

WRITE YOUR BOOK THIS YEAR

3 SHIFTS TO SUCCESS



Rochelle Melander

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BY ROCHELLE MELANDER

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I've taught, coached and interviewed hundreds of people who want to write a book. My clients come from a variety of professions and need to publish a book for different reasons. They include:

- An entrepreneur who wanted a book to boost her business.
- An educator who needed a book to get tenure.
- A freelance writer who sought to add book writing to her repertoire.

Most of my clients share a common problem: they haven't completed their projects. They had good intentions. A few even had deadlines. But because of procrastination, writer's block, crazy schedules, and myriad other issues—they didn't finish writing their books.

My clients come to me for help because I'm known for meeting crazy deadlines.

I received a fellowship to do my second master's degree. The catch? I had just a year of free tuition, housing and meals. During that 9-month period, I took all of the required classes, worked as a teaching assistant, wrote my 100-plus page master's thesis, and earned extra money babysitting and cleaning houses. Oh yeah, and I was dating!

In 2004, a friend and I were hired to write a book on global travel—in two weeks. And Thanksgiving fell just a few days before our deadline. We researched, wrote and edited the book, turning it in a day early.

Even my book on writing fast, *Write-A-Thon: Write Your Book in 26 Days (and Live to Tell About It)*, was written in just 26 days during National Novel Writing Month.

I never imagined I'd fail to meet a deadline. But I did.

In 2012, during National Novel Writing Month, I set a goal to start and finish a nonfiction book on writing during the month and failed. What happened?

When I examined the month, I noticed that in addition to writing a nonfiction book, I'd also set the goal to complete revisions on my middle grade novel. But that's not all. I also wrote a weekly blog post, edited an issue of a periodical, wrote several other articles on assignment, met with coaching clients, and hosted Thanksgiving. At the end of the month, I'd met my many small deadlines. But while I'd amassed a bunch of words on my nonfiction project, I hadn't finished. And I'd barely touched the middle grade novel. I wanted to blame being too busy, but in the past I'd finished other books while editing and coaching. What happened?

Instead of beating myself up (I wasn't disciplined enough) or blaming the project (it was a difficult book to write), I examined the data: what went wrong? I also reviewed the times when I'd finished a project quickly: what went right? What were the key differences between failing and succeeding? What shifts would I need to make to finish this project?

As I looked at my failed attempt and the many times I'd succeeded, I discovered three key differences. I knew if I made these shifts, employing tools and practices that had helped me succeed in the past, I could complete the book. I made the changes and tried again in January. I finished the book in record time.

What shifts could create such rapid change? Take a look:

- Moving writing from a hobby to a profession
- Changing my focus from multiple projects to a single project
- Switching from working alone to connecting with others

This book will examine each shift, explain why it's necessary for success and present suggestions for how you can make the shift in your own life.

In addition to these big shifts, I've learned several tools and practices that help me stay focused and write. This book will teach you five key practices that will make it possible for you to overcome writing obstacles and increase your productivity.

Ready? Let's go!

SHIFT ONE: MOVING WRITING FROM A HOBBY TO A PROFESSION

A few years ago, I took a painting class at a local bar with my networking group. It cost \$30 and included a canvas, paint and a lesson from the artist who'd created the painting. With music blaring, the young artist shouted instructions into a headset mic. We drank wine and followed along—brushing on the red and then the orange and yellow paint—trying to make our night skies look just like his painting of a city skyline. Afterward, we each took home a painting that looked somewhat like the original (in my case, I'd stress the somewhat.) I loved the experience so much, I took two more classes. Then, I decided it would be cheaper and quieter to paint at home. I bought canvases and paint. But, despite a YouTube tutorial and a bottle of good wine, painting in my dining room wasn't quite as satisfying as painting with friends. I never got around to trying it again. The supplies sit on a shelf in the basement, next to my beading tools and paper-making materials.

Since I was a young girl, I've wanted to write books. Like many writers, I do not earn a full-time income from writing books. Instead, I work full time in and around the profession of writing. I get paid to edit books, write articles, coach writers, and teach. Because of this, it's easy to push aside writing my novel or nonfiction book in favor of endeavors that make money right now. But treating writing as if it were a hobby—something I can stick on a shelf in the basement until I have more free time—decreases the likelihood that I will finish anything, let alone earn my income from writing.

When I treat writing as a profession, I have a better chance of finishing my projects (and someday earning income from them). During the month that I failed to finish my writing project, I did not treat those writing projects as priorities that required both my time and attention. When a client needed me, I set aside my writing. When other tasks seemed more interesting or pressing, I skipped my book-writing sessions. I didn't reschedule the writing sessions. I let them slide. I allowed writing to become a hobby, something I could do when I had more time. But I never had more time.

Let's take a look at what characterizes a profession. An occupation or a career has:

- a set of expectations, competencies, and guidelines
- required education or training both before and during professional life
- regular working hours
- a preferred location for working
- prescribed job duties
- long-term and short-term expectations and goals with deadlines
- a supervisor, boss or client to be accountable to
- rules about how time can and cannot be spent during working hours
- payment in exchange for one's time and/or work product
- colleagues and support staff

Now, think about this. When we treat writing a book like a profession, we don't:

- fail to show up to write, sometimes for months at a time
- miss personal and professional deadlines
- spend scheduled writing time having coffee with friends, checking social media, cleaning the office, or working another job
- write while watching television, monitoring children or texting
- show up to write but put in only a minimal amount of time
- stop writing when it gets difficult or we feel stuck
- skip networking events and conferences

When I talk to clients about this shift—moving writing from a hobby to a profession—they always have the same question: *But how do I earn a living? I have to work!* They say, “I do not make enough money as a writer to treat it as a profession.”

I get that. I face the same challenges every day.

**SUCCESSFUL
WRITERS TREAT WRITING
AS A
PROFESSIONAL
commitment.**

Consider this:

- Most published authors write professionally long before they make a full-time income from writing. *What if you thought of yourself as a professional writer with a day job, like Robert Frost (teacher) or Harper Lee (ticket agent)?*
- Many professions require internships for people new to the career. (E.g., marketing professionals, physicians, and ministers.) During an internship, the professional is required to show up, set and meet work goals, and produce results. *What would it look like to treat your writing as a part-time unpaid internship?*
- Most professions, including writing, require regular continuing education for achieving promotion. *What would change if you decided your writing time was a continuing education class, required for your professional life?*

It's time for a real-life example.

Amanda Hocking, the young Minnesota writer best known for making millions self-publishing paranormal romance novels, changed her life by thinking about writing as more than a passion. According to a 2011 story in the [New York Times](#), “It was January 2009, and Hocking started treating writing as a job.” Before that time, Hocking said it was, “something I always did . . . like playing video games.”

In an [earlier article](#), Hocking talked about how she would come home from working all day at a group home for adults, down a can of Red Bull and then write for another eight hours. After deciding to treat writing as a job, she wrote even when she didn't feel like it. Over the next year, she wrote “at least five or six new novels.”

But Amanda Hocking did more than dedicate additional time to writing her novels. She also began to think about writing as a business. Hocking considered what [type of books](#) might succeed in the market:

“After studying bookstore shelves and researching the industry to see what was published, as well as reading lots of Y.A. novels, Hocking figured out that romance was an evergreen when it came to popularity, but that paranormal elements really helped books take off. *My Blood Approves* and its sequels emerged from this recognition.”

When Amanda Hocking treated writing as a job, she took these key steps:

- She researched the market, reviewing records in the publishing industry to discover what would sell.
- She wrote on a regular schedule, usually after a day of work.
- She wrote even when she did not feel like it.

This attitude toward writing made it possible for Hocking to finish five or six books in a year and pursue self-publishing.

In the fall of 2011, I set the goal of writing a middle grade novel during National Novel Writing Month. It was a crazy goal. *Write-A-Thon*, my NaNoWriMo guide, had just been released by Writer's Digest Books. I was speaking at least once a week, blogging every day, and—oh yeah—there was hosting Thanksgiving to think about. But because I'd written a book about NaNoWriMo, I felt like I also needed to take on the challenge. That attitude—this is part of my profession as an advocate for NaNoWriMo—helped me squeeze in twenty minutes of novel writing on even the busiest days.

IF YOU THOUGHT OF
WRITING A BOOK AS
YOUR JOB,
what changes
WOULD YOU MAKE?

What might change if you thought of writing a book as your job? What if you took this amazing passion of yours and treated it like a continuing education project or an internship, something you could grow into a paying gig? You might:

- Set daily and weekly writing goals.
- Create a plan and follow it to meet your goals.
- Find a partner or coach to help you stay accountable.
- Schedule time to write and track your progress.
- Honor that time with your complete focus and attention.
- Protect writing time from interruptions like phone calls, coffee dates, social media, and other tasks.
- Receive professional training or mentoring when necessary.
- Seek to be paid for work completed, through a book contract or some other arrangement.

Not every successful professional writer has the freedom and time to write from 9 to 5, five days a week. Many of us have day jobs. Others juggle writing with raising children, caring for elderly parents, keeping up a house, tending to animals, and handling countless other commitments. As I've studied the habits of professional writers and worked with clients over the years, I've seen that the professional writing life can take many forms.

- One novelist with a day job writes his books in long hand on the train to and from work each day.
- A parent with five young children writes her books right before bed each night, revising the raw pages during the children's naps the next day.
- A mystery writer with a full time job writes his books at a coffee shop every Saturday.

MAKING THE SHIFT

Successful writers share a common trait: they treat their daily writing practice as a professional commitment. Whether they write for ten minutes or two hours a day, they regularly dedicate time and attention to writing. In other words, they live the life of a professional writer long before they are paid like one.

Once you make the first shift—from thinking of writing as a hobby to treating it like your profession, you'll feel the difference in your attitude. You'll write every free second you can. You'll learn more about the craft. You'll connect with other writers. In time, you'll have experience and the credentials of a professional writer. And most importantly, you'll commit to finishing your book!

Consider this: If you thought of writing as your profession, what changes would you make in your daily life?

SHIFT TWO: CHANGING MY FOCUS FROM MULTIPLE PROJECTS TO A SINGLE PROJECT

Or as I like to say, shifting from being a project polygamist to a serial monogamist.

Most writers I work with struggle with having too many good ideas and not enough time to devote to each of them. They agonize over all of the choices: Would it be better to do this book or that book? Which would have a better chance of selling, be easier to write, be more fun to dig into, fit with life right now and so forth? They end up spending time worrying over which project to choose rather than writing! If we want to write a book this year, we'll need to choose one project to work on and set aside the others.

I struggled to finish my book during National Novel Writing Month because I had just one small slot to write and tried to use it to complete many writing and editing projects. I was writing a nonfiction book on writing, blogging about NaNo, revising my novel, editing a periodical, and writing two articles on assignment. I had so many goals, I couldn't focus well on any of them. No wonder I was having difficulty finishing the book.

When I look back to my most productive writing months, I notice one thing: I dedicated my writing time to a single project. During National Novel Writing Month in 2009, when I wrote *Write-A-Thon*, I had all of the challenges I usually face: working full time as a coach and editor, parenting young children, and attending to the tasks of daily life. Still, I set aside 30-60 minutes each day to write, and I dedicated that time to *Write-A-Thon*. I didn't try to outline a novel or revise an article or create a new class for my clients. My only writing goal that month was this: write 1600 words each day about writing fast.

But I'm not the only one who has discovered this:

Bestselling romance author Joan Johnston said in an [interview](#), *"I only write one book at a time. I tried doing two once, a historical and a contemporary, but the contemporary characters started speaking with a western twang."*

Bestselling author [Melody Carlson](#) has written more than 200 books and sold more than five million copies of her books. When asked how she does it, she said: “One book at a time. Just like so many other things in life, one step at a time, one day at a time, this writing career happened one book at a time for me. And it continues to do so.”

In *Write-A-Thon*, I wrote:

I once worked with a marathon runner who got so inspired during her morning run that she had developed a long list of book ideas. Given her full time job and her running schedule, she didn’t know which project to squeeze into the remaining daylight hours. For several months she tried to juggle three book-writing projects, a writing assignment for a client, and her full time job. One day I said to her, “You can run only one marathon at a time.” Something clicked for her; she made a decision to work on one book. The rest she put into her someday file, knowing that some day she would be choosing those races.

I fully believe that we can run only one race at a time or write one book at a time. But I often hear people say: “But I have so many ideas! How can I work on just one book? What if I get bored? What if I get stuck? What if I can’t sell it?”

You cannot sell something you haven’t finished either. Working on one project at a time will guarantee that you have a fighting chance of finishing it.

**I FULLY BELIEVE
THAT WE CAN RUN
ONLY ONE RACE AT A TIME
OR WRITE
one book at a time**

Let’s address the common criticisms about working on a single book at a time:

But I have so many ideas! How do I choose just one?

Of course you do—it’s your job to dream up new books to help, entertain or terrify people. Keep an idea file to hold all of your aha moments. When you choose your single project to write, you will have even more ideas. (Ideas beget ideas.) Keep that idea file open when you write. Jot down every random idea and thought, but keep working on your chosen project.

When you have an idea that grows into a potential project, create a project binder, shelf or virtual folder to collect research, resources, and ideas. But collecting is not writing. It's simply setting aside information for a future project.

Before you choose your project, take a look at the information you've collected. For me, the best projects have all three of the following elements: I'm passionate about the project (*I could think about this for hours!*), there is a market for it (*I know people need this!*), and I have enough ideas to fill a book (*There's so much good stuff here!*).

What if I get bored? What if I get stuck? With two projects, I can always write something!

When I get bored or stuck, I am very tempted to stop writing and play word games, chat on Facebook or even clean the house. But I've discovered that if I stick with the project and take a simple renewing break—like folding towels, stretching, or walking to the store—I'm able to push through writing block and move forward.

When a short break doesn't work, I spend time on another aspect of the project—researching publishers, putting together a bibliography, reviewing the narrative thread, or attending to other book-related tasks. With the extra time, my subconscious mind usually solves the problem, and I keep writing.

In the midst of it all, I remember that getting bored and feeling stuck are just parts of the writing process. All writers stumble over obstacles. When we face a block and overcome it, we learn something. When we overcome one obstacle, we know we can overcome the next one. The practice of writing even when we feel bored or stuck builds strength. Enormous obstacles become pesky little problems to solve, and we know how to do that.

What if I spend all this time writing this book and can't sell it?

Most writers fear having a box (or hard drive) filled with finished, unsellable books. We worry that we are going to waste a whole bunch of time on a project that no one will buy.

Writing is always a risk. Writing a book is a business venture, just like opening a restaurant. You can create it, but you'll also need to sell it. You can protect yourself by doing market research

before setting aside time for a project. Talk to booksellers, ask friends, visit the library and bookstore, and research the idea online. Convince yourself that there is a market for this book.

Once you've done your research and feel confident you can sell the book, you need to take the risk. Jump in and write! You won't be able to sell the project if you don't develop the book proposal or write the novel. At some point you will have to leap.

All that said, when I talk about writing one project at a time, I mean one book project. If you write full time, you'll still be blogging and writing short articles. You'll also be keeping up with social media and all of the other things writers do—answering emails, submitting queries and researching the market. If you don't write full time—if you have a day job—then this might be a time to slow down or take a break from other writing and social commitments.

Let me use an exercise analogy for this. Think of your book as your marathon training. Consider your blogging, article writing or social media time as cross training—lifting weights, yoga, and biking. The shorter projects should help to develop your other muscles and protect you from injury or burnout.

But remember one of the fundamental rules of marathon training: honor your rest days. Every long run is followed by a rest day. Cross training and easier runs should be fun, not grueling work. To translate that to writing: Take time to rest. Limit your short projects to ones that are fun and easy.

And don't forget, when you are writing one project, you probably have several “on the back burners.” In *Walking on Water*, Madeleine L'Engle said it like this:

“When I start working on a book, which is usually several years and several books before I start to write it, I am somewhat like a French peasant cook. There are several pots on the back of the stove, and as I go by during a day's work, I drop a carrot in one, an onion in another, a chunk of meat in another. When it comes time to prepare the meal, I take the pot which is most nearly full and bring it to the front of the stove.

“So it is with writing. There are several pots on those back burners. An idea for a scene goes into one, a character into another, a description of a tree in the fog into another. When it comes time to write, I bring forward the pot which has the most in it.” . . . (179)

IF YOU COULD WRITE
JUST ONE BOOK
THIS YEAR,
what would it be?

MAKING THE SHIFT

Successful authors write one book at a time. Even writers who complete multiple books a year do them in quick succession, one after another. That doesn't mean that they forget about all the other books in their head—they keep notes and files on all of their ideas, stirring the pots on the back burners.

Think of it this way. By the time you're finished writing your current book, you'll have enough ideas in your file to move right away to one of your other projects, and you won't have to wait for your next book idea!

Consider this: If you could write just one book this year, what project would you choose?

SHIFT THREE: SWITCHING FROM WORKING ALONE TO CONNECTING WITH OTHERS

I've worked for many years as an editor and writing coach. I've taught at conferences and attended many others. I see the value in connecting with other writers and have worked to do this over the years.

During National Novel Writing Month in 2009, I wrote early every morning. I looked forward to going online at noon, recording my word count, and then chatting with other writers online. Sometimes we'd do writing sprints—writing fast for fifteen minutes at a time. I also looked forward to seeing my NaNo friends in town. We commiserated with each other about trying to write so many words fast. After NaNo was over, I missed connecting with so many people who were involved in similar work.

But the year I failed at NaNoWriMo, I stopped connecting with other writers. On many days, I didn't meet my word count—so when I went online, I avoided writing sites. Why would I want to see that other writers were succeeding when I was failing miserably? It frustrated me to watch their word counts grow while mine stayed stagnant. Because I had so much other work to do that month, I took fewer social breaks. I stayed away from NaNo gatherings, cancelled coffee meetings and stuck close to home. But that meant I was missing out on one of the things I needed: the support of other writers.

One of my day jobs showed me the value of connecting with others. Over the past six years, I've coached many groups of professionals around personal and professional wellness. I've watched my clients set and achieve wellness goals with the help of their small groups. I noticed that the people who succeeded at exercising daily, eating better or spending less money belonged to small groups that connected regularly.

But I also noticed this: when people faced great challenges in their lives and had failed to achieve their wellness goals, connecting with their group often helped them move forward. The group offered them support, encouragement and helpful ideas for overcoming obstacles.

Wow!

This experience convinced me that although we must write alone, we also need the support of others.

According to authors Ted Kooser and Steve Cox in their book, *Writing Brave and Free*: When Stephen King was in high school, the editor of the local newspaper advised him to write with the door closed, rewrite with the door open.

For me, writing with the door closed has meant honoring my daily writing time as alone time. I can't write and socialize at the same time. I need to keep those two activities separate. It has also meant that I do not share my work in progress with anyone until I've finished it. When I socialize with other writers during a big project, we talk about the process of writing and not the content. Once the book is done, I can open the door. At that point, it's possible to invite trusted colleagues to read and comment on the work.

But other writers don't keep such a strong boundary between writing and connecting. Some of my colleagues and clients like to write in coffee shops with other writers, challenging each other to writing sprints and reading passages to each other as they go. Several of my clients share early drafts of chapters with me during the writing process, asking for comments about their content to keep them on the right track. There's not just one right way to mix writing and connecting.

Writers can find additional support and information from critique groups. Many writers attribute their success to meeting with other writers to read and review each other's work. In one Portland writing group, they've celebrated each other's success many times over. Their ranks include several published authors, many with bestsellers under their belts: Cheryl Strayed (*Wild*), Chuck Palahniuk (*Fight Club*), Chelsea Cain (*One Kick*), Diana Page Jordan (journalist), Mary Wysong-Haeri (memoirist), Monica Drake (*Clown Girl*), Susie Vitelo (*The Empress Chronicles*), and Lydia Yuknavitch (*The Small Backs of Children*). But these writers didn't start out as bestselling authors. They started out like all of us do... as beginners. [In the article](#), Cain is quoted as saying, "I knew nothing about writing fiction (before joining the group). I was not sure I could be published at all, definitely not at the level I did. Chuck and Suzy, in particular, gave me a master class in writing fiction."

WHY SUFFER alone

WHEN YOU CAN GET HELP
FROM WRITERS WHO HAVE
WALKED THE PATH
AHEAD OF YOU?

In the years I didn't have a critique group, I met individually with writing friends for encouragement and support. For example, a writing colleague and I regularly meet for coffee to talk about current writing projects. At one meeting, we both were struggling to finish projects. We challenged each other to finish our current manuscripts by the end of the month. When we hit the deadline, we met and exchanged manuscripts. After reading each other's work, we met to offer each other critique and advice. That arrangement made it possible for me to finish revising my novel for children quickly. Why? I knew that I had a deadline to meet. And I had someone looking forward to receiving my book.

But connecting for success does not have to be done with other writers or a writing critique group. Mary Pipher participated in an activist group as part of her plan to finish her most recent book, *The Green Boat*, which is about environmental issues. In an [interview](#) with *Boulder Weekly*, she said: "One of the things that really helped me write the book was at the same time I was part of a group that I helped form that was actually working very hard on an environmental action. So I'd spend my mornings in my study as I always have as a writer ... and then I did a lot of planning and getting together with other people to talk about events and so on in my free time."

What might connecting for success look like? Here are some ways to connect with other writers:

- Connect regularly with friends who write. If you like writing with others, set up in person write-ins at libraries or coffee shops. Meet to exchange ideas, tips and manuscripts. Set goals and provide accountability for each other.
- Attend conferences to learn about writing and publishing. Conferences are also a great place to meet and pitch to both agents and editors.
- Join a critique group.
- Take a class online or at a local University extension.

But don't stop there! Connecting with success can also include meeting with friends, colleagues and professional support persons. Over the past five years, I've had a mastermind partnership with a local entrepreneur. In a mastermind partnership or group, members meet to share goals, provide support and information, and hold each other accountable.

When my mastermind partner moved to a different city, we continued meeting monthly on the telephone. We both credit this partnership with our ability to finish projects—personal and professional. Here are some ways to receive additional support from others:

- Form an accountability partnership or group
- Hire a coach, therapist, editor or other partner to support you
- Find support at your local faith community or another cultural group
- Create a research and design team to test out ideas
- Create a group of beta readers who will read your work when you're finished or as you go
- Participate in an online site of writers and readers, like Wattpad
- Join a networking group of authors in your genre (e.g., Nonfiction Authors Association, Romance Writers of America, Mystery Writers of America)

MAKING THE SHIFT

Successful authors connect with other writers. It makes writing more fun! In addition, other writers can offer support and guidance during the revising, publishing and marketing process. As the old Swedish proverb goes: "Shared joy is a double joy; shared sorrow is half a sorrow."

WHO WILL YOU
PARTNER WITH
TO BOOST
your writing skills?

Think of it this way—why suffer alone when you can get help from writers who've walked the path ahead of you? Kooser and Cox provide a good analogy for connecting with other writers: "Writing can be like folding a banquet-sized tablecloth; you can do it yourself, but it's a lot easier when you can find somebody to help." (p. 118)

Consider this: Who will you partner with to boost your writing life?

REVIEWING THE SHIFTS

If you want to write a book this year, you need to make three shifts:

- Moving writing from a hobby to a profession. Instead of fitting in writing like you might cycling or scrapbooking, schedule time to write. If you thought of writing as your profession, what changes would you make in your daily life?
- Changing your focus from multiple projects to a single project. Instead of trying to complete more than one book, create a priority list, choose the most promising or pressing project, and dedicate your time to it until it's finished. If you could write just one book this year, what project would you choose?
- Switching from working alone to connecting with others. Instead of working independently, create a network of support to help you write your book. Who will you partner with to boost your writing life?

For me, the shifts meant that I wrote more quickly. After finishing the book on writing and then spending the next month revising the children's novel, I've used this framework to write multiple books. But the benefits of making these shifts went beyond increased productivity.

After I began treating writing as a profession, I worried less about dedicating time to writing books I couldn't guarantee would sell. I did my market research and trusted the process. I reminded myself that professional writers write books. Whether the book would sell was a question I needed to address before I started a project and after I finished it, but not during the writing process.

When I chose to focus on a single project, I was less distracted and frustrated. Instead of doing mental gymnastics, worrying about what I wasn't getting done on the other book, I

INSTEAD OF FRETTING
ABOUT WHETHER OR NOT
THESE SHIFTS WILL
WORK FOR YOU,
TRY THEM.
Test them out.

dedicated my time and energy to a single book. By devoting my reading, thinking and writing time to solving the problems in a single project, I felt more centered.

Because I was connecting with other writers, I also felt less alone. Instead of spending hours agonizing over writing problems and the state of the publishing industry, I emailed friends. We shared how we'd overcome blocks over coffee. I attended networking events and learned how other writers did it. I leaned on my network when I needed to. But I also offered support and encouragement to my circle of colleagues. (It goes both ways!)

You may still be wondering: how? How can I make these big shifts with my busy job, overwhelming life, multiple deadlines, and limited time?

Instead of fretting about whether or not these shifts will work for you, try them. Test them out. Then, examine the results.

Last fall, I read a book that encouraged people to treat new practices like scientific experiments. It invited readers to test new tools or habits for a few weeks and then evaluate the results. What worked? What failed? What benefits appeared as a result of the experiment?

If you're not sure that making these three shifts will help you finish your book, set up a personal experiment. For three weeks, work as you normally do. During and after that time, collect data on how it went. Measure your productivity (time spent writing or words written). But also measure how your normal practices affect your mood, attentiveness, work quality, and anything else that matters to you.

Next, make the above shifts for 3-4 weeks. Again, keep track of your productivity, mood, writing quality, and any other information that you find helpful. Afterward, analyze the data. What happens when you treat writing like a job, choose a single project and connect with others?

Once you've tried writing with both mindsets, you'll have a better idea what works for you. In the end, you get to choose how to manage your professional life. As I say to each of my clients: do what works for you.

BONUS TOOLS

PRACTICES TO INCREASE PRODUCTIVITY

I've never had the luxury of writing full time for more than a month here and there. I've juggled writing with graduate school, full-time work, marriage, parenting, and more. Over the years, I've worked hard to develop habits and tools that help me write no matter what else might be happening in my life. As a professional coach and writing consultant, I use these habits and tools to support my clients in figuring out how to manage their schedules, beat writer's block and finish projects.

The Southern writer and essayist Flannery O'Connor said this about writing habits:

"I'm a full-time believer in writing habits. ... Of course you have to make your habits ... conform to what you can do. I write only about two hours every day because that's all the energy I have, but I don't let anything interfere with those two hours, at the same time and the same place." (From *The Habit of Being*)

*"I write only about
two hours every day
... but I don't let
anything interfere
with those two
hours."*

— Flannery O'Connor

The following practices form the core of my writing life. Like the shifts, these research-based tools have helped me write many articles and books. My clients report that these techniques have changed the way they work and increased their ability to finish projects. Use the ones that work for you.

1. Schedule writing time

I often quote the breast self-exam study—100 percent of women who scheduled when and where they would do their breast self-exam did it. In Peter Bregman's book, *18 Minutes*, he recounts the study of two groups of drug addicts in withdrawal who were asked to write an essay before 5 PM on a certain day. The first group was given no more instructions, and no one in the group completed the essay. The second group was asked to decide when and where they would write it, and 80 percent of that group finished the essay. Scheduling works.

Schedule time to write at your most productive writing times. You can discover when you write best by reviewing your schedule and noting when you experienced productive writing sessions. When did you feel energized, think clearly, and complete a writing goal? You'll also want to schedule writing during a time that's free from competing goals (monitoring social media) or distractions (watching children).

Scheduling positively impacts productivity. Whether you can write for five hours or five minutes each day, schedule it. I encourage clients to block out writing time several months in advance to prevent overscheduling other appointments. It can also be helpful to schedule a little more time than you actually need. If your scheduled writing time gets interrupted or falls apart, you can move it to another slot later in the day or week.

2. Divide and conquer

Divide your book project into small, doable chunks, and tackle one or more during each writing session. When we anticipate taking big steps—like writing a book or a whole chapter—our brains can panic and our bodies go into a flight or fight response. Small steps trick the amygdala and bypass the flight or fight response.

I recently worked with a professor who was writing his first book. He was also teaching and raising kids. Every time he set aside time to work on the book, he panicked. So instead, we made a list of little steps he could take: small chunks of writing to do each time he sat down to write. Instead of worrying about writing a whole book, he planned a tiny chunk. It worked. He finished the book.

Choose the type of chunk that works for you. Writing a whole chapter can be daunting. Instead, think about dividing writing into scenes (fiction and memoir) or idea chunks (nonfiction). An idea chunk might be a few paragraphs that define a main idea, an anecdote, or a chart.

3. Never face a blank page

The blank page terrifies everyone, even professional writers. It causes writers to create elaborate and unusual rituals, drink copious amounts of coffee or alcohol, and quit writing. My solution: get rid of that blank page as quickly as possible. When children learn to write, they

often do a prewriting exercise. Here's how to make that work for you. At the end of each writing session, set aside 10-15 minutes to:

- Decide what chunk or scene you're going to write about during your next writing session.
- Do a prewriting exercise—brainstorm what might happen in a scene or create a mind map of the section you plan to write.
- Jot down notes in the computer or hard file so that you'll remember exactly what you'll be doing the next day.

4. Create a writing friendly environment

As a culture, we're addicted to the "dopamine hit" we get when we get interrupted by the ping of email: A new client! A business deal! Important information!

A recent study reported that most of us check our phones 150 times during the day. Some of that is to read and send texts, others are for phone calls or to take photos, sometimes it's just to check the time—but the fact remains: that's a lot of checking. How does anyone get anything written?

In addition to media, other distractions compete for our time. The phone rings, the dog barks, the neighbors fight, our stomach growls, and ... you get the idea! Each writer is disturbed by different distractions. Some of my clients find any kind of noise disruptive, while others write better in the buzz of a café crowd. Use these tools to make your writing space distraction free:

- Find a space that works for you. I prefer quiet, so I write at home in the early morning hours. But when the kids are out of school, I head to the library. Gertrude Stein wrote in the front seat of her car, often while her partner Alice B. Toklas ran errands. Benjamin Franklin wrote in the bathtub. Maya Angelou would check into a hotel for her writing sessions. You might find you like to work while reclining on your bed or hanging out at the local bar!
- Let people know when you're writing. My clients, colleagues and friends know that I write every morning—and won't be online until noon. Some still email and text, but they know I won't answer until I've put in my time. If you're writing during a time that you used to be available for socializing or work—let people know. If they still interrupt you, find somewhere else to work and turn off your phone. In time, both you and your friends will learn to respect your writing time.
- Create a media-free writing zone, at least for the time you're working on your book project. Turn off or silence anything that beeps, pings or buzzes at you.

5. Boost Your Energy

Writing energy is limited. After writing for fifteen minutes or an hour, we get tired. That's absolutely normal. No one is built to focus for eight hours straight. Most of us depend on coffee or a bit of sugar to boost our energy when we struggle to write. But while coffee and sugar increase our energy for a short time, they both lead to energy crashes. Thankfully, there are better ways. Writers can increase and restore their energy in these simple ways:

- Exercise daily. Even a little exercise can help you have more energy. Getting up once an hour to walk around the block or do a few push-ups will help renew your attention and keep you healthy.
- Take energy-restoring breaks. [Researchers](#) have discovered that looking at photos of cute baby animals can increase our focus and help us to get more writing done.
- Take a nature break. There's some interesting research that says that when we take time to wander in nature, we can restore our ability to focus. If you live in a city, keep a few plants in your house or hang a bird feeder outside your window. If possible, take longer breaks at local parks.
- Do chores. Another study found that when we do boring repetitive tasks like sweeping the floor or knitting, we're more likely to experience the Eureka effect or an aha moment—the sudden solution to a problem we've been working on.

PAY ATTENTION
to the habits
THAT HAVE WORKED FOR YOU.
USE THEM TO BECOME EVEN
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Bonus Tip: When it comes to habits, writers can be a quirky bunch. Dan Brown, author of *The Da Vinci Code*, practices inversion therapy to get ideas (that's hanging upside down!). Aaron Sorkin, who created *The West Wing*, tries out dialogue in front of a mirror. And you? When you examine your most productive writing times, pay attention to the habits that have worked for you. Use them to become even more prolific!

Do you need more support to finish your book this year?

[Contact me](#) for a complimentary consultation.

Visit my [coaching page](#) to find a package that's right for you.

About the author. Rochelle Melander, the [Write Now! Coach](http://www.writenowcoach.com), is an author, speaker, and certified professional coach. She is the author of ten books, including the National Novel Writing Month guide—*Write-A-Thon: Write Your Book in 26 Days (and Live to Tell About It)*. Rochelle teaches professionals how to overcome obstacles, write more, turn their ideas into books, navigate the publishing world, and connect with readers through social media. She is the founder of Dream Keepers, a writing workshop for children and teens in Milwaukee, and leads workshops for teachers who want to reach reluctant writers. She interviews authors and publishing professionals on her blog, at the *Write Now! Mastermind* class, and in her podcast, *Always Write!* Visit her online at www.writenowcoach.com