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### [Writers' Craft Box](#)

What this section is intended to do:

Give writers suggested hints, resources, and advice.

How to use: Pick and choose what you feel is most helpful and derive inspiration from it- most importantly, **HAVE FUN!**

What a Writers' Craft Box is: Say you're doing an art project and you want to spice it up a bit. You reach into a seemingly bottomless box full of colorful art/craft supplies and choose only the things that speak to you. You take only what you need to feel that you've fully expressed yourself. Then, you go about doing your individual project adding just the right amount of everything you've chosen until you reach a product that suits you completely. So, this is on that concept. Reach in, find the things that inspire you, use the tools that get your writing going and see it as fulfilling your self-expression as



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opposed to following rules.

Writing is art and art is supposed to be fun, relaxing, healing and nurturing. It's all work and it's all play at the same time. A Writers' Craft Box is whatever your imagination needs it to be- a lifeboat, the spark of an idea, a strike of metaphorical lightning, a reminder, or simply the recommendation of a good book. Feel free to sit back and break out the crayons. Coloring outside the lines is heartily encouraged.

Negative Space

By Elizabeth Schwing

What is it about traveling that leaves me lighter? I ask this because I have often wondered why I come back feeling more open and unencumbered. Traveling removes us from our everyday lives and all the accoutrements that go with it. In a word, stuff. I was overwhelmed by all the things that I have allowed to accumulate around me.

Think of a hotel room, a rental home or even a tent. The first word that comes to my mind is clean, but I'm not talking about Clorox Clean-up. It's uncluttered. There is space. There is room to move, live and breathe. It is simple. When I travel to a different climate, I check the weather and take only what I need. That's why I don't even use all the drawers. This is a radical departure from my life. Traveling calls on us to pare down to the essentials and scrap the rest.

What, exactly, is the rest? And why do we collect it and hang onto it?

We call home our sanctuary, but how can it be if we are drowning in a sea of our stuff?

Think about Hurricane Ike. Everyone was stockpiling bottled water, canned goods and batteries so they would be prepared when we lost electricity. The irony is that I think most of us are pretty much “stocked” all the time. Between Costco and Target, buying in bulk is a way of life now. I don’t know about you, but my pantry could outfit a small bed and breakfast. Who really needs 12 rolls of paper towels? We tell ourselves that we are saving money, but the real question is what are we losing? We are losing our space. An artist would call it the negative space on a canvas. It seems like nothing, yet it defines the subject.

Our homes are bulging at the seams with all sorts of gadgets that promise to make life more convenient yet in reality robs us of living. You may be asking, “what’s wrong with having things?” Nothing, until those things start taking over our very lives. For me, I realized that when I travel, I am calmer, more present and more efficient. On the other hand, when I am surrounded by clutter and lack negative space, I lose my focus as well as my motivation. I can’t even start a given task. Maybe that’s part of why vacations are rejuvenating. Just stop by a coffee shop and you’ll find all sorts of people tapping away on their laptops. They could be in their office or home, but I know why they are not there. They are escaping all their stuff so they can work, write, and think in peace.

I decided that I wanted to take this element home with me. I started assessing my belongings. I got rid of over half the clothes in my closet; most of which had not been worn in over a year. I purged my pantry. There were cans with 2005 expiration dates! Now, I just pick up a 4 pack of paper towels when I’m at the grocery store. I filled up an entire dumpster cleaning out my garage. I am slowly, steadily ridding myself of excess. This is an ongoing process that never ends. It is a practice that allows me to live simply and more fully. I also think hard about purchases. I consider how I will store it, how much space it will require and how it will improve my life. I avoid Walgreen’s because it is practically impossible for me to restrain myself from the 2 for 1 specials. I don’t shop at Sam’s. Period. My husband doesn’t even ask me to go with him anymore. I don’t freeze meat I buy on sale either; Ike proved that if I hadn’t used it by that rainy day, I never would.

We have to make peace with ourselves. Paradoxically, letting go of what we

don't need is the biggest gift of all. We restore the negative space our souls require.



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Writer, editor, and writing coach and consultant, Noelle Sterne publishes widely in writers' and mainstream magazines. Articles have appeared in Archetype, Children's Book Insider, Long Ridge Writers eNews, Pure Inspiration, The Write Place At the Write Time, Writer's Digest special issues, Writers' Journal, and The Writer, with additional pieces scheduled for later in 2009 and beyond. A short story about a middle-school boy who discovers his healing powers appears in the Star Stepping Anthology (Wild Child Publishing, June 2008). Based on Ms. Sterne's academic consulting practice, she is completing a psychological-spiritual handbook to help doctoral candidates finish their dissertations (finally). Other book-length projects include a collection of essays for writers, *First You Find Your Desk: Start Writing and Keep Writing with Less Agony and More Joy*. In early 2010 a craft piece will appear in *Writing-World* (online) and an interview with the publisher/editor of *Children's Book Insider* will appear in *Writer's Journal* (hard copy).

#### SEVEN SECRETS TO STIR UP WRITING SLOWDOWNS

by Noelle Sterne

Like many writers, I've struggled with writing blocks of all shapes, sizes, and

durations. I've tried many ways to foil their infinitely devious manifestations. Most didn't work, especially frontal attacks like the following.

At midnight, sizzling with commitment and purest high purpose, I mapped out the next day's writing schedule. Never mind the five primetime hours I just wasted on back-to-back TV movies, three channels' news, and most of the late-night talk shows.. I fired off the sterling schedule I vowed to keep:

5:00 a.m. Immediately at alarm, rise  
5:03 a.m. Shower  
5:15 am. Get coffee  
5:30 a.m. AT DESK, WRITING  
7:30 a.m. Breakfast  
8:00 a.m. BACK TO DESK, WRITING

and on through a glorious six-hour writing day.

When tomorrow came, though, here's the leaden schedule I really kept:

5:00 a.m. Open right eye; reset alarm  
5:30 a.m. Reset alarm  
6:30 a.m. Reset alarm  
8:00 a.m. Stagger up, grope for coffee

and on through another self-condemning day of chores, errands, compulsive kitchen-sink scrubbing, and bill-worrying.

To start the day like this only breeds clouds of guilt. They gather quickly and threaten full-blown storms of self-recrimination and frozen fingers. I realized that such guilt-filled days can become so routine that they stop only with the end of a life. I didn't want it to be mine.

But I also knew, like other writers at different times, that I used my most brilliant creativity to do everything possible to keep from writing, even though it's the thing we say we want to do most in the world.

So instead of directly confronting the dread activity, I realized I had to sneak up on it. The seven suggestions here do just this, without provoking fear of failed promises, staring contests with the blank computer screen, bouts of cleaning frenzy, or any of the other Pandora's file box of writers' ills that clog our creativity. These solutions work whatever your viral strain of block, from full-blown and fevered to slight and sniffing.

If you follow the suggestions in the order given, they will help you slip gently into the activity you've spent your energy avoiding. Each of the ideas, more direct or less, aims at one purpose—to get you to the page and put something down before the end of the new millennium.

#### 1. Take a Moment for Time Management

Your writing will benefit much from thinking a bit about time management. So will a time management book, if you give it the time. I'll own up that I've never been able to finish one, but I've gained a lot by browsing and saved a lot of time.

My browsings have led me to see that we can shape our time, like cookie dough, any way we wish. Of course, we must all devote specific chunks of time to life's maintenance, day jobs, and significant others, but when we do give ourselves writing time, it's ours to mold as we wish.

For example, you can choose specific days of the week to devote exclusively to different writing objectives and tasks—a day for queries only or market research on articles. Or you can decide to have a single objective for the week, maybe to finish your latest essay, poem, or short story. When you've accepted the idea that your writing time is ultimately flexible, you're ready to stir up your writing slowdowns.

#### 2. Prevent Writer Interruptus

Writers generally agree that electronic interruptions are their biggest ravager of time. Here's how not to succumb:

- Turn off your land line phone bell and turn on your answering machine.
- Put your cell phone on vibrate and hide it under three sofa pillows.
- Do not open any email, no matter how much it winks and pings at you.
- Do not look at your text messages, no matter who they're from.
- If you peaked, do not respond to any. Sit on your hands if you must (of course, after a moment, this action can be self-defeating).
- If anyone really needs an immediate response, the police escort will show up at your door.
- When you must return or make calls, group them. This means you set aside a certain block of time just for calls.
- Take into account other people's late arrivals, prolonged coffee breaks, restroom emergencies, extended lunches, and early departures.

These times may considerably narrow your window of caller-tunity, but you'll

at least feel you've got some control. If you do have to leave a message,

declare in a loud, firm voice when you are available, even if it's a week from next Wednesday from 3:06 to 3:22 p.m. Equally firmly request that if others get your machine again, they kindly give you the same information.

### 3. Just Say No Way

Now that you've said No to the phone and its ubiquitous progeny, repeat the word, and mean it, to spouses, partners, relatives, friends, kids, pets, paperwork on your desk, the bandaged kitchen table leg crying piteously to be fixed.

Everything can wait. Look how long it's all waited already, and with no retributive lightning when you've snuck out to the game or that irresistible four-hour mall sale.

### 4. List Your Writing Objectives for the Week

Maybe you feel overwhelmed by all those great ideas kicking around in your head and heart, and even your hard drive? Here's how to harness them. When you list the writing projects you want to aim for, your motivation rekindles and your momentum picks up. The list gives you a map, a guide, a plan of attack. Think of it as a war game: the mission is to defeat your self-defeatism.

Good times to create your Objectives for This Week (OW) list are the previous Friday or Sunday night. Making the list at these times already plants in your mind the seeds of action—and completion.

Create your objectives according to your ways of working. Never mind how Hemingway did it or Dan Brown does it. What do you feel most comfortable with?

- Pages or words written.
- Hours written.
- Research/sections/chapters/topics completed.
- Pieces finished.
- Pieces/queries sent out.
- Any combination of these.

Here's one of my recent lists:

**OBJECTIVES FOR THIS WEEK**



1. 15 hours of writing
2. Finish second draft of “Seven Secrets” (self-explanatory)
3. Start “Sonoma Serenade” (short story: aspiring chef falls in love with clerk at upscale mall culinary store)
4. Finish final edit of “Tiffany Epiphany” (personal essay: aspiring writer confronts inner self buying sterling silver pen)
5. 1-3 queries out by Friday.

Notice several things to help you with your OW. First, for me the 15 hours is ambitious, given my work schedule and commitments. But 3 hours weekdays, usually in the morning, works best, and I often write Saturday mornings too. Second, just seeing the projects listed here keeps them active in my mind. Third, the list gives me choices and variety. The projects vary not only in subject, content, and tone, but also in type of writing, from first draft to final polish. Fourth, with the flexibility of choices, I can decide to devote a whole morning to “Sonoma” or do a section and then switch to “Tiffany” or a query. Fifth, you may choose a similar mode or prefer certain days or hours specifically for certain projects. Experiment.

If you’re working on a book or other large project, you can still divide your OW into sections, subjects, or scenes. Or your entire objective for a given week may be to finish that crucial turning-point chapter. Observing how you best work, you may not want the variety (or, depending on your perspective, fragmentation) of jockeying between pieces or parts.

#### 5. Set Your Daily Goals

With your OW, set your goals for each day. Daily goals give you structure, a beginning, and an end. If you don’t set these mini-goals, what you think you should accomplish in a given week, chunk of hours, or session remains amorphous, leaving you wide open to depression and writing refreeze.

For my daily goals, looking at the OW list, I may allot two hours to “Seven Solutions” and one to “Tiffany.” Or one to query letters and two to “Sonoma.” Or I may immerse myself for the entire time in “Sonoma” and aim for a complete first draft. If you’ve listed your objectives in terms of pages or other units, they can also be easily translated into daily goals.

If you’re working on large project, the daily goal allocations still works, based on your OW. Decide which sections or chapters to concentrate on each day. Of course you can vary them, but however you divide up the time, you’ll be moving toward your objectives.



You may not meet all your Objectives for the Week or even the day. I rarely do. Allow for unexpected turns. I found that the first paragraph of “Sonoma” took a whole hour, and the pesky final “Tiffany” edit took most of the week. But so what? I’m writing, honoring my best efforts, and producing quality work, and meeting objectives.

By making this list and writing even a little, you’ll feel a great leap of movement, accomplishment, and even joy. You’ll see you can make a promise to yourself and keep it. This realization alone is exhilarating and confidence-building, and you’ll transfer these feelings and the unmet OW to next week’s list.

Writing your OW is not only a promise to yourself but also an affirmation of your projects finished. By declaring your objectives this way, you are seeing them done. Take one more step: How will you feel once the current draft is complete and you’ve sent it off? Keep feeling this feeling as you work on your daily goals.

Here’s another way to ensure your success.

#### 6. Start Small

Whatever your daily goals in time and projects, set yourself something manageable. I reached three hours daily (allowing for a skipped occasional day and email frittering) only after years of agonizing and experimenting. Trying all kinds of schedules and times, I first diagnosed myself as a “morning person, then a “night person,” and finally a “no-time-is-good person.” Nothing worked.

Then I realized that the “I’m a \_\_\_\_\_ - person” theory isn’t immutable. True I don’t like talking to people in the morning, but if an editor or agent calls at 8:14 a.m., you’d better believe I’m ready. If a writing deadline looms, I can write at 10:00 p.m., 4:00 a.m., or any time in between. This is not to show off my flexibility but to show you that when something is important, exciting, or threatening enough, we show up.

Nevertheless, I started small, with a half hour a day. The more days I racked up my half hour, the better I felt. And I gradually added small amounts of time and stuck to them.

So set yourself a modest, slightly comfortable amount of minutes, hours, words, pages, paragraphs. By starting small, you’re much more likely to fulfill that sparkling promise of your weekly objectives and daily goals. I never thought I’d get to a whole hour, much less three.

About now, you may be asking, “What about that writer I admire so much? The one who swears on a stack of Stephen Kings that every single day,

Christmas included, he puts in ten undiluted hours or produces eighty pages, whichever comes first.” I guarantee you—he or she too started slow and small and insecure.

Need more resolve? Here are some words of encouragement from others in different fields:

- From a management consultant, “Use the power of short-term goals.”
- From a psychologist, “Better to achieve than grieve.”
- From another psychologist: “Repression leads to depression. The remedy? Expression.”
- From a chef, “One pot, one plot at a time.”
- From a Woody Allen wannabe, “The novel of a thousand pages begins with the first cheese Danish.”

As you absorb these motivational words, or customize them, consider the final secret for stirring up your writing slowdowns.

#### 7. Keep a Writing Log

A writing log can spur you to launch and keep your weekly and daily goals. Maybe the log seems like a lot of work, or another record-keeping annoyance when your unfinished paperwork already threatens to displace the furniture. But if you note the starting and ending times of each writing session, these tiny actions will become a habit and you’ll always be up to date.

Your log can be simple and self-made. For years I’ve used graph paper sheets, one or two for each month, with the following headings (a prototype can also be created on the computer):

MONTH: \_\_\_\_\_

2010

Activities/  
Week  
Month

Date  
From-To  
Hours

Piece  
Subtotal  
Total

I enjoy totaling the hours at the end of a given week, comparing them with last week, and resolving to do better next week. But if you're not as obsessive as I, just go by the month. (Okay, okay, I also keep a "Year Summary" log with every month's totals and add them all up on New Year's Eve.)

Keeping a log offers some fine benefits. As you tally up the dates, times, words, or pages of your sessions, you'll feel a delicious shock seeing that you don't feel as guilty as you thought you would for not writing as much as you thought you should, because you really did write more than you thought you did. I hope this is clear.

Studying your log will also show you your writing patterns and preferences of times and activities. Despite my disclaimer of "I'm a \_\_\_\_\_ person, many of us work better at certain times. For example, how often did you write in the mornings? Did it take five chocolate-caramel-cinnamon lattes with a double shot of whip before you revved up? Did your morning start euphemistically at 11:49 a.m.?"

Or did you find that you wrote most and most effectively during the 2:00 to 4:00 a.m. shift, where you reveled in the blissful blanket of black, secretly gleeful because everyone else was sleeping and you alone were working away, getting ahead of all of them? At 4:15, did you take a quick nap, inexplicably bounding up after twenty minutes and revitalized for the rest of the day?

As you review your log, ask yourself which time period went the smoothest. Revising at reveille? Making notes at noon? Cropping at cocktail hour? First drafting at dusk?

When you look closely at your log, you will see the actual hours you put in on each phase of a piece or project. With this knowledge, you can nudge your goals toward reducing the time.

To illustrate: My usual pattern is a fast and sloppy production I wouldn't even show my mother, who's supposed to love me unconditionally. Nevertheless, I

congratulate myself, like a Tour de France racing star, on the downhill speed of this version. But then I shift gears, brake hard, and pedal laboriously for countless computer miles over bumpy and muddy drafts before reaching anything close to a presentable second, much less final, manuscript.

So, seeing this pattern and the disproportionate times between start and finish, I want to shorten the revising route.

The first step is to declare it: “I’m gonna knock three hours off these rewrites.”

The second step is to wheedle myself with logic: “This piece on male secret lovers of crochet (“Coming out of the Crochet Closet”) doesn’t have to be Balzac, or even Belva Plain,” I tell myself. “Just put down the facts, not a bouquet of forced flowery metaphors. Remember, you’re getting paid only with a gross of complimentary crochet hooks. Move it!”

The third step is to bribe myself: “When you finish this draft/revision/section, you can get back to your novel. You can go to the mall and buy that gilt-edged dictionary of homographic homophones. You can watch four hours of 1970s mystery show reruns.” Whatever works.

So, start and practice these seven solutions. You’ll not only be able to sneak up on your writing but will stride out to meet it face to face, shake hands, and slap it on the back. You’ll probably also think of other solutions that match your preferences, lifestyle, and present situation. And before you can say “Acceptance,” you’ll no longer think of yourself as a slowed-down writer but as a consistently creating one.

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Think of a hotel room, a rental home or even a tent. The first word that comes to my mind is clean, but I'm not talking about Clorox Clean-up. It's uncluttered. There is space. There is room to move, live and breathe. It is simple. When I travel to a different climate, I check the weather and take only what I need. That's why I don't even use all the drawers. This is a radical departure from my life. Traveling calls on us to pare down to the essentials and scrap the rest.

What, exactly, is the rest? And why do we collect it and hang onto it?

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Think about Hurricane Ike. Everyone was stockpiling bottled water, canned goods and batteries so they would be prepared when we lost electricity. The irony is that I think most of us are pretty much “stocked” all the time. Between Costco and Target, buying in bulk is a way of life now. I don’t know about you, but my pantry could outfit a small bed and breakfast. Who really needs 12 rolls of paper towels? We tell ourselves that we are saving money, but the real question is what are we losing? We are losing our space. An artist would call it the negative space on a canvas. It seems like nothing, yet it defines the subject.

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These times may considerably narrow your window of caller-tunity, but you'll

at least feel you've got some control. If you do have to leave a message,

declare in a loud, firm voice when you are available, even if it's a week from next Wednesday from 3:06 to 3:22 p.m. Equally firmly request that if others get your machine again, they kindly give you the same information.

### 3. Just Say No Way

Now that you've said No to the phone and its ubiquitous progeny, repeat the word, and mean it, to spouses, partners, relatives, friends, kids, pets, paperwork on your desk, the bandaged kitchen table leg crying piteously to be fixed.

Everything can wait. Look how long it's all waited already, and with no retributive lightning when you've snuck out to the game or that irresistible four-hour mall sale.

### 4. List Your Writing Objectives for the Week

Maybe you feel overwhelmed by all those great ideas kicking around in your head and heart, and even your hard drive? Here's how to harness them. When you list the writing projects you want to aim for, your motivation rekindles and your momentum picks up. The list gives you a map, a guide, a plan of attack. Think of it as a war game: the mission is to defeat your self-defeatism.

Good times to create your Objectives for This Week (OW) list are the previous Friday or Sunday night. Making the list at these times already plants in your mind the seeds of action—and completion.

Create your objectives according to your ways of working. Never mind how Hemingway did it or Dan Brown does it. What do you feel most comfortable with?

- Pages or words written.
- Hours written.
- Research/sections/chapters/topics completed.
- Pieces finished.
- Pieces/queries sent out.
- Any combination of these.

Here's one of my recent lists:

**OBJECTIVES FOR THIS WEEK**

1. 15 hours of writing
2. Finish second draft of “Seven Secrets” (self-explanatory)
3. Start “Sonoma Serenade” (short story: aspiring chef falls in love with clerk at upscale mall culinary store)
4. Finish final edit of “Tiffany Epiphany” (personal essay: aspiring writer confronts inner self buying sterling silver pen)
5. 1-3 queries out by Friday.

Notice several things to help you with your OW. First, for me the 15 hours is ambitious, given my work schedule and commitments. But 3 hours weekdays, usually in the morning, works best, and I often write Saturday mornings too. Second, just seeing the projects listed here keeps them active in my mind. Third, the list gives me choices and variety. The projects vary not only in subject, content, and tone, but also in type of writing, from first draft to final polish. Fourth, with the flexibility of choices, I can decide to devote a whole morning to “Sonoma” or do a section and then switch to “Tiffany” or a query. Fifth, you may choose a similar mode or prefer certain days or hours specifically for certain projects. Experiment.

If you’re working on a book or other large project, you can still divide your OW into sections, subjects, or scenes. Or your entire objective for a given week may be to finish that crucial turning-point chapter. Observing how you best work, you may not want the variety (or, depending on your perspective, fragmentation) of jockeying between pieces or parts.

#### 5. Set Your Daily Goals

With your OW, set your goals for each day. Daily goals give you structure, a beginning, and an end. If you don’t set these mini-goals, what you think you should accomplish in a given week, chunk of hours, or session remains amorphous, leaving you wide open to depression and writing refreeze.

For my daily goals, looking at the OW list, I may allot two hours to “Seven Solutions” and one to “Tiffany.” Or one to query letters and two to “Sonoma.” Or I may immerse myself for the entire time in “Sonoma” and aim for a complete first draft. If you’ve listed your objectives in terms of pages or other units, they can also be easily translated into daily goals.

If you’re working on large project, the daily goal allocations still works, based on your OW. Decide which sections or chapters to concentrate on each day. Of course you can vary them, but however you divide up the time, you’ll be moving toward your objectives.

You may not meet all your Objectives for the Week or even the day. I rarely do. Allow for unexpected turns. I found that the first paragraph of “Sonoma” took a whole hour, and the pesky final “Tiffany” edit took most of the week. But so what? I’m writing, honoring my best efforts, and producing quality work, and meeting objectives.

By making this list and writing even a little, you’ll feel a great leap of movement, accomplishment, and even joy. You’ll see you can make a promise to yourself and keep it. This realization alone is exhilarating and confidence-building, and you’ll transfer these feelings and the unmet OW to next week’s list.

Writing your OW is not only a promise to yourself but also an affirmation of your projects finished. By declaring your objectives this way, you are seeing them done. Take one more step: How will you feel once the current draft is complete and you’ve sent it off? Keep feeling this feeling as you work on your daily goals.

Here’s another way to ensure your success.

#### 6. Start Small

Whatever your daily goals in time and projects, set yourself something manageable. I reached three hours daily (allowing for a skipped occasional day and email frittering) only after years of agonizing and experimenting. Trying all kinds of schedules and times, I first diagnosed myself as a “morning person, then a “night person,” and finally a “no-time-is-good person.” Nothing worked.

Then I realized that the “I’m a \_\_\_\_\_ - person” theory isn’t immutable. True I don’t like talking to people in the morning, but if an editor or agent calls at 8:14 a.m., you’d better believe I’m ready. If a writing deadline looms, I can write at 10:00 p.m., 4:00 a.m., or any time in between. This is not to show off my flexibility but to show you that when something is important, exciting, or threatening enough, we show up.

Nevertheless, I started small, with a half hour a day. The more days I racked up my half hour, the better I felt. And I gradually added small amounts of time and stuck to them.

So set yourself a modest, slightly comfortable amount of minutes, hours, words, pages, paragraphs. By starting small, you’re much more likely to fulfill that sparkling promise of your weekly objectives and daily goals. I never thought I’d get to a whole hour, much less three.

About now, you may be asking, “What about that writer I admire so much? The one who swears on a stack of Stephen Kings that every single day,

Christmas included, he puts in ten undiluted hours or produces eighty pages, whichever comes first.” I guarantee you—he or she too started slow and small and insecure.

Need more resolve? Here are some words of encouragement from others in different fields:

- From a management consultant, “Use the power of short-term goals.”
- From a psychologist, “Better to achieve than grieve.”
- From another psychologist: “Repression leads to depression. The remedy? Expression.”
- From a chef, “One pot, one plot at a time.”
- From a Woody Allen wannabe, “The novel of a thousand pages begins with the first cheese Danish.”

As you absorb these motivational words, or customize them, consider the final secret for stirring up your writing slowdowns.

#### 7. Keep a Writing Log

A writing log can spur you to launch and keep your weekly and daily goals. Maybe the log seems like a lot of work, or another record-keeping annoyance when your unfinished paperwork already threatens to displace the furniture. But if you note the starting and ending times of each writing session, these tiny actions will become a habit and you’ll always be up to date.

Your log can be simple and self-made. For years I’ve used graph paper sheets, one or two for each month, with the following headings (a prototype can also be created on the computer):

MONTH: \_\_\_\_\_

2010

Activities/  
Week  
Month

Date  
From-To  
Hours



Piece  
Subtotal  
Total

I enjoy totaling the hours at the end of a given week, comparing them with last week, and resolving to do better next week. But if you're not as obsessive as I, just go by the month. (Okay, okay, I also keep a "Year Summary" log with every month's totals and add them all up on New Year's Eve.)

Keeping a log offers some fine benefits. As you tally up the dates, times, words, or pages of your sessions, you'll feel a delicious shock seeing that you don't feel as guilty as you thought you would for not writing as much as you thought you should, because you really did write more than you thought you did. I hope this is clear.

Studying your log will also show you your writing patterns and preferences of times and activities. Despite my disclaimer of "I'm a \_\_\_\_\_ person, many of us work better at certain times. For example, how often did you write in the mornings? Did it take five chocolate-caramel-cinnamon lattes with a double shot of whip before you revved up? Did your morning start euphemistically at 11:49 a.m.?"

Or did you find that you wrote most and most effectively during the 2:00 to 4:00 a.m. shift, where you reveled in the blissful blanket of black, secretly gleeful because everyone else was sleeping and you alone were working away, getting ahead of all of them? At 4:15, did you take a quick nap, inexplicably bounding up after twenty minutes and revitalized for the rest of the day?

As you review your log, ask yourself which time period went the smoothest. Revising at reveille? Making notes at noon? Cropping at cocktail hour? First drafting at dusk?

When you look closely at your log, you will see the actual hours you put in on each phase of a piece or project. With this knowledge, you can nudge your goals toward reducing the time.

To illustrate: My usual pattern is a fast and sloppy production I wouldn't even show my mother, who's supposed to love me unconditionally. Nevertheless, I

congratulate myself, like a Tour de France racing star, on the downhill speed of this version. But then I shift gears, brake hard, and pedal laboriously for countless computer miles over bumpy and muddy drafts before reaching anything close to a presentable second, much less final, manuscript.

So, seeing this pattern and the disproportionate times between start and finish, I want to shorten the revising route.

The first step is to declare it: “I’m gonna knock three hours off these rewrites.”

The second step is to wheedle myself with logic: “This piece on male secret lovers of crochet (“Coming out of the Crochet Closet”) doesn’t have to be Balzac, or even Belva Plain,” I tell myself. “Just put down the facts, not a bouquet of forced flowery metaphors. Remember, you’re getting paid only with a gross of complimentary crochet hooks. Move it!”

The third step is to bribe myself: “When you finish this draft/revision/section, you can get back to your novel. You can go to the mall and buy that gilt-edged dictionary of homographic homophones. You can watch four hours of 1970s mystery show reruns.” Whatever works.

So, start and practice these seven solutions. You’ll not only be able to sneak up on your writing but will stride out to meet it face to face, shake hands, and slap it on the back. You’ll probably also think of other solutions that match your preferences, lifestyle, and present situation. And before you can say “Acceptance,” you’ll no longer think of yourself as a slowed-down writer but as a consistently creating one.

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