

Lesson 3 - Fighting the Good Fight

This lesson we are going to talk about getting out of your comfort zone to write and avoiding distractions. Since I am a big advocate of incremental achievement this is a companion lesson of sorts to the last one. There we talked about incremental achievement, one thing every day toward a goal, big or small, and now we are going to talk about keeping your head in the game long term to get to those spectrum (long game) goals. We are going to look at some things that might help you get out of a rut, if you are in one, or help you improve your productivity if you are doing just fine on your own. We are also going to talk a lot about not getting discouraged and ways to fight distraction.

The first thing to realize is changing your routine will be hard, establishing a routine will be hard and sticking to it...you guessed it will be hard. So don't make it worse by being hard on yourself if you slip now and then or are slow getting started. Just because we love doing this does not mean every day is a bed of roses. I have the quote below above my desk. I think it is something that every author whose goal is production has to come to grips with at some point.

“Running a close second [as a writing lesson] was the realization that stopping a piece of work just because it's hard, either emotionally or imaginatively, is a bad idea. Sometimes you have to go on when you don't feel like it, and sometimes you're doing good work when it feels like all you're just managing is to shovel shit from a sitting position.” Stephen King, *On Writing*

When it comes to writing sometimes the issue isn't not having time. The issue is really not being motivated to write once you are there even though you are trying to convince yourself you are. I am not saying this part will apply to all of you. If it does, you will know and read on, if it doesn't scan ahead and pick up where what I am saying starts to apply again.

In a previous lesson we talked about my two minute rule. Try it full bore for two minutes if it works press on. If it doesn't try again later. If you still can't get it to work after a few days, stop and consider what about that task is making you hesitate. Being able to get started is part of it. Another part of it is finding your process. You have to have a process that works, *one that ends with a saleable product*. Unless you are a recreational writer or a hobby writer you MUST end with a saleable finished product no matter what your process is. That should be the first part of your goal, period. It should even come before write a great story. You can rewrite and edit a something into a great story, but you have to have something to edit and rewrite or you just have nothing no matter how you look at it.

Every writer has a process of what works for them. E.L. James talked in interviews about how she wrote *Fifty Shades* on a subway going back and forth to work every day on her phone. I am not sure if I believe that on the whole, but I know some people do quite well with short stint writing. I am not one of them. I need to have a few minutes to collect myself, refocus, remember where I was and then move on. I need quiet and I can't write in a room full of people. I am the quintessential solitary writer. It took me almost a year to figure out I needed to stop fighting it and stop trying to work like this person or that person and do what I needed to do to create product.

The bottom line for all of this is to figure out how you best create *product*, whether it is drafting, editing or proofing. The most important thing is getting it done, whatever it takes. You will find certain things make it easier to concentrate and get you focused more quickly. For me, a big thing is a clean desk. Part of my ritual when I sit down to write is take two minutes (of course) and clear my desk into a neat pile of what I need to do when I am done writing and set it on the floor at my feet under the desk so I can't physically see it. Once I am done writing, I pick up the pile and get after it. If there are things on my desk that need my attention they have to wait until I am done writing, then I am all theirs.

Sometimes seemingly silly things make a difference. I only allow myself to keep water at my desk. I do that so I don't get caught up in trying to make tea or coffee or other things like that before I sit down. I write for two to three hours when I sit down (a couple times

a week, not every day) specifically to write so those things are my reward at the end, not something I allow myself during. I am not saying you can't have goodies to drink or snacks or whatever. I am saying look at the little things that pull your hands off the keys. Take a few days and every time you sit down to write and your hands get ready to come off the keys ask yourself why. Then ask yourself if it really has to be done *right then*. You are only writing for a while, so can it really not wait another half hour?

There are several things you can do before you start trying to write each day to make things easier for you depending on what sort of writer you are. I will talk about Social Media in a while because you have to use it carefully to keep it from being a time suck.

But you *can* use it as long as you use it for good instead of evil. A friend of mine and I are in a group called Word Wars and it has a few hundred people in it. Every night when she sits down to write she clicks on and she has a standing appointment with a few other writers (sometimes I join them) and once they are all online they kick off their nightly writing with a race to a thousand words. When another friend and I are in draft mode we get on FB and open a private chat and do the same thing.

We "sprint" to get rolling then we free write for an hour then sprint again at the end. That runs us both an hour to two hours and we both normally crank out about three to five thousand words. Then there are nights where we both can sleep late in the morning, have a glass of wine handy and start talking smack and those night end up between five and ten thousand words (we don't hit ten often but it *has* happened). Some nights I start a thread and a few of us go for a few hours doing sprints every half hour or short ones every fifteen minutes. Sometimes we go for speed and do first one to a hundred words or first one to five hundred words.

Hopefully, it sounds like fun and it is. When several of my friends and I know we are going to be attending an upcoming meeting or event we start racing for drinks, meals or we have even raced over a summer and the first one to finish their book was treated to a master class at an upcoming conference. We went together of course and the other one bought breakfast, lunch and coffee so it evened out. We make it fun and stay accountable to one another. The reason I say find your process and see *when* you write is because you can find people on social media who you may not know yet that write at

about the same time you do. Make friends with those people and give it a go. Getting out of your regular “writing” social circle, may be surprisingly helpful to get you rolling and focused. Sometimes dealing with people that ONLY have writing in common with you can be helpful. Well my RWA chapter does that you might say. Really? Mine does as well, but I meet so many great people there it is hard not to become friends in real life and talk about writing and other things. Sometimes just writing can good.

I have another pal of mine who does the same thing between four thirty and six thirty every morning. The gals all click on and check in and off they all go. Writing is a lonely endeavor, but with technology becoming what it is, it doesn't have to be *as* lonely.

In general biggest distractions that cut into my students writing time (from my student surveys I give at the end of class occasionally) are the internet being a click away and social media also being a click away. All your friends are most likely RIGHT THERE. I make sure if I am on social media it has to do with my writing or I get OFF social media. It was REALLY hard to do that, especially in the beginning, more on that in a moment. As to the internet, there are sites that can help. My previous students tell me often they just can't seem to stay off it. They click on to research something to do with their medieval romance and the next thing they know it is four hours later and they are watching YouTube learning how to imitate monkey calls in the Brazilian jungle to signal danger to the rest of the troupe.

There are sites that will lock you out of your own internet, on the whole or selectively, for a time you specify. For instance, there is a site called Anti-Social. Freedom and Cold Turkey are others. This article covers several of them,

<http://alternativeto.net/software/antisocial/>. If you search anti-distraction apps you will find several. Remember, be ruthless. As you read up on this, you will see more and more people taking “internet Sabbath's”. They pick one day a week and go without internet. Since I have a young daughter we are trying to teach to actually speak to other people face to face in an intelligent civil manner, we have rules for all family members about phones being turned off and plugged in early in the evening every single day.

Trust me when I say I know how hard it is to do that but think about which is more important. If you are worried about emergency calls put your phone in a room with

someone else and let them come and get you if an emergency call comes in. Some of the programs above are free, others are paid. Research them well and download/purchase at your own risk. I am letting you know they are out there (I used Freedom until I broke my internet habit, but that was a few years ago) whether or not you decide they are right for you is up to you.

Now, I have a sticky that I keep on the top of my monitor. It says “Is this more important than finishing your book or spending time with (daughter’s name here)?” Every single time I get ready to leave my window with my WIP in it, I ask myself if whatever I am going to do is more important than finishing my book or spending time with my kiddo. I am utterly brutal about it. Every time I catch myself with a spare hour that I am thinking of just messing around and wasting, I look at that and I let out a big sigh and go to work or go find my kiddo and spouse.

A few years ago, when I did my assessment to see where my time was going, I wrote down what all I did on the internet. I played Farmville with my cousins back in the Midwest. I looked for recipes that didn’t take long to cook. I looked for life hacks for having a toddler. I would lose focus and instead of refocusing on my work I would go look at Pinterest or some other visually stunning site. I finally had to just stop. I also did “research” on my historical period. I read all sorts of things about it. It all went into my book right? Wrong. I wasted more time studying my period than anything else. As long as I was researching the Regency I didn’t have to feel bad, right? Again, wrong. I had given myself a way to justify not doing the hard work of writing. I know good and well I was researching things that had nothing to do with the story I had in front of me. That research needed to wait.

Don’t get out of your document to do research. When you are on a writing run keep a notebook handy and when a question comes up turn the line bold and red and jot down what you need to look up along with the page number of your manuscript and at the end of the session, when you are tired of sitting there, then go look it up. That will normally keep your work from being interrupted or halted all together and then it will also keep you focused during the research which does not require as much creative juice to complete properly because you are ready to get up and leave, not putter around on the

internet any more than necessary. Making research the last thing in a session was a simple but effective change for me.

When I say I asked myself if what I was doing on the internet was more important than my work in progress that was just the start. I began doing it in all aspects of my life. Was that coffee run to town to get out of the house more important than finishing my book? Was picking up socks more important than my book (we talked about that already)? As I was writing my to-do list and working my schedule for the following day I asked that every time I added something to the list. After I got used to doing it, I improved at cutting the fat from my to-do lists so I had more time to write. Some days it was only a few minutes, other days it was considerably more.

Before we move along, there are some other things on the internet that might be helpful if you like a game (ish) atmosphere for writing. When I am really stuck or working on a new project I like to go use <http://writeordie.com/>. You set your goals and you write. If you stop you get audio prompts like airplanes flying overhead or music starting to play louder. If you don't keep writing the program starts to delete your work a word at a time. It is a bit diabolical but it works. I write. The noises get louder and que you what is coming if you stop but if you are a pressure junkie like me you may find this good fun. It is a paid game (\$20, one time) but if it appeals to you it may be worth the money.

Whatever your process is, the main thing you are training or retraining yourself to do is focus better. In a previous lesson we talked about S.M.A.R.T. goals, make sure those come into play here. Don't say I want to write every day. Say I want to write for one hour every day or I want to write a thousand words or a single chapter each day. To focus properly you will need to know what exactly you want to achieve. *You have to evaluate your priorities and your goals and see where the two meet. They are often not the same thing.*

The reason I hammer on focus and getting rid of distractions so much is because everyone is into multi-tasking these days. Just because you are busy does not mean you are being productive. Also, multi-tasking has been proven on nearly every level to not actually work. Studies show your brain physically can't fully focus on more than one thing at once, and you can't actively "think" about more than seven things even in a

vague way, so what has worked for me is to not multi-task but to have a very clear vision of what order I need to do things in.

Let's take a second and talk about multi-tasking. First, humans were never meant to multi-task. Remember in my bio I told you all I have a degree in communications technology. First, multi-tasking is a computer tech term, not a term to be applied to humans. When computers were first coming into being there was a lot of work put into how to fully utilize the processor and it's unheard of (at the time) power. When a computer runs a function it starts the function, will leave it while it runs in part of the processor and will go run the next function and when the first is done it comes back to it and finishes it. So multi-tasking means the power of the processor goes nearly instantaneously from one task to the next then back to finish the first with as little reorient time as possible.

Multi-tasking, as a computer term, is about doing tasks as quickly as possible in linear order breaking them up without reorient time, NOT about doing tasks simultaneously. This term was never meant to apply to humans. The human brain cannot physically give it's focus to more than one thing at once. After my accident my neurologist confirmed this equivocally. The only place you will find that multi-tasking as a human concept, is in marketing and with companies and authors trying to sell you things. **You cannot multi-task as in doing two things at once. You can make a single task serve more than one function.** Remember when I talked about my school stuff? I could not do all those things or even a few of them at once, but I could make the single task serve several purposes. You can also take the time to plan your day in such a way that (at least at the beginning) you have things in an order that makes sense as far as things smoothly flowing into one another and you not having to double back or waste effort.

When you try to multi-task or get as close as humans think we can, what you are actually doing is a single line of tasks. When you try to do more than one at once, your brain has to reorient every time you jump from one to the other. If you are drinking coffee while reading this for instance, your brain is focused on reading this but when you want to take a drink for a split second your brain will turn away from this and focus on you lifting

your cup, tilting it, taking a drink, and setting it back down. Then you will go back to reading. In that sequence there are two major reorients and a few smaller ones for handling the cup and the liquid. It's just a split second you might say...According to various studies the human brain reorients focus like this four to ten thousand times in a twenty-four hour period. It adds up, it has also been proven the shorter the times of singular focus the harder it is to think deeply and effectively about something.

For me when I started cutting distractions I couldn't exactly place why my output was not only more but higher quality, this was why. The more distractions you cut out the fewer times you reorient your focus allowing you to concentrate more fully and essentially put more of your brain into what you are doing. It will work better on all levels once you get good at recognizing it and focusing on the task at hand. What you are shooting for is a well done list that you can move through from one item to the next quickly and efficiently, not doing two things at once.

The myth of the multi-tasking maniac is a misnomer. You can of course do lots of shallow tasks throughout the day and even do some of them simultaneously but you won't be as effective at either one as if you had given each one your full attention. You can have a ton of things on your to-do list and end the day with very little progress made. That is the most discouraging feeling, at least it was for me. I realized I had developed a misguided sense of pride in my ability to multi-task and complete lots of tasks instead of the important ones. It wasn't doing me or my writing any good to spread myself that thin. The answer was some things had to go (more on that in another lesson on volunteering and networking). Being busy, isn't necessarily being productive which means instead of being the productive person I was trying to give the impression of, I was just mismanaging my time. It was a hard day on the ego when I finally came to accept that. And the things that were always left at the end of the day? The important one's because I was putting off starting them for a whole ton of reasons, mostly if I didn't start it I couldn't fail at it.

Most of us don't have a choice but to multi-task on some levels if we ever want to achieve anything. I have already talked about some positive ways more correct ways to do that so it isn't self-defeating. The key is to make sure that as many of those various

things you are doing as possible all lead back to the goal you are trying to accomplish in a very real and productive way not just keep you busy. This goes for life goals and writing goals. An excellent book on this is *Find Your Focus Zone - An Effective Plan to Defeat Distraction and Overload* by Lucy Jo Palladino, PhD. Another excellent resource is *Driven to Distraction* by Edward Hallowell and John Ratley, both MDs. It is a book on attention deficit disorder that has some excellent coping strategies for avoiding getting distracted. Both are available through most libraries in audio and print format.

Speaking of that place we all go sometimes where we feel busy but aren't accomplishing anything...I want to talk about the concept of a self-licking ice cream cone so you can avoid adding them to your life or allowing them to stay. This is a term that was used often in the intelligence field. A self-licking ice cream cone is a task that it performed because it has always been that way, or was taught to you that way, but it doesn't serve any purpose but to feed itself and does not result in a productive or helpful result. It is normally a classic case of work for work's sake. If you find yourself doing something because it is the norm, what you were taught, or what you have always done and it doesn't REALLY lead to better production *for you*, find a new way to do whatever it is you are doing. Search the internet, hit YouTube or anything along those lines and search "best way to..." You would be surprised how many people have come up with life and work hacks to make things as streamlined and efficient as possible.

Don't reinvent the wheel. Do the searches on the internet and see what people have come up with. The anti-distraction programs are a great example. It works for other things too. If you have a household task that is taking forever and cutting into your writing time look it up and see how other people do it. We talked about laundry in a previous lesson. It doesn't always have to be something so big. I have found ways to be faster and more efficient at all sorts of things (example, best way to hang kids clothes so kids can do it themselves, best way to scrub a toilet without actually scrubbing it, how to set up a fridge so it stays clean, etc.).

Here is another example, I used to take about half an hour to wash my dog's water container two or three times a week. She has one of those dishes with the upside down water bottle in the top (the five gallon kind, she goes through a ton of water). It took

forever because that bottle was a nightmare to clean. I scrubbed and scrubbed, I tried bottle brushes, trimmed down toilet brushes and other things to try to get it clean to no avail. It was important so I did it. Then I got pissed (after YEARS of doing this) and searched it. Sure enough there was a better way.

Now I pour a quarter cup of popcorn kernels in the bottle, add a dollop of dish soap spray in a few cups of really hot water, shake it as hard as I can for two minutes, dump the kernels out in a strainer and rinse it out and done. It is spotless on the inside. It takes five minutes. I learned how to do that on YouTube. There was an half an hour a week back in my column after a ten second internet search. “Easiest way to clean a dog’s water container” sounded dumb when I punched it in, but there it was, less stress and time saved, next....

As you look at your schedules and start nailing down your process, or fine tuning it as the case may be, realize that once you get to someplace where you are happy with your production, the key is maintaining and *protecting* that process. It will be harder to protect that process once you have it in place than it is now. That is because once you start making some time you feel like you have a handle on everything and can relax and waste a little time occasionally. Don’t fall for it. Once you hit that production level you are looking for hold on tight and be brutal.

Time is finite. If you want to bring things into your routine or your process and it still keep it functioning effectively once your established you have to get rid of something else. One obligation in, one out. Preferably more out than in. **Learning how to say NO is the biggest thing that will help you get your production going again or up to a quicker pace.** I will cover this at length in the lesson on networking, but for now, know that NO is your friend, start chatting it up now ;)

I want to touch on procrastination again before we summarize and close today. I have some things that help with procrastination other than the things I already mentioned.

You can blackmail yourself. I mentioned my chicken buying habit when I started working toward a better process. Another option is www.stickk.com. Stick is a site devoted to putting money on the line to get a goal completed. What makes it different is that Stickk requires a referee you have to prove you met your goal to. I have used it

along with some of my friends before when we were all on serious deadlines. If you are up for some alternative motivation this is a great site for it. Take a look and check it out. I can't explain it as well as the site does for itself. It sounds horrible but it is really fun (at least me and my pals thought it was). Basically, you all bet you will make a goal and if you don't you lose your money. If you do you can make money.

Remember in college or high school when you had a big test coming and you knew you were going to need to cram to get a good grade? Every once in a while when I am getting frustrated with my lack of progress I schedule a cram session with the husband's assistance. I will clear my schedule, take a nap for an hour or two when my husband gets home and he watches our daughter, then I get up and put her to bed. After that I get some food ready and in the fridge that can be microwaved or sandwich stuff and make some coffee and have a good old fashioned cram session for half the night or longer if I can stand it.

I write for as long as I can, and as hard as I can. I go into it with a plan and I can come out of a night with as many as ten or twelve thousand words. I don't do it often because even with sleeping in a bit the next day, it takes me a few days to recover. But it works. It is ideal for complex or emotionally difficult parts of books. It also is ideal if you are having a spat of writer's block.

Avoid "analysis paralysis", as in you analyzing your writing as you write. Sometimes you write a scene and then realize it was a bad way to go. That is OK. Remind yourself you are a writer, the only way to know something is wrong or needs work is to get it down and look at it. Your ego needs to learn NO professional writer writes perfect text the first time around. Give yourself permission to write crappy copy. Read that again. I have several students who have told me every time someone tells them that their ego goes, but that's not me, I am gifted and should be able to do just that. You can't, get that out of your head. Even if the copy is perfect you will still need to edit, or have it edited and perfect copy does not necessarily translate into where the story needs to go so rewrites are just a part of what we do. Don't cling so desperately to the hope your copy is perfect that you psych yourself out of the amazing improvements that can be had in editing.

If you have to rewrite something remember you are a writer. You are supposed to do that. You are supposed to write things that suck and then make them better. That is the job. Don't let anyone tell you everything they write comes out perfect the first time around. Give yourself the room to work and create something good, then make it something great. If you don't give yourself that chance you limit yourself and your work.

Avoid "someday" thinking. I will do this someday. Someday I want to do...Why not now? I used to have a whole closet full of projects I wanted to do "someday" and a whole shelf of books I wanted to get to eventually. Then I started looking at my priorities and goals. If I ask myself everyday what is more important, writing this book, spending time with my family, or dragging out a craft project and doing it, for me the answer will always be writing or family because those are the things I love. I felt overwhelmed by the clutter and all those things expectantly sitting there waiting for me to get to them.

I cleaned out that closet. I gave all but two hobbies worth of craft stuff to churches, nursing homes and schools. I sold the expensive stuff on Craigslist in lots so it didn't take long. It was painful, and I hated it when I was doing it, but I am SO glad I did it. It got rid of some of the clutter in my house so cleaning was easier and it took a burden off me because those were tasks I no longer felt obligated to do. Every someday task I got rid of was one less thing I was behind. I kept two hobbies and the associated materials. I am careful to keep to those two hobbies and that is all. I make metal work wind chimes and read. The rest of my time goes to my family and writing. All the other "projects" went. I didn't finish them. I just got rid of the items in a way I didn't feel guilty about. You can't do it all, don't try. Think of stuff like that like a beauty contest, if you line them all up and compare them, is that project every going to win as what you actually want to do with that time? No? Then get rid of it.

A few words on mental clearing...When I did my craft project purge that meant I got rid of things like yarn, quilt scraps, beads, paper crafts, scrapbooks that weren't ever going to get done. It felt amazing so I went with the beauty pageant mentality and started through my house. It took about a year doing a little bit every day or so. I got rid of old clothes that were fine but would never be what I picked to wear that day. I got rid of things I was keeping to make into quilts later. I got rid of my painting and drawing

supplies because I like metal work better. The more I mentally and physically cleared the better I felt and the better I got at clearing everything that wasn't really important or that I would never really get to. However, I was much better at it a year in than I was on day one so realize there is a learning curve there and start small.

Make sure the hobbies you keep *are transitory in nature*. Don't pick something that will result in you having tons of items in your home to move around and clean up. I donate the wind chimes I make to local charities to raffle off so they don't create clutter in my home once they are done and they do some additional good. I have a small set of tools and keep a bin of bits and pieces to work with. Make sure you have something in mind to do with your finished products.

The more clutter you have, the more work it is to keep things clean, which cuts into your writing time. I do the same with books. I donate a ton of books to my local library now. The only books I keep are the ones I am interested in rereading (which is very few, as you might have guessed) and reference books. I feel OK hoarding reference books (as long as they actually apply more than just a few pages) because they don't call to me to read them cover to cover most of the time so I don't feel guilty if they sit there on the shelf. However, there is only one shelf for that and a book must earn its real estate. Whatever you chose, keep it moving in such a way that it doesn't cause you more work in the long run or stress day to day to have something than it is worth.

Avoid going on autopilot. I intentionally change up my schedule a little bit each day (from the day before) so that it feels a bit different and I can look at things with fresh eyes.

Avoid the guilt rut. If you have a task you just can't seem to get to and it is keeping you from making big picture progress, make a plan to power through it or find another way to get that result. Don't let it linger or fester and kill your productivity. Keep in mind if you are working on your process and making changes to give you more time to write and you are trying your best to write then you are doing everything right. Don't get down on yourself because you can't always hit the word count you want or you wrote a chapter three times and it is still not right (as far as you can tell). That is all part and parcel of being a writer and making sure you are also remaining part of other human beings lives

that you coexist with. Try and try hard, but cut yourself some slack when you can look at a situation and know you did the best you could and it just wasn't meant to be that day.

As you start to make some changes in your routine and surroundings remember, your natural response is to continue doing what you are doing. So if you are in a rut, you will want to stay in a rut. If you are being productive you will most likely want to stay productive. Going from rut to productive can be hard so give it time. Also, if part of your process really does work well keep it.

In closing...

To make real changes, ask yourself every time you go to do something (that isn't absolutely necessary), is this more important than my work? Is it more important than my family? Is this ever going to be more important to me than these other five things I want to do? Why is it something I want to do someday but not now? Make things a contest, will this whatever it is ever win the contest, all signs point to no if you are asking to begin with. Start eliminating things that always come out on the losing end of these type of questions then see where you are in six months once the easy stuff is starting to get moved out and eliminated.

Devise a plan, take decisive and immediate action. When you know how to make something work for you, do or fix it at the earliest opportunity. As my father says, "Life is short, time to panic". Make the changes you need to get closer to what you want. That may only be one small thing a day but try for at least one small thing a day.

That will do for a Monday...On Thursday we will talk about priorities and questions to ask yourself to see whether your goals and priorities are intersecting or not.

Have a great week!

Warm Regards,

Merien