

Time Management in 90 Minutes or Less

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The first step in successful time management is creating a work plan. Don't have time to make one, you say? You will free up more time, guaranteed, if you devote a few hours each month to developing an overall plan. But it does take time to manage your time – at first, it will probably take you an hour and a half every week. (Yup, every week.) Hence, the name of this workshop!

The first step in work plan-creation is to break down your goals. Many projects seem overwhelming until they are broken into bite-size pieces. Even the projects that seem daunting – whether it's assembling poems for your first chapbook or applying to the Seattle CityArtist program – can be broken into small steps, and then each step can be placed on a timeline. Think in terms of daily goals, weekly goals, monthly goals, and annual goals. Ask yourself:

- Where do you want to be one year from now?
- Five years from now?
- Ten years from now?

What do you need to do next month to get there? You are the only one who can answer that question. You are – when it comes right down to it – the one who cares most about the answer to that question.

For that reason, **be sure you set goals that are actually under your control** (more or less). For example, set a goal for the number of submissions you will make to literary journals in the next year, rather than for the number of publication credits you will have by the end of that year.

Check in regularly on progress toward your goals. **Don't add anything to your work plan without knowing why you are adding it.** Which goal does it serve? This will help you decide what to cut when you run short on time. (i.e. When push comes to shove, you cut the task that relates to a lower priority goal, rather than the task you least want to complete.)

A work plan is *not* the same thing as a To Do list. A To Do list is far less useful than a well-organized work plan because the former is not in priority order. When tasks are listed in no particular order on a To Do list, it's easy to lose sight of the long-term goals behind the tasks, and too easy to cut out the most difficult task, rather than the lowest priority one.

Keep your work plan where you can see it. Get in the habit of referring to it at the beginning and end of every work day. (This is harder than it sounds.) The key to effective work plan management is *getting in the habit*. This requires commitment and focus, but it *is* possible.

If you really want to delve into successful time management, keep track of how long it takes you to accomplish each task. If you do this for long enough, you will eventually be able to predict, very accurately, how long it will take you to do just about anything.

In addition to carving out the time to transform your To Do list into a true work plan, it is also worth the time required to develop good time-management systems. The upfront investment of time will pay for itself. Here are a few questions to ask yourself as you begin to set up your systems:

- Are your paper files organized and easy to navigate?
- Are your computer files equally logical and navigable? Do you have a recent, complete back up?
- How do you keep track of writing ideas, gems from your journal, opportunities you learn about?

When you begin to set up a writing life work plan, make sure to include all aspects of that life. Each writer's list will be different, but here is a sample:

- Writing time – first draft, revision, polishing
- Giving and receiving feedback on your writing

- Continuing education / professional development
- Submitting your work / getting published
- Funding your work
- Promoting your work
- Reading

Look for small chunks of time in your day-to-day life that you can devote to your writing life.

- You can listen to recorded books while you do the laundry or drive to your day job.
- Always, always have a notebook and pen with you. (Or a digital recorder, if you prefer.)
- Guard your best writing time. (If you are a morning writer, never schedule a breakfast meeting.)

Give yourself whatever you need to keep yourself motivated to face the page, move toward your goals, and supersede the (inevitable) rejection along the way. Use whatever sort of reward you need to reward yourself.

Finally, and most importantly, **make sure your goals are SMART:**

- Specific
- Measurable
- Achievable
- Results-oriented
- Time-bound

Each time you set a goal for your writing life, revise it until it meets these five criteria.

Finally – don't try to do all of this at once! Take control of your time little by little, step by step.

A Few Resources on Goal Setting and Time Management

http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_87.htm

More on SMART goals.

http://www.mindtools.com/pages/main/newMN_HTE.htm

Resources on time management from the “Mind Tools” website.

<http://wishful.fileburst.com/creativetime.pdf>

This free mini-e-book, by Mark McGuinness, is useful for artists just starting to think about time management.

<http://www.businessofdesignonline.com/time-management-resources/>

Lots of links to lots of writing by lots of people who want to help you get lots more done in much less time.

<http://www.43folders.com/>

Merlin Mann has received much attention for his blog/website on how to make time for one's creative work.

Ditzler, Jenny. *Your Best Year Yet! Ten Questions for Making the Next Twelve Months Your Most Successful Ever* (Grand Central, 2000)

Recommended by Washington writer Ruby Murray: “She does a good job of being positive, encouraging review (and letting go of lackluster performance) and explaining why we'd want to use goals and how they move us forward. She encourages balancing the parts of your life and being realistic”

Goodman, Michelle. *My So-Called Freelance Life: How to Survive and Thrive as a Creative Professional for Hire* (Seal Press, 2008)

Focused on freelancing, an excellent follow-up to the most excellent *The Anti-9-to5 Guide*. Though it does not focus specifically on time management, her section on creating a business plan is excellent.
