

Battling Procrastination—One Day at a Time

By Sophie Littlefield

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Procrastination isn't a vice unique to writers—but we sure are good at it.

Consider how many people “have been meaning to” write a novel, have been working on the first chapter for months, or the first draft for years, or consistently find that their lives are too busy and their obligations too great to make any progress at all.

Now, consider whether this describes you.

It is entirely possible that writing doesn't matter to you as much as the other activities and duties that compete for your time. This is not a condemnation. If you consistently find yourself ranking writing below other obligations and activities, be honest with yourself about whether this is the right time in your life to write.

If, however, you want to make writing a high priority, but consistently let it slide, you need to change the way you approach the process. And to do so, you need to understand what is getting in your way.

For many of us, the biggest obstacle to our own success is fear. Fear dampens enthusiasm, cripples progress, and plagues many, many fine writers, both newcomers and veterans.

Before I understood the nature of my own fear about writing, I began to notice its physical manifestations. The thought of writing caused the same gut-tightening, pulse-quickening queasiness that I felt when I was about to speak in public or attend a cocktail party where I knew no one.

It didn't make sense to me. I was published in nonfiction. I had received a decent amount of praise and support for my work, and I believed I had a measure of raw talent and potential.

I had several other advantages: a supportive husband, a terrific critique group, and a bit of free time every day that could be devoted to writing. I had no deficiency of story ideas, so “block” was not the problem.

One day I created an exercise for myself to try to understand where the fear was coming from. The exercise went like this:

I'm not afraid of writing, but if I were afraid, three possible reasons would be:

1. -----
2. -----
3. -----

The results stunned me. As soon as I gave myself permission to brainstorm, I wrote this:

1. If I write, I might discover that I'm not any good at it.
2. If I write, I might find that I'm not as good at it as I used to be, and that all my previous success was sheer luck.
3. If I write, I'll have to take responsibility for reaching my own goals, and then I can no longer blame other people and factors for my lack of success.

These were not happy revelations. They did not suggest easy solutions. I wasted some more time resisting, and my output sank even further.

One day, I heard about a program where participants committed to writing one hundred words for one hundred consecutive days. You could write more if you liked, but you didn't have to. And the words didn't even have to be any good.

I realized that this was a challenge I could meet. I wrote one hundred words, buoyed by the knowledge that they were allowed to be terrible. The next day I wrote a hundred more. I kept going, writing a few hundred words some days, sometimes even a thousand. I was working on a story I'd been dabbling at for an appalling four years. I took a deep breath and dug up notes so old they were rimed with dust. I hated every session, I believed in my soul I was writing dreck, but I kept going.

It got easier. Around day fifty it occurred to me that there ought to be something in this exercise for me, a little reward in case all I ended up with was 10,000 words of bad prose. I made my husband promise to take me out for a nice dinner when I got to 100.

That did the trick. If I had a bad day, I'd just think, *Oh well, that's going to be one hell of a nice dinner.*

I also told my critique group what I was doing. I was surprised at how supportive they were. I resisted admitting that I was just writing junk.

One hundred days came and went. Dinner was fabulous. I ordered dessert—I deserved it. I came home and decided to see how much I’d written.

To my astonishment, I had written 87,000 words.

This was more than I’d written in the prior three years—and I’d done it in a little over three *months*.

I began this exercise exactly two years ago. Since then I’ve taken days off—once several weeks when my office was renovated—but I’ve never stopped. I’ve completed two manuscripts and begun a third. I’ve written articles, short stories, and book reviews, and I’ve become a more careful and skilled critiquer.

About eight months ago—253 days, to be exact—one of my dearest writing friends began a similar journey. Though she kindly gives me credit for inspiration, my belief is that she was ready on that day to conquer her own fears. She has an incredible book taking shape, a work that has us all cheering, a project worthy of her considerable skill and imagination.

Could it be your turn?

It’s possible that fear is not your issue. But try the exercise anyway. Then make a deal with yourself.

For me, writing every day is critical. Days off don’t work; they interrupt my flow and send me plummeting back to uncertainty. I’ve had to be creative, writing while sitting on a rock in Yosemite National Park, in the carpool line, in guest rooms, at family holidays, by the pool on vacation, and in subways, airplanes, and bathrooms.

Other writers report success with a variety of strategies. Some take weekends off, or count fifteen minutes of revising or line editing. The key is to make your goals very clear, and to be your own unyielding boss from hell. Not feeling well? Good thing it’s only a hundred words. “Desperate Housewives” is almost on? Guess you’ll miss the first fifteen minutes. Have absolutely nothing to say? Write about your frustration.

Naming your fears and creating a systematic approach to working around them is not easy. It won’t turn you into Nora Roberts or Stephen King. It won’t even cure your procrastination.

I will still do just about anything to avoid sitting down to the computer. My family has the cleanest, fluffiest, most beautifully pressed clothing in the neighborhood because I would much rather do laundry than work.

And yet, every day I eventually run out of excuses. I sit down, fears and all, and I work. I write a hundred words. Sometimes I write more. Sometimes I write so much and so well that I forget that I hate the process.

The fears are losing the battle. More and more, I entertain only doubts, fear's weak cousins. Working every day has shifted my self-identity; now, if anyone asks, I'll answer with conviction: I *am* a writer. Some days a fine one, other days an embattled one, but most definitely and permanently a writer.

Resource: Club100—a Yahoo Group, moderated by Beth Patillo. Visit:

www.bethpatillo.com/id8.html.