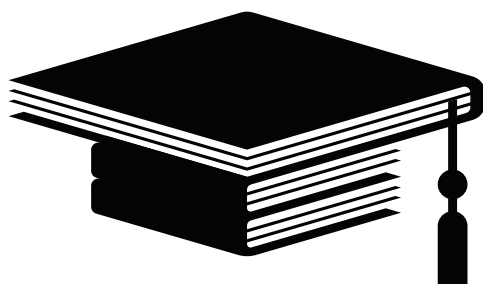


EXISLE ACADEMY



WRITING SPACE & TIME



IT'S TIME TO WRITE!

Recently we ran a mini-competition about writing on Facebook. People had to write about what their 'big concerns' were. Most people wrote about the difficulty of finding time to write — and given that this was being expressed on Facebook the irony was truly apparent. But enough words have been wasted on writing about making the time and space to write that it's understandable this is a common complaint. So let's set things straight. At its heart, writing concerns the who, what, why and how. It is not about the where and when of the writer. Worry about your idea, your plot, your character, your audience and what you are going to share. When you have that figured out, the where and when you do it will follow if you are passionate enough. Hoping for the time and space to write to magically appear *before* you can start writing is putting an obdurate cart before your horse.

WHERE TO WRITE

Of course, it is good to have somewhere nice and comfortable to write from. Everyone will have their tastes and requirements. My father, who wrote bestselling British books about trains, needed to be somewhere undisturbed. Except by the cat. He had locked doors between him and the rest of the household while he thundered away on the old typewriter. On the other hand, I caught up with Bryce Courtenay who seemed happy enough writing in a dark room next to a grimly imposing set of gymnasium machinery. If you visit the Brontë Sisters Museum in Yorkshire you will find a cold hard space where you can almost hear the scratching quills and sense the sheer physicality of their work. Like most serious writers, they were probably too busy to notice their surroundings. Shakespeare reputedly scribbled away in ale houses and theatres, and most great travel writers have scribbled into their notebooks wherever they are. So please do not get obsessed with finding 'just the right space'. Focusing on your writing space is often just a form of procrastination.

If you are taking over a bedroom, the kitchen table, or a chunk of the living area you will need to agree some ground rules with the rest of your home's inhabitants. Especially if they are a cat. Mine resented my teenage attempts at typing and took up position behind the typewriter so she could swat the keys before they landed on the paper. She enjoyed the game. The old Remington typewriter did not. Humans, however, are unlikely to take such direct action and you will need to explain that you need quiet and for how long.

WHEN TO WRITE

As for making the time to write, ask yourself this question: how important is writing to you? When people tell me that 'they don't have time to read' it just says that they make it a low priority. Some writers do not see an immediate consequence if they do not generate some words. If they are writing without a contract to fulfil, a writer can put off producing anything ad infinitum. So, depending on how self-disciplined you are, you might want to set some targets. I know fiction and non-fiction writers who routinely produce around 2000 words per day in a critical writing period. During less productive days we advise a target of no less than 500 words per day. But your critical writing period needs to be scheduled as part of a larger plan of how many words need to be written between a determined start date and your required delivery deadline. We suggest that you do not start to edit and redraft your manuscript until you have completed your first draft. Then allow at least as much time as you allowed for the first draft for your first edit and rewrite. We also suggest that you leave a period of about two weeks between drafts so you can develop some detachment and assess your work more objectively.

A NOTE FOR CHILDREN'S WRITERS

Writers engaged in producing short children's books — i.e. the 500 words or fewer picture books that houses such as EK publish — require a very different approach. Children's writing for the 4–9-year-old age bracket is a very competitive activity. Should you wish to get published by a traditional publisher in this area you must offer something that is truly outstanding. Every nuance, word and thought matters immensely, so the time that fiction and non-fiction writers allocate to producing lots of words needs to be allocated by the children's writer to careful conceptualising. One of the most depressing things we have encountered in the Exisle Academy is when our students, after receiving detailed feedback from one of our highly experienced editors, come back in a day or even less saying 'Done it!'. They clearly have not thought enough about the feedback and how best to implement it in their manuscript. In all kinds of writing, your first draft is likely to be not much more than the framework upon which the final product is eventually built. If you are not giving yourself the necessary time to do this in a careful and considered manner — and we are talking about months of cogitation for children's books — you are unlikely to come up with anything that breaks through to become publishable.

Of course, thinking time doesn't always need to be spent at your desk. But cramming in the necessary thinking alongside your normal life routine — unless, of course, writing becomes your life's routine — is not going to work. So it's imperative that you proactively plan for adequate thinking time.

PLANNING

There is a cliché about failing to plan to be the same as planning to fail. This is true for all forms of serious writing. You will need a plan to include what will be in the book. This might include elements such as the characters, the chapters, the plots, your references, permissions (if required), illustration notes, the contents list, and much more besides. Then you need to plan for the time in which you are going to do all this. Be careful here. Obsessively detailed multi-month or year plans tend to fall victim to even minor unforeseen interruptions or delays. This, in turn, gives rise to negative emotions which can be debilitating. Alternatively, too vague a plan will not provide the structured framework you need to complete the task at a serious enough pace to know that you are a writer (and not just someone who witters on a bit too hard on Facebook).

As you write, the information available to you changes. You might find that contradictions or inconsistencies in your research or plot become apparent when written down. A character might run away from you, or you might decide to assassinate them. You might discover five new books on your subject that are just about to be published. Change, rethinking, adjustment and revision are inevitable, no matter which genre you are writing, but you can and should plan for this. Review and update your planned timetable every week. In the process be kind to yourself. Do not set so hard a target that you are unlikely to meet it. On the other hand, writing does require focus and hard work, so set goals that require you to get on with it. Also be fully aware that if you are writing non-fiction or genre fiction, the idea that you thought was original a few months ago may well have been discovered by other people at a similar time. So if you delay too long, you might be overtaken.