

DISCIPLINING YOUR TIME

By Dr. Lin Stepp

One of the hardest aspects of any career in which you are fully – or partially – self-employed is to learn to plan, discipline, and maximize your time. Many people think that people who have their own businesses, and are, in a sense, entrepreneurs, work less. The truth is they often work more – if they want to be successful.

In the early stages of a writing career, discipline is especially hard. Here are some of the reasons why disciplining your time to write at home is difficult:

1. You may have defined yourself as a writer – but this identity may not be affirmed by the outside world.

We all like affirmation, praise, and encouragement in relation to our work. We want someone to notice the long hours we put in on the job, to pat us on the back for the progress we're making. But all too often – except for a few friends or family members who see the effort we put in daily and give us support – there is no affirmation, no applause, and little encouragement. In fact, frequently the '*I'm writing a book*' comment is responded to with a patronizing '*How nice, dear*' or it's followed immediately with the '*Is it published yet?*' question. The point is that the early writing stages demand a fiercely, dogged personal determinism to even keep working and plugging away at all - since most feedback we receive is negatively tinged. This makes consistent, ongoing self-discipline more of a challenge.

2. Second, few writers have the luxury of pursuing their writing full-time in the early stages – and, sometimes, even once they are well-published.

Like in sports, only a few superstars get rich from their writing – and only a small percentage of writers make a strong enough income from writing to pursue it exclusively. So, for many, writing is an avocation – their second job (or third). The discipline challenge here is that the time for the work has to be sandwiched around other work and family demands. Carrying multiple careers is challenging for anyone – and often more so for women, who write the greater percentage of romance – because women are the kin-keepers in their family. They still traditionally carry the lion's share in caring for home, children, and elderly parents in their family units.

3. Third, once you make up your mind to write at home – a whole, new unique set of challenges must be overcome in that home office setting, and most by sheer, dedicated self-discipline.

Isabel Isidro, a writer and editor, listed pages of problems and challenges on working at home. Some of these included:

- Finding a quiet area and space in which to work without constant distractions
- Getting sabotaged by the ongoing daily household routine
- Answering emails and then getting caught up for hours on the internet chatting, playing, or supposedly researching
- Talking on the phone with friends and family who forget your home-time is your work time – as you seem to do as well
- Turning on the television for a break and then getting sucked into its addictive vortex for hours

- Having no work accountability to a boss – which essentially means that most of the time only *you* know if you clock in the hours you have committed toward your writing career each day or if you use those hours wisely.
- 4. Finally, for many of us – our writing life simply has no orderly, focused, disciplined structure.

According to Steve Manning, many writers claim to have a system for writing but refuse to acknowledge when their system or method is not working. Basically, if you're not consistently working and producing every week – your system or method is undoubtedly faulty, no matter what rationale you have for it. Here are the disciplined tips Manning and others suggest are essential for success:

- **ESTABLISH A DISCIPLINED TIME TO WRITE AND A SET ROUTINE**

Quit writing sporadically. Decide on a set time for writing every day or a set block of hours each week to fulfill – and Do It. Twyla Tharp wrote: “Being creative is an everyday thing, a job with its own routines. That’s why writers need to establish a routine. ...[and] after a while it becomes a habit ...The routine is as much a part of the creative process as the lightning bolt of inspiration (perhaps more) ... It’s up to the individual to take potential talent – and to create work habits to realize it ... Discipline morphs into habit.”

- **CREATE A CLEAR DISCIPLINED WRITING PLAN TO FOLLOW**

Most successful authors say they research, plot, and outline their books before they begin to write. Steve Manning stressed that one of the major problems that most writers have comes from having no clear and focused plan laid out before the writing process begins. Too many people, Manning said, try to write from the seat of their pants – and yet this method works successfully for very few. Manning wrote: “Your book writing success or failure depends largely on the outlining process. Create an outstanding outline for your book and your writing task becomes easy. ... If you think you can write your book by being spontaneously creative as you write, you’re wrong.”

- **DEVELOP DISCIPLINED GOALS AND HABITS AND STICK TO THEM**

Stop wasting time. Carol McLachlan said that most people spend 80% of their day on unproductive tasks, activities, and doodle-dee-do with nothing to show for the time. She recommended taking control of your hours and reversing the 80/20 rule – spending 80% of your available time in productive self-disciplined work instead. She stressed prioritizing your time, saying No to unnecessary interruptions, finding your best times to work and then sticking to the disciplined work schedule you lay out for yourself.

The best summary to all this gathered research on *self-disciplining your time* would be those of John Roger and Peter McWilliams: “LET’S GET OFF OUR BUTS AND JUST DO IT!” Their #1 New York Times Bestseller on this subject, called *Do It! Let’s Get Off Our Buts* is a terrific read on this subject. Truthfully, when it comes right down to it, the only person who can change the wasted hours, the procrastination, and the excuses that are keeping you from the self-discipline you need in order to accomplish your goals is (gulp) YOU.