just squeeze writing in, they make it a priority.**

What I want to show you now are some neat tricks and tactics that can take you step by step through a process that will put writing back into it's proper position.

STEP ONE: HAVE VISIONS

You care about writing, or else you would not be reading this now. You would have stopped, and moved onto something else. So because you keep reading this, it must mean writing matters to you. And that is why actually writing things down and doing this exercise, and the ones that follow, is going to matter to you and make a difference. You will have written it down, and therefore it will matter to you.

In this first exercise, you will write down your vision for your ideal writing life, your ideal self in 5 years.

Have fun, be creative, dream a little, but have it be really about what you want your life to be like.

Use about a page to describe what your life is like, how you spend your days, as well as what you have accomplished, published, the awards that you have won if any, the new jobs you got, and the titles and other information of your most important work. Where are you going to work on your writing? Where are you going to exercise, teach, socialize? Create an image of who you want to be as a writer, and write it out. Imagine yourself in 5 years, and everything went really, really well. Not impossibly well, but about as great as you could imagine reasonably possible.

Use at least 20 minutes to write this out. Then, do it again the next day, for three days in a row. It's important to rub this vision in a bit and also to clarify it.

I think you will find that simple the doing of this exercise alone can boost your mood and energy. That is a very important part of it, because by framing our attention this way, including the

important ingredient of engaging our imagination, our creative energy is funneled into something we want, while our awareness becomes increasingly clear about what that, exactly, is. Left to its own devices, attention goes to danger, worries, fears, and bad future outcomes to avoid, while our imagination cooks it up extra nice and hot and scary.

While you want this to come out as the best version of your writing life, and not a silly fantasy, there is no reason you can't have fun with it. You can write it as a book blurb bio, with endorsements chiming in from major muckitymucks in your discipline. You can write it as an Amazon review of your book (you know, where the fan explains both your book and your whole life to potential readers). You can write it as a present tense first-person account, or as a magazine interview, whatever.

Put in the time to have a specific vision with specific details, being sure to harness the power of your attention and creativity and clarity, and then proceed to step two.

STEP TWO

Step two is step two for the purposes of this eBook, but in all other cases it is “Step any time is good.” And this step is a sort of a look back, sort of a look in the present, and it is to ask and answer the question: what has been your growth from before, that is present with you now? What good powers, talents, capacities have been developing, since before, and that are present now? What, in relation to your writing process and abilities, are you glad about? What are you grateful for?

While it is important, in setting priorities, to have a vision of your future so that you know why you are setting these priorities, an exclusive focus on the future goal can be counterproductive to say the least, dysfunctional to say the middle amount, and a betrayal of life itself to say the most.

There are two things that must accompany the setting of a vision for your future:

1. a focus on the day to day habits that will get you there, instead of the goal itself (which I will get to in future steps below).
2. a focus on accomplishment, growth, and gratitude, the subject of step 2 aka “step any time is good.”

So ask yourself a few questions about writing. For me personally, I don't get much of anything from thinking about the actual objects I have made a while ago, like a book or film or whatever. If you can use that stuff, great! But I find that's history... it's more the "past that lives in the present" that is important. This means an acknowledgement of the powers, capacities, capabilities and skills I have developed through those past projects. Knowing that the capacity to get absorbed into writing (which I know from the past experience of writing that book or whatever) or the knowledge that my sentences have an interesting rhythm (which I can see is true even if I am struggling with what my argument is or how to fit in a certain theory), the awareness alighting on these things is important for your momentum.

1. what are you good at in writing?
2. what have you gotten better at?
3. what progress have you made?
4. what are you glad about that happened or that you did?

Now, I know that at times we might be struggling and not be able to answer a question like "what progress have I made"... but

rest assured, if you follow much of the advice in these eBooks, and especially go through the steps in this guide here, you will make the kind of progress you can look back on. So step 2—step any time is good— will be something you can actually do. The point is: DO this acknowledgement of what works, and often! Once you make progress, it is extremely important that you acknowledge that regularly, take it in.

Why? Well one reason is that sooner or later a sole focus of attention on the future can lead to a belief that happiness lies over the rainbow, and that any sacrifice now is worth it for the sake of the then. This is what we are conditioned to believe. And it kind of works, for some people, but only for a while. Some grad students can get by like that, but I bet most of you tenured Professors out there cannot sustain your motivation on simply the belief that if you sacrifice happiness now, you can be happy later. You've done it too many times before, and you know that happiness is not in the future, it's only now.

Setting the big goal is a fine thing to do. After all, we do have this power to scan the attention ahead in our imagination—we should use it. Clarify it and harness this power of ours to project

into the future. But we must use it wisely.

Postponing happiness seems like it will work, to one part of the mind at least, but it is not going to work for long. Now of course the mind is happy to believe the don't-postpone-happiness idea in a single moment, such as when faced between the choices of TV and sitting down to write. But this is not about that. It's about how you relate to and hold your goals. It's about the art of shifting the frame of attention: from writing as suffering for a future happiness goal, to the goal of being happy while writing now. When we sit down to write, it is easy to call up an idea like "I must finish this chapter so that I can be happy in the future" and have that as the goal. And that's partially fine and good. Sometimes you'll hit it and sometimes not. But how important is it to us—meaning how often do we emphasize—to set the goal firmly in mind: "sit down and enjoy myself writing right now?" That should be a goal too. That should be part of the mix. It should feel important. Sometimes you will hit it, and sometimes not—it's not possible to enjoy writing all the time—but there is a sense that it is really important. It's on the front-burner. It is framed in your attention as being the point of this

writing.

Let's just spell it out in all it's obviousness: enrolling happiness into the productive process is a great fuel for writer's momentum and should not be given a minor or non-existent role.

STEP THREE

Once you know your vision, and are willing to hold it skillfully, it's time to get very basic, and start to get clear about how it's gonna have to be, from now on. So step three is about making two lists. The first is your Unshakable and Ultimate Yes List, and the second is your Unwavering and Ultimate No List.

Let's start with **yes**, because there is no word I love more than yes.

So this is simple: with your vision of the ideal Future You in mind, choose 5 things in your day to day life that you are absolutely going to **say yes** to in your life right now. (And hint: if writing isn't one of the 5, then it's not necessary to go any further). So you might say that, absolutely, you will always **say yes** to your

children, or to exercise, or to vegan food gathering and cooking activities, to barbecue rib competition training, or to pets, but you only get 5. So you've got to pick what is really meaningful to you and which fits in with your vision of your future in 5 years. For a creative academic, writing is one of the things that are a priority in life. These are the things you want in your life, that you care about deeply. You are always going to **say yes** to these.

And understand that when we are saying yes to things that are not on this list, **we are saying no to the things that are on our list.**

So it's probably the case that you can think of 5 things that you might habitually be doing, that might be somewhat pleasant, or seem compelling and necessary, but which are not very important to you and take time and energy and attention off of things on the Ultimate 5 list. This might be slightly painful to write down, but do it. Write your Ultimate No list.

It might mean saying no to wandering on Google or Facebook, at least until writing and pets have thoroughly been said yes to. It might mean saying no to requests to be on another committee, or to spend time in certain social circumstances with people who don't share your interests. Whatever it is, these no

things need to diminish, because you identified them as not being important to you.

When you say yes to what doesn't matter to you, you are saying no to what does matter to you. See this fact plainly expressed in your two lists, side by side. The fact is that many of us lead lives dominated by things that are not very important to us, and leave what is important to the side—and that has got change, and it can change.

What matters to you never should dangle helpless at the whim of what is of little consequence to you.

What matters to you should not be at the mercy of what matters to other people around you. Many people around us do not and cannot understand the importance of writing to a creative academic. Even other academics around you may not understand the importance of writing in your life, or are too lost in distraction themselves. Don't expect others to reward you for making writing a priority when it's something they are not clear about themselves.

By contrast, it can be a great, great benefit to associate with others who are making writing a priority.

It's time to draw some lines in the sand, at least in our frame of attention, and being clear about that, start to put it into practice.

So with your vision in mind and ultimate yes and no lists, you can proceed to step three, which is to get clear and detailed about the steps you will take from moment to moment, living out your dreams.

STEP FOUR

Hey, it's your life. Fact is, much of what we covered is already there in your heart. You may not have formulated it before, or specifically trained your attention on it like we have in the preceding two exercises, but now that you have, what you probably found is something that was already there. The first two exercises are really about looking into your self and seeing what is true. Then, through writing, framing it and clarifying it, we have stabilized it.

Now it's time to proceed, to walk the talk, and here it's time again to drill down and get specific. It's your Future You—what are the steps to get there?

This means setting goals, which is an oft-mishandled act these days, mostly due to two things:

1. Not being specific enough about the goals.
2. Not understanding the day-to-day habits that will produce the momentum that takes you to the goal.

Your first goal is to have the right kind of goals. And that means, **specific goals**. Of course we have big things to do and dreams and urges. And ultimately that's what it's all about. But if we only see that, and compare it with our current behavior, then every time our current behavior happens to be less than ideal, the gap is huge. It's awful to behold. We all stare into that abyss sometimes, and despair. When I do it, it's by accident. It's a mistake (it happens). And I urge you with all my heart to see it the same way. This is one of the worst conditions to start holding what I like to call "The Trial of You." The evidence is overwhelming at those moments when the big goal or vague dream is in view and one is evaluating current, less than ideal behavior. The verdict in the trial is inevitable.

But if you are watching a few too many episodes of Walking Dead on Netflix (or if you're like me, watching people on singing

shows having their hopes and dreams crushed in front of the nation), and that is conflicting with your specific goal to, say, write 500 words a day, well: your down 500 words now. You can make it up over the week—just 100 extra words a day for five days. The cops in your head are going to let you off with a warning.

This is very different than the thunderbolts and lightning crashing down on you: “Look at YOU! With popcorn bits stuck to your pajamas, mesmerized by TV and failing at everything while your manuscript lies in shambles, is going to go down in flames, and you’re fiddling around while it all burns.... You’re pathetic!”

I don’t about you, but when the thunderbolts and lighting come down I know what I’m gonna do: get out of that storm by diving right back into the rest of season 3. Long live the Zombie Apocalypse!

Or, to cover our cases here, start getting busy with other people’s business, helping people, get cluttered and involved in duties, etc.

(And no, writing these eBooks doesn’t count— because that’s my project right now).

But when you have specific, even measurable, goals, and your focus is on the day-to-day, then whatever day-to-day fluctuations in

your behavior and output happen they are not major deviations, they are minor matters subject to adjustment.

Of course, it still remains very important to stay on track, and stay accountable. It remains important to actually know how far off track you are on a day-to-day basis, and to know skillful ways to get back.

But thunderbolts and lightning are not the way.

Deadlines and fears, our favorite go-to “resources” are also not the way, though often times we have been conditioned into a pattern where this is the only thing we know. It starts in grad school or earlier—you’re in your class, just starting to get interesting and onto something, then whiz, boom, crash—it’s the end of the semester and all the papers are due. So you crank them out. And do it again, and again, and again.

Then whiz, boom, crash—now you’re not a student anymore. You came down with “ABD” as they say. Or you are teaching. There are deadlines, but they are far away. And what you need more than anything else in this world right now is to work bit-by-bit steadily making progress on your major work of art. But what have you been doing all your life? Cranking it out at the last minute.

Everything you trained for as a writer... it's all no good to you now!

It's just not the way to do it. That way doesn't work. And then we think it is us. We blame ourselves and feel bad about it but the first thing I want to get across to you is: of course it's hard, and it's not you! It's just that all this time in academia, since you started college, you've been forced to train in completely the wrong way for an academic life.

It's not your fault. It's built into the system you just went through. You were simply conditioned into habits that are no longer suiting you.

So what I see is a lot of writers, cranking things out in the last days (while others famously indefinitely postpone the "deadline," something faculty do quite a bit of).

Some of you are dissertation writers or remember the state back in the day. You're stalled, or treading water, getting nowhere, and wondering if you ever are going to get out of being bogged down in inefficacy. At this rate, it will take you ten years, but you only have one more. Or six months.

Ouch. What a state to be in. I know it seems hopeless sometimes, but let me tell you some good news and bad news:

You actually are going to get that beast done. Most do. And how do they do it? They crank it out at the end, when it's way too late. And they can do it because at last minute is what they have been bred and trained to do. So the good news is if you are stuck you will likely get un-stuck at the last minute and save the day.

Even myself, who was a steady writer and I guess did have an 800-page dissertation, finished most of my dissertation in the last three months. And I have seen others do it in a month.

It's horrible to be stewing a long time in ineffective habits. So the "good news" is that for most, when it comes down to the last minute, you'll be able to draw on what you are good at: cranking things out at the last minute. That power will suddenly appear for you because the right conditions are present (i.e. it IS the last minute). You've trained in that power and it will be there for your use. But only at the last minute!

Problem is, when time's up and you hand in your book, article, or dissertation, you will be a little disappointed in it. You'll feel you just got going, and there is so much more you could do and so much more you hoped for. There just wasn't enough time to get it the way you wanted, because you only could get it going at the last minute.

So, if you are worried about when you are going to write that dissertation or get the output done for tenure: don't lose hope based on what's happening now. You have a highly trained last-minute deadline cranking power which may awaken in time.

But that's not good enough, on so many levels. It's not the clear space to realize your creative dreams. It's not a comfortable way to live. It means living in purgatory most of the time. It's also risky, especially when it comes to tenure, when there's that extra stage of publishing which can take, in my field at least, two years to get all the way to print—so what feels like the last minute can be a year or two too late.

And, last but not least, it means disappointment in your creative works.

So I went on a bit about this because in Step 4 here, we are starting to get into the nitty-gritty. Here we are addressing our previous conditioning by inputting counter-conditioning—which is another way of saying learning new, more effective writing habits. It's going against the grain a bit. It can be tough at first to turn the ship around and paddle against the wind. But it's what we have to do, and to make it through to writer's momentum we have got to understand and believe that a dysfunctional habit that was built

through repetition can be undone through precisely the same thing: repetition. We have to build the best new writing habits that we can. And then, it is their power that is filling the sails.

So we can start with taking the attention off of the result that we have to finish by a deadline, and on to setting the right kind of goals that are tied to daily habit.

And the right kind of goals are:

1. specific
2. measurable
3. doable

So Step 4 starts with having a specifically defined goal, measurable and so correlated with time and therefore doable.

Fortunately, as writers our work is measurable. Primarily, we can keep track of how many words we are writing, how many pages, or how much time we are putting into writing and revising. We can also plot out either our work process or the structure of our writing and mark our journey along the way. And measuring here does not mean to maximize. That's the panic cranker attention on measurements. It doesn't really matter if how big or small your

measurable progress markers are if they lead to the goal. Everyone can figure out what is the best rate and way of working. Some delete and revise as they go, some don't. Some are working with an over-exuberance of messy wordage, some are dealing with procrastinating, some with procrastinating, it's all different for all of us. So the point is not to measure to maximize, but to measure to know, and to be specific about your goal.

In fact, maximizing can be counter-productive. It is far better when developing superior writing habits to make sure you are hitting your specific goals. This creates confidence and momentum. This is easy to understand, but difficult to believe. It is hard to believe that writing for 15 minutes a day could be the right goal for you, for now. It could be 30 minutes or an hour, or 2 pages or 5 pages, or 250 words or 1000. Sometimes, when our writing habits are really not working out, the first goal needs to be putting our writing habit on life-support. So the goal might start at 15 minutes of writing a day, or maybe even 10! That's hard to believe, but if you get the repetition and habit worn in a bit that way, this momentum can build up to something bigger. By contrast, if the work habits are not in great health, then setting a daily goal that is too much, yet seems absolutely necessary, can lead to failure to

come even close to the mark and another major wound to the work habits.

Goals should be doable, because you are building momentum, which means superior work habits will be able to do more later and pick up the slack—not from speed=0 as in the deadline crank, but with a running start.

[And just a commercial break here: in case you are feeling this counting thing is a crass, materialistic approach that is counter to creative spontaneity and genius (and even I kind of have traces of that feeling), just know that is a very, very, very common thing among all the great writers in the history of literature—so many greats had or have specific daily goals, and the reality is that it is a huge boon to creative excellence].

So for step 3: get out a piece of paper and write out your specific goals for the time ahead.

Let's say it's one month, or 4 weeks is good because it has four equal parts. When setting the goals, make sure they are specific and measurable, that there are markers and levels.

I advocate Time as the standard. Time works great for both measurement and markers for the academic writer, and here is why I think so.

But first: I have to point out that in my study of creative writers and authors over the years, mostly in literary and popular fiction, it is often word count or pages that is the standard, not time. And there are many advantages to that for anyone. First of which is that it is eminently measurable. And second, that it is identical and coterminous with the actual big goal, which is also to write words after all.

This works great for generating text, especially in fictional genres, in the moving through the first draft story writing stage of the writing.

But sometimes academic writing has huge variations in pacing, and the generative stage, with research, citations, theory, description, interpretation, has more variation than it does for the average fiction writer. Even just physically, the actions can be different. For instance, some sections you are checking historical details, referencing other texts, rummaging through your fieldnotes, quoting theorists and no doubt reading a few pages as you do, or writing anecdotes from memory or making an argument that either you rehearsed many times before or is rolling spontaneously out of you in the moment. It's just quite variable and what you do not want to do is set minimums that you can't live up

to on some days. You want your progress to be repeatable, consistent, successful, and momentum-building.

That's why identifying specified amounts of minimum (or in some cases also maximum) **writing time** works best for academics in most cases.

You could be revising, quoting, summarizing notes, thinking aloud on the page, whatever, and the building of the habit is about making sure that this is happening daily, not falling by the wayside, and it is happening successfully—that is—the time is being spent doing the writing. Some days it's a lot of words, sometimes it's not. But it's going to even out over the long run.

The momentum of regular timed writing practice on a particular project is going to get in-grained. Since much of the barely-usable training in writing that academics have acquired—that is, the cranking it out for deadlines training—has very much to do with a relationship with time, this re-ordering precisely of the relationship with time is what can be quite profitably addressed. In other words, one special side-effect of using timed writing sessions is that it digs a bit directly into our unfortunate habits of dealing with time.

Now, this might bring a bit of a “ship adrift at sea” feeling to some who are focused on word count and output. And it’s fine to use word count instead, especially and all the more so if you have a predictable rhythm to your writing process like a fiction writer might have.

And for some the focus on time may mean actually limiting the time spent writing, not enforcing a minimum. This is, actually a worthy goal in the super hard working writer who is not making progress.

So let’s look at all the cool features in the 15 minutes a day or 1 hour a day model:

You can get your quotes ready first. Preferably, the day before. You can get you daily beats ready. You can get your notes out and thought about. You can do a bit of tinkering the night before, if your problem has been procrasterevising. You can read the night before if it is procrastereading. Whatever is your vice... reading your text over and over, instead of writing... get it out of the way, preferably the night before. Then assert that this 25 minute writing block, or whatever, is for writing and writing alone, with the bare amount of other activities necessary. We could define writing as anything from brainstorming, free-writing,

outlining, and drafting to revising, if it is the appropriate time for revising. In any case, you train yourself to focus on writing for your 30 minutes a day, every day, on and on like that... and it might be uncomfortable at first. It might even be unbearable to only work 30 minutes or 25 or 15. But if you are patient and carefully layer in more short writing periods in the day, with many breaks, you can work up momentum. If you put in the time, day after day, eventually it will turn, and all the deadline cranking, worry-and-fear-based writing habits will come undone and be replaced by something far more effective. Your relationship of writing and time is getting altered for the better, and when that becomes clear to you, there's no going back.

You know what it feels like with the jack-hammer of anxiety, worry and fear on, and you know what it's like with it off. And you will do anything to keep it the way it is now.

Luckily, what it takes to stay in this zone is easy. Just keep repeating the pattern, which is writing in short amounts of time, daily, and not get complacent because you feel so great that it doesn't seem like you need the structure anymore.

The other way is hard. It's hard to crank it out at the deadline, and it's hard to be in the much longer duration of wallowing and despairing state as well. It's just hard all the way around.

By contrast, it is only this transition phase, where one relationship with time is being unconditioned, and its opposite is being conditioned, that is the challenging part.

So to sum up these first steps, as well as add a couple new aspects to them:

Most of our goals are “work harder” “work more often” “write more” or “get this article done,” etc. This is fine to have in the background. But the foreground should be specific goals.

Goals should be defined in writing, and measurable. Luckily for writers this is easy: there's pages, words, sections, and my favorite: time.

Our feelings about writing will improve when we exert ourselves and reach our marks on a daily basis.

When our goals are vague—like write more, work on my book, they are oppressive and likely to only be met through deadline cranking. Instead, divide your work up into small doable steps.

Enjoying ourselves right now should be also be a goal. If it is a difficult goal, well... then it's a difficult goal. Get there little by little. If it's not too hard, then don't take it for granted. Keep the attention framed on enjoying yourself. Repeat it. Check it. It's your best fuel.

Tied to this is the fact that our bigger goals should be intrinsic goals—coming from genuine desires and passions. We covered that in the *Clearing Your Way* eBook, and also by starting here with our 5 year vision, as well as with the goal of present enjoyment. This element of intrinsic motivation, whether strong or weak in the beginning, will be strong in the end, when you have developed writer's momentum.

STEP FIVE

If you are an academic writer then you are a professional writer. It's that plain and simple. And professionals show up to work, because they have to. And we writers should too. To quote, vaguely from memory, Julia Cameron, who is actually mostly on the touchy-feely inner-muse side of writing advice (and who is well worth listening to a bit, as long as you don't mind the personal transformation-type language):

You are a writer, so you,
“suit up, show up, and shut up.”

By which she means, among all the other valuable inner work we might do, there is an important place for the idea that you've just got to do the damn writing. It's your job. Most people need to do a job. Do yours.

Suit up, show up, and shut up... the practical version of which I would put as: schedule in your writing the way you would a class you are teaching or a meeting that's been set. You have to go to these things. I have one today as I am writing this. I have to go there, even though I don't feel like it. Step 5 is to make a writing schedule.

Now, not every writing session we do needs to be on schedule, although most successful writers seem to have kept very regular hours (a majority early hours, it seems). At least, as professional writers, *some* of our writing time should probably be scheduled. And, it should be scheduled in small doses that we know will not send us into a state of horror and dread.

Part two of this fairly simple and straight forward step 5, is learn from experience what is your best times for writing, and try to capitalize on that for all its worth. Like I mentioned, most successful writers who published their writing habits wrote in the morning on a regular basis. But many people simply are not morning people. I know several prolific academic writers who write late at night, and I admire their work very much. For almost all of us, there are certain times of the day when we write best. We can track that.

Step 5 then has two parts—one: schedule writing, and two: learn about scheduling writing, by studying yourself. Use a notebook, computer file, or even excel file maybe, to track how things are going in terms of your output. It might not be exactly how you think—so learn, study yourself. Keep track, keep records, and then schedule your writing based on this knowledge.

Keep an eye on your work, and your feeling of energy, engagement, zest, clarity—when you know a bit about these rhythms don't throw away your best time on grading, schmoozing, email, browsing. Know your magic hour and make sure that goes for writing, if at any way humanly possible. Don't waste your precious magic time!

Treat it with respect. Give it's own schedule in your calendar or routine, and plan it way ahead of time, before other things. That way, you schedule other things around it.

Then show up.

Likewise, start to pick up routines and schedules for other tasks, and get them over all at once so that they do not keep pecking and intruding. Here are some ideas:

Schedule all your helping-other-people meetings together in clusters, at your not-best hours.

Schedule your email work for a certain time of day (not your best), and take care of it all at once, in one session, forever sealed away.

Schedule certain other tasks for other times: reviewing literature, notes, etc.

So, step 5 here may seem a bit overboard about scheduling, and we should go ahead and modify it to suit, but do know that if you make writing a regular habit, like brushing your teeth, in not too long of a time you will sit down to it with about the same amount of dread as brushing your teeth. We will settle into the comfort of our writing habit, once we build it, and regular scheduling has this effect for sure.

STEP SIX

A nice quick one.

Make a “will / so that” statement, write it on something, and post it prominently where you can see every day. And do make a point of reading it.

“I will write for 25 minutes so that I can achieve my goal of finishing the book in August.”

Very simply, after scheduling in your writing, remind yourself that it is part of the big picture of your vision, and that it is an integral cause toward that effect. Be specific and tied down to a simple doable step that will be repeated. It’s specific actions that will get you to your goal.

Fact is, your goal and your vision will only be achieved because of single writing periods. Each one is a step toward the goal. Know that, every time you sit down to write. Look at your will / so that statement, a cause-effect statement. You know why you are doing this. Every time.

STEP SEVEN

Explore your environment, place, space. Discover where you write best, wherever that is, inside or outside the home. And then make that special and marked somehow. I happen to be writing on the kitchen table these days—not very special— but I have a red velvet cloth I put over it that says “writing place” to me (if you’ve seen my writing videos, you’ve seen it. I actually write on that red table). I know some people have a special rock or figurine they put on the Starbucks table when they write. I write with the figurine of the Academic Muse Mare (or Stallion).

Wait a sec... let me just check...

Well, what do you know? Though I bought this at Toys R Us, I am surprised to find it is not absent between the legs but it is in fact a mare.

(well, if it had to be something I suppose, at Toys R Us it would have to be a mare and not a stallion, am I right?)

Back to the point. Make ritual of your space—but don't go overboard. Some people can make arranging the place a big procrastination device. Watch out, you (you know who I'm talking to).

STEP EIGHT

Reward yourself! Give yourself presents. As may be apparent, I am into meditation, so you know I value presents.

Sometimes the reward can be going all crazy lost on Facebook—but only after you have written for the day. Sometimes the reward is a nice dinner or a movie when you have finished a chapter or did a respectable week. Something special to mark the occasion. Don't finish a chapter draft and then immediately look to the next one like, oh crap, the next chapter to start. Take it in! You did it! Not only mentally take it in, but physically, materially take it in with a reward.

STEP NINE

Support your writing energy with deliberate practices that renew and refresh your energy. Now, the secret and most fundamental practice for renewing energy for writers has been known throughout the centuries and I am about to reveal it to you. It is called: the break.

“I’m on a roll” will often override and obscure the break. “I’m pressed, stressed, gotta get to the goal” will often wash the break out of consciousness for hours at a time. “I’m doin great” also will toss the break to the side.

However, the break is your true friend and you should respect it and pay homage to it frequently. If you have not, you have no idea what you are missing.

Atop the foundation of the secret practice of the break, it would be wise to build a specific habit of energy-renewing and refreshing practices. Stretching, meditation, strolling, yoga, dancing, jumping jacks, sitting down on the carpet with small children and doing whatever they decide you will do—whatever it is, you need this to be a professional writer. Work at this. It is vital to your long-term momentum. It is worth putting off some writing for the sake of

much more, and better, writing that will follow as a result of developing some skill at refreshing your energy.

Create emotional and energetic space. Make sure attention isn't divided by phones, intrusions, internet. If you are finding this is difficult, getting away from it all, then listen to that! Try your best to get away. It may be absolutely crucial. You can find a way.

And make the space that you do have, clean. Keep bills, syllabuses, overdue library notices or whatever—out of sight. Clean, clear space in your vision line beyond the screen—try it!

STEP TEN

The best one. Well, I can't pick. They are all— all ten of these steps to the writer's space— the best one.

Step ten is: associate with other writers, particularly those who are also taking steps to come into the writer's space.

Those who don't, again, do not know what they are missing. The fact is that we are social animals and are made to work together. Of course, many of us choose to write because we are somehow drawn to the solitude of it. So that's fine. I am the same

way. But a huge burst in energy comes when writing is felt to be a communal work as well.

Some people feel very isolated in their academic writing. Some don't. Those that feel isolated are lucky, in a way, because they know somehow that they need to get into connection with other people. They feel they are missing something. And will hopefully go find what they are missing.

I, unfortunately, am of the other ilk. I like being alone so much that I cannot feel the isolation side of it. I probably chose writing in part because of the chance it gives to be alone. So, if it weren't for the accident of leading writing classes, I would never have discovered what I was missing. It's great to write together, even if you feel you don't need it. You don't know what you are missing.

Everything is easier together. Even our individual and somewhat private work is easier.

That's why I founded a writing community and why I enjoy so much supporting it in every way I can.

So step 10, the best of an all-best series of steps to the writer's space, is to seek out writing buddies. Critique and exchange groups or feedback partners is a great way to go, and

often groups already exist in our environment, or are easy to start because people understand about feedback and critique.

It is less common that people understand about the value of just sitting down to write with others.

And better yet is if those others know what you are trying to do, and why. Maybe they have similar goals. Maybe you can help each other to stay on track.

Reach out, even if it goes against every fiber of your being, and find other writers and associate with them. There is nothing like other people to keep things top of mind. We care about other people, we just do, without having to try to care. If you are associating with other writers who are also trying to make writing a top priority, it's bound to happen for you. You are naturally going to incline in that direction because so much of our unconscious mind is seeking out that group orientation, naturally. So much of our unconscious mind is primed for caring about others, setting our compass with others, and caring about our social life. If our social life is, in part, a writer's life, we are getting all that natural energy on our side!

We don't have to move the mountain of habit alone— we can get the power of group culture on our side, and then there will be less struggle, plain and simple.

So here come those ten steps again. I hope with all my heart that you do go through them, even as a just an exercise to inaugurate a change: to turn a new leaf and start a new relationship with writing. I wish you all the best!

Yours in words and deeds,

Alan

10 STEPS TO A WRITER'S SPACE

1. Have a future vision
2. Appreciate writing now and have gratitude for your strengths
3. Make your Yes and No list
4. Set goals skillfully: specific, measurable, doable.
5. Schedule your writing and respect your best writing times.
6. Capture your incremental writing step in precise words: “I will... / so that...”
7. Find your writing spot.
8. Rewards and Presents!
9. Learn and practice ways to renew your energy.
10. The power of groups: associate with other writers and get your social dimension on your side, so that you don't have to struggle or do all the enforcement alone. Other writers keep us on track.

For more on how to implement these insights in your writing life, consider joining the Creative Academic Writing Bootcamp.

A session is starting soon at www.academicmuse.org/bootcamp/

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