**Bazooka the Doubt & Begin Writing Today**

**Almost (but not quite) 5 tips for Creating a writing routine you will actually stick to**

So you have a great idea for a novel? Or a series? Or a memoir? Perhaps a place, an experience or a character has you feeling inspired to write? Or you really want to enter a short story competition?

Grand. So why then are you reading this and not writing? Why do you need to be told how to get yourself to your desk (or maybe you have a Roald Dahl-inspired writing hut) in order to make your dream come true?

I’m sure you have a suitcase of excuses in answer to that. But really, if you want to write all you need to do is sit down and write. Sounds easy. And yet it is often astonishingly hard to do that. Believe me I know how hard that can be and how much filing and laundry and WhatsApp messaging can suddenly fill a perfectly good hour that could have been spent on writing. I, like many other writers, know what it’s like to have a duffel bag of excuses, a couple of children and multiple social media accounts that demand my attention, and all justify my lack of writing.

But let’s not be too harsh on ourselves. Having inspiration is a good thing isn’t it? It’s a necessary first step isn’t it? The Big Idea? Ta-dah!

No.

Jack London famously said ‘You can’t wait for inspiration. You have to go after it with a club.’ (If you’ve got to this point, you may have noticed the article is not conforming to the well behaved partly AI-generated format of search engine optimised introduction, keyword-rich subtitled subsections of body text, and an affirming ‘in conclusion’ paragraph. Apologies for the wayward approach. But I promise links to some very useful more conformist and comforting blogs at the end that will tell you how to create a useful writing routine…but only if you can bear with me through my epiphany on the usefulness of pessimism for writers. I hope I don’t lose you there….)

Let’s get back to inspiration. The problem with the Big Idea is that it’s a misleading first step because you should never start writing just because you have a good idea. You should be writing already, you should be constantly on the prowl, always hunting down stories, putting in the hours, having fun with words, getting frustrated with sentences that just aren’t quite what you want, grappling with structure, getting used to not feeling like writing, making peace with the miseray of a story that starts well but fizzles out, but regardless of the struggle, writing anyway. If you have to wait for inspiration, you’ll be lucky to write one story in a lifetime.

What? I can hear you muttering: she must be crazy. Well, writing is crazy. Crazy and wonderful and sometimes miserable and it will drive you to your limits. And those limits will include your limits of self-belief. If you’re reading this and hoping for a cure-all schedule that will solve your tendency to procrastinate, if you’re reading this and not writing then it could well mean that you’re suffering from self doubt (which for writers could also be called pernicious optimism or toxic expectations…read on to find out why).

Everyone is shouting at once now. *It’s not doubt, it’s TIME, you crazy woman. I just don’t have time,* you’re saying. You work, you’ve got children, you’re too tired, you feel lazy, you need to watch Netflix, you have to keep up with Instagram, you’ve got a social life, you’re studying, you’re looking after sick relatives, you’re sick, you’re travelling the world, you’ve just had a baby, you’ve started a new job, you’ve moved countries, you’ve become president, you’re saving the universe … you don’t have TIME. If you had time, you would *of course* be writing. Well, for every drain on your time that you can mention, I bet Google can find a famous author who had the same time drain but managed to fit in writing anyway.

Most writers who get published and many who get famous do their first years of writing while they still have a day job (and probably a family and a bit of a social life along with some housework and sleep when needed). Ater they’re famous, they probably quit that other job and have the luxury of making a living out of writing stories. But even then, they can’t wait for inspiration, they have to go after it with a Bazooka. Publishers are not charity organizations - just because they’ve published you once doesn’t mean you can rest on your laurels; if you want to make a living out of writing you have to keep writing and you’re going to face doubts all the time. Hemingway said, "There is nothing to **writing**. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and **bleed**" - I’d say he was well-versed with the tribulations of getting a story onto the page and certainly didn’t suffer from perncious optimism.

Big ideas quickly become bad ideas after a few doses of self doubt. Why’s that? It’s because huge expectations lead to creative impotency.

Alternatively bad ideas can easily transform into beautiful ideas when you’re turning up regularly to write. Lower expectations and work harder (in other words arrive at your writing desk like a stoic).

Don’t lie to yourself: if you’re not writing you’re doubting and if you’re doubting it may be that you’ve burdened yourself with huge expectations.

After 14 years of working with dozens of debut novelists, I can say without hesitation, that those who give up do so not because of time, but because of doubt, a feeling of failure before even starting. Doubt can make you lazy, exhausted. Doubt eats time. But the first step towards clubbing that pesky, pernicious doubt is acknowledging that it is not time you are lacking but confidence.

I can hear you now smugly saying: *I know I can write. I’m a good writer. People have told me this.*

Maybe you’ve even had some work published and won some writing competitions. But doubt is keeping you from writing more. This kind of doubt is not always about skill, but about repeating success or avoiding disappointment.

Confidence is married to expectations.

Now I’m bringing out my bazooka: Alain de Botton, my favourite philosopher, who says ‘If you expect to succeed you will almost certainly fail.’ I would like to extend his notions on life to writing and to offer that it is useful to think of writing as, to quote Alain de Botton, ‘a deeply troubled and compromised affair’. [You can join the millions of other viewers and watch his speech on the wisdom and power of pessimism on YouTube.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aw1oLtuJOXQ) He suggests starting a project with a sense of gentle pessimism; and to assume that the outcome won’t be great.

OMG, what a relief: you mean my first draft doesn’t have to win the Man Booker Prize? This sounds absurd doesn’t it? But, after more than a decade of teaching creative writing, I cannot tell you how many very erudite and intelligent people punish themselves with outlandish optimism regarding the quality of their first draft (and usually it is the first draft of the first novel they have ever attempted to write). And then there are the slews of writers who get published but believe that their book is going to be an instant best-seller - sheesh, the pressure! Toxic expectations. De Botton says it perfectly when speaking of life: “A society that tells people that they can achieve anything will also be a society that very swiftly develops a problem with self-esteem. If everybody expects to achieve everything, you’re going to get an awful lot of people who are feeling that something’s gone dramatically wrong with their lives.”

Or their manuscripts. Or their debut novels (that are published, but guess what, they’re not bestsellers!) If you, as a writer, begin each project thinking it’s going to be the next Harry Potter or whatever manner of literary glory floats your boat, you are sabotaging your project and your creativity with pernicious optimism and toxic expectations. And this is an oily sludge that makes sticking to a schedule almost impossible. No matter how well-reserached and carefully planned that schedule may be.

So Bazooka the doubt, embrace gentle pessimism and start writing now!

Really all you need to know about the schedule is that if you can fit in an hour or two, three to five times a week, you’ll get your novel, your story or your memoir written as long as you keep turning up at that writing desk.

Earlier,I mentioned sitting at your writing desk like a stoic, well if you watch the [YouTube link to De Botton’s address](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aw1oLtuJOXQ) on pessimism, you will hear him mention Seneca’s morning Premediatio malorum (‘the pre-meditation of evils) : *The wise will start each day with the thought, "Fortune gives us nothing which we can really own."*

The Premediatio malorum is a Stoic daily practice of imagining all the things that could go wrong and prepares for setbacks and so develops resilience and acknowledges that not everything goes smoothly and even if you work hard, sometimes things don’t work out in the way you hope. I suggest that you start each session at your writing desk with an amended mediation for Stoic Writers (we are the ones who keep writing through the doubt). **As you sit down and before you begin to write, imagine everything that could go wrong with your task and with your project. Like Marcus Aurelius (another famous stoic), acknowledge that as you write ‘ today I will be meeting with interference’. Not everything is going to be perfect as you sit down to write. And when you have completed your manuscript and edited it, the publishing process will prove too that the destinies of writers ‘are in a whirl, nothing is stable, nothing is sure, an empire can be overthrown in an hour.** **Reckon on everything, expect everything.**

You’ve been very patient, if you’ve read all the way to here and I did promise some more SEO optimised versions of the scheduling dilemma. So here they are:

<https://writersedit.com/fiction-writing/7-useful-tips-establishing-writing-routine/>

<https://thenovelsmithy.com/writing-schedule-guest/>

<https://www.dabblewriter.com/articles/how-to-start-a-writing-schedule>

To prove it is possible to Bazooka the Doubt, when I write the last full stop here, I am going to start work on a new novel. AND I’m throwing down the gauntlet: I am challenging you to start a brand new project (or re-commit to an old one) and renew your vows to a fresh writing schedule too. I will check in on the comments feature below and I hope you will let me know how it’s going. Once a week, on Friday, for the next six months, I will do a check in too - that way we are accountable to each other. Let’s be productive writers and gentle pessimists together. Let’s give toxic expectations the middle finger. (I bet that’s going to be edited out.)

Good Luck

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