

How to Find Time For Your Writing



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Introduction

One of the most frequent questions I get – from blog readers and from coaching clients – is *how do I find more time to write?*

It's not an easy one to answer, even though I've written plenty of articles about time-management. Many traditional time-management tips do apply to writing – but issues of motivation and inspiration don't generally get much of a look-in.

“Time management” is about far more than simply cramming more into your day, and this little ebook is my attempt to share some useful ways to take back control of your time. I've kept it short and simple, and I've given you a quick exercise to try out at the end of each chapter.

Whether you're new to writing or an old hand, you'll find some tips in here that work for you. And even if your actual job involves writing (e.g. you're a freelancer) then you can use this ebook to find time for a personal project – perhaps a free report to encourage traffic to your website, or that novel you've been dreaming of writing.

Good luck!

Ali

My blog www.aliventures.com is updated regularly with new, free, articles about writing, blogging and self-publishing. You can get every article sent straight to your RSS reader or your email inbox if you want – details are in the top of the sidebar (on the right-hand side).

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Chapter 1: Your Writing is Important

How many times have you set your writing aside because you felt that it wasn't important enough?

With a stack of dishes to do, or “real” work to be completed, or friends and family to see, maybe writing feels like an unnecessary self-indulgence. And if you're not yet making any money from your work, it can be tough to feel that the time you're putting in is worthwhile.

Your writing *is* important. It does matter. And it's up to you to make it a priority in your life.

If you want a reminder of why it's so important:

- For many of us, **writing is a form of creative expression**: something deeply fulfilling (though admittedly frustrating at times too).
- Even if you're not being published yet, **every word you write is getting you closer to your goal**. You're building up your writing skills and your writing discipline.
- Your writings – whether they're fiction, memoir, or non-fiction – can be a legacy; **they may well one day survive beyond your own lifetime**.
- And ... you're quite probably a nicer person to be around when you have time to write. ;-)

Don't kid yourself that writing is unimportant or insignificant. It's not. And if *you* treat your writing as something worthwhile, the people around you – friends, family, colleagues – are more likely to respect your writing time too.

Exercise #1:

Why is writing important to you? (Write your answer, in a few sentences or bullet points.)

Chapter 2: Forget About Self-Discipline

There are all sorts of areas in life – writing’s just one of them – where we blame a lack of self-discipline for preventing us from reaching our goals.

I didn’t write anything today. Or this week. I’m just not self-disciplined enough.

I couldn’t resist giving into those cookies. I just have no will-power.

Most experts now agree that self-discipline is overrated. Writing in *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard*, Chip and Dan Heath say:

When people exhaust their self-control, what they’re exhausting are the mental muscles needed to think creatively, to focus, to inhibit their impulses, and to persist in the face of frustration or failure. ... What looks like laziness is often exhaustion. (p12)

What works is the force of habit. Once you’ve established a steady routine for your writing, it’s an awful lot easier to be in the writing mood. Just like brushing your teeth, cooking a meal or taking a shower, writing can become a perfectly normal part of your day.

Your writing won’t go well if you’re constantly trying to force yourself to do it. Most writers feel some initial reluctance to sit down and get started – and you’ll want to push on through that – but if you’re really not in the mood to write, you’ll struggle to produce your best work.

So, for the rest of this book, forget about self-discipline. Think instead about *habit* and about *motivation*.

Exercise #2:

Have you established any successful new habits in the past? (Perhaps exercising regularly or eating healthily.) What helped to get going and to stick with these?

Chapter 3: Where's Your Time Going?

Just think how much easier it'd be to write if you had two extra hours every day. That's actually not so impossible as it sounds.

Do you know where all your time goes? There are probably a few very clear activities taking up big chunks of your day, such as sleeping, working and commuting.

But there are plenty of other things that you spend your time on, and you probably don't have a very clear idea of how long these take:

- Household chores, shopping, cooking...
- Watching television, reading the paper, surfing the net...

When you're trying to find *more* time, the best place to start is by keeping track of your time-situation right now.

So, for at least a couple of days, keep a time log. Write down everything you do from when you get up to when you go to bed. (If you've got a completely non-writing-related day job, you can just count that block of time as "work". If you're a freelancer, a full-time parent, etc, then keep track of all your time.)

You can keep your time log on paper or in a spreadsheet, whatever works for you. I find that it's useful to mark this out into 15 minute intervals.

I can guarantee you that you'll have some surprises when you've finished.

You'll find that some things actually take less time than you think (I always feel like housework takes about three times as long as it really does...) and that some of your time is disappearing on activities that you don't really value.

You might also find that you're doing some things rather inefficiently. Perhaps you end up popping to the shops nearly every day, or you're spending ages cooking each night. With a bit of fore-planning, you might be able to free up a lot of time.

Exercise #3:

If you *had* to find an hour every day for some vital new commitment, what would you cut out?

Chapter 4: Planning Your Writing Sessions

If you set aside a specific time to write, you're *far* more likely to get some writing done. If you simply wait and hope that a nice time-gap will open up (and that you'll be in the mood to write) ... you probably won't end up writing anything at all.

So, it's important to deliberately put aside some time for writing. That doesn't mean finding a whole free day or even a whole afternoon – unless you want to.

Experiment with some different session lengths to find out what suits you. Some writers work well in short bursts: 20 – 30 minutes per day. Others, me included, prefer longer sessions – even if that means that several days go by without any writing.

There are no “rules” here. You might have heard guidelines in the past, like *you should write 1,000 words per day* ... but unless that works for you, forget it. For most busy writers with day jobs, families or other commitments, 1,000 words every day is an overly ambitious target.

If you're not sure where to begin, pick one of these targets:

- 500 words every weekday
- 1,000 words every Saturday and Sunday
- Write for 30 minutes every day
- Write for two hours at the weekend

It's up to you whether you set a target number of words (or pages) or a target time. I usually set myself a word target as it means I can work fast and finish early! But you might find it easier to write for a fixed time. Again, experiment and find out what works for you.

Exercise #4:

Plan out your next three writing sessions. When will you write, and what will your targets be?

Chapter 5: Finding a Place to Write

Finding a good writing *time* goes hand in hand with finding a good writing *place*.

We might wish that we could simply write, regardless of our surroundings – but the truth is that **the right location makes a huge difference to our motivation and concentration levels.**

Some of this is for obvious, fundamentally physical reasons. It's hard to write in a noisy house, or when you're sitting on a busy train, or when you don't have adequate lighting or a good seat.

But location can be important psychologically too. Certain places will have a good writing atmosphere for you. Perhaps:

- You find it easy to sit and focus when you're in a silent library
- You love the hum of a busy coffee shop, where you're surrounded by people yet also able to sit on your own
- You've got a shed in the garden that lets you get away from all the demands in your home – a spouse, kids, chores...
- The desk in the spare bedroom is *your* space – no-one else uses it.

There are probably plenty of different places where you could write. Try out a few until you find what works for you.

It might well be helpful to get away from your usual locations (home, work) and seek out somewhere separate – especially in the early stages of establishing a writing routine. Once you're settled in a library or coffee shop, it's easier to stay motivated to write than if you're at home, surrounded by distractions.

Exercise #5:

This week – today, if you can – try writing in a new location. Record how you found it (e.g. did it feel odd to begin with? Did you get more done than usual?)

Chapter 6: Your Best Time to Write

Not all hours of the day are equal. Sure, each one has sixty minutes – but sometimes you'll be capable of sixty focused minutes, and sometimes you'll barely be able to concentrate for ten.

When it comes to writing time, the *quality* of your time is often more important than the *amount* of time you spend. For instance, I'd rather write for an hour in the morning than for two hours in the evening – I know I'll get more done that way.

You might be a morning lark, a night owl, or something in between. If you're not sure, try writing at different times until you figure out what suits you.

That might mean:

- Getting up half an hour early so you can write before work
- Writing during your lunch hour
- Spending an afternoon writing at the weekend
- Staying up late to write when everyone else is asleep

Obviously, you'll have some constraints on your time due to work hours or other commitments ... but try to experiment as much as you can and figure out when writing comes easily to you.

Exercise #6:

When during the day do you typically feel most energised and focused?
You might have several time slots (e.g. 8 – 10am and 2 – 4pm).

Chapter 7: Starting Your Writing Session

Once you've sat down for a writing session, you'll need to use your time well. Don't get into the habit of sitting at your desk staring into space, or reading blogs, or getting up for another coffee ... this isn't the routine you want to establish!

At the start of your session – or, ideally, beforehand – **figure out what you want to accomplish**. That could be almost anything:

- Write the next 500 words of Chapter Three
- Come up with an idea and an outline for a story for this month's competition in *Writing Magazine*
- Edit the blog post from yesterday
- Write an email newsletter
- Practice writing dialogue, using some exercises

What's important is that you have a clear task (or, if you want, two or three tasks). If your goal is simply to “write something”, you'll probably end up staring at the keyboard or at your notebook for far longer than you need to.

(To mix things up a bit, it can be fun to have an occasional “free” session too, where you simply pick something on a whim and run with it. You might want to find a book of writing prompts to help you get started.)

Exercise #7:

For each of the three writing sessions that you planned in Chapter 4, write down a specific goal.

Chapter 8: During Your Writing Session

Try to stay focused while you're writing. If your attention starts to drift, resist the urge to turn on the television, check your emails or play around on Facebook. (You might even find it helpful to turn off your internet connection...)

When I'm finding it hard to focus, I often set a timer going. That reminds me to stay on track – at least for 15 or 20 minutes.

If you run out of steam and you're not sure where to go next, go back to your plan or outline (if you have one). With fiction, you might like to close your eyes and really visualise the characters and the scene – what are they doing? How do they stand, talk, interact?

With non-fiction, imagine the reader: what questions might they have? Is there anything you haven't covered?

You can write your piece in any order – you don't have to start with Chapter 1 or Introduction and work through to The End. If you get stuck, it's fine to leave a note to yourself along the lines of "come back and add this in" ... just move on and keep writing!

Similarly, try not to get too distracted by looking up missing information. It's all too easy to let a quick Google search turn into a half-hour of surfing. If I'm missing a fact or statistic or some important piece of information, I'll usually just pop a note to myself so that I know to add it in when I'm redrafting.

Exercise #8:

Be prepared for distractions to arise. Decide now how'll you counter the "I'll just take a quick look at Facebook" urge.

Chapter 9: Ending Your Writing Session

Once the word counter hits 500 or the timer goes off, don't down tools *too* quickly.

It's helpful to take a few minutes to:

- **Reflect on how you felt during the writing process** (especially if it was a longish session) – try keeping a writing journal
- **Pick some tasks to tackle during your next session**
- **Mark your achievement in some way** – e.g. put an X on the calendar for achieving your word target
- **Put away any materials that need to be stored.** It's *really* frustrating to be ready to write and realise that you've no idea where your notebook is.

The end of your session is also a great time to back up your work. Save it to a separate disk, email it to yourself, or use an online service like Dropbox to ensure that you've got a copy somewhere other than your hard drive.

After that, you can go grab your well-earned coffee. ;-)

Exercise #9:

Get a notebook (or open up a computer document) that you can use as a writing journal. Record each writing session, and – if you want – add a few notes about how the session went.

Chapter 10: Support From Other Writers

I've left this chapter until last, because although other writers can be a powerful source of inspiration and encouragement, they can also be a distraction from your actual writing.

Time management isn't simply about working effectively and having enough hours in the day: a large part of it is about motivation. Spending time with other writers helps provide this in so many ways:

- They'll help reinforce that what you're doing *is* important and worthwhile.
- A workshop group will want regular pieces of writing from you – a deadline, and an expectant audience, can be extremely motivational!
- Writing at the same time as a friend (even if you're not physically in the same place) can be encouraging – some writers share their word counts on instant messengers or Twitter to stay on track.
- Working towards a big goal is a lot easier – and more fun – when you have company. Across the world, 200,000 people take part in NaNoWriMo (National Novel Writing Month) each November.

So where do you find other writers to hang out with? **Blogs and Twitter are great places to start, as are local writing circles or meetups.** You'll meet plenty of writers at the same level as you on almost any formal class or course (whether that's online or offline).

Reach out to other writers and ask whether they'd like to form a group or just get together occasionally for a writing session in a cafe. Don't wait around for someone else to make the first move – we writers tend to be a little shy, so other people will be grateful that you've taken the initiative.

Exercise #10:

Look for a local writing group or meetup of writers (try www.meetup.com or ask around in your local library or bookshops) ... and put their next meeting in your diary. If you're nervous about going to a workshop group, look for a writing course in your area instead.

Where Next?

Congratulations on making it to the end of this ebook!

If you're looking to take your writing even further, don't forget to check out my blog at www.aliventures.com – I write regular, in-depth articles about writing, self-publishing and blogging.

The blog is totally free – you can even opt to have my latest articles delivered straight to your inbox.

You can also hire me for one-to-one coaching, if you'd like some extra support with your writing. You can find out all about that at www.aliventures.com/coaching

About Ali

I've been a writer since my teens, when I started work on my first novel. I write regularly for many big websites – including writing/blogging sites like Copyblogger, ProBlogger, Daily Blog Tips and Men With Pens, and personal development sites like Dumb Little Man, Pick the Brain and FeelGooder.

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