

ROBERT G. EVENHOUSE

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A Brief Treatise On Writing

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By Robert G. Evenhouse

Introduction

Neil Gaiman once said, "If you only write when you are inspired, you may be a fairly decent poet, but you will never be a novelist. ... You learn by finishing thingsⁱ."

That may be easy for him, but you and I are not Neil Gaiman.

We are husbands, wives, parents, and employees with little time to chase our dreams of writing. On top of that, the moment we begin to get clarity or momentum we have to rush off to a meeting, mow the lawn, or go to bed for an early morning.

My guess is that if we looked deep enough, we'd see the spare bits of time we lose every day, like loose dollars in our monthly budgets.

Even though we are busy, time is the currency we have. We must not make excuses. For no matter if we are the president of the United States, Stephen King, or a paper pusher in a cubicle, we all have one hundred and sixty-eight hours in a week.

What we do with them is up to us.

Why-Fueled Writing

Have you ever marveled at a neighbor who ran every day, rain or shine? How about a friend who lost twenty pounds? What they do seems impossible. You tell yourself that they have tremendous discipline and try to battle back the envy, right?

But let's back up for a moment.

What if these two individuals, the runner and the dieter, hold the key you need to become a consistent writer?

If you asked them what they did to become successful you'd most likely hear something like this: "I started running because my uncle died young." Or, "I want to be mobile when I am older and still able to get around like so and so." Progress always starts with a thought, a reason for action.

This motive is called your *WHY*. This foundational thought is pivotal. It is the beginning statement. "I want to write because ____." It could be as simple as, "I want to write to start an online business," or, "I want to write to make it a career," or, "I desire to tell this story because other moms need to hear it."

This *WHY* must be solid, strong, and full of meaning. It must be more than money or sleep or fame.

Your *WHY* is a fist to the face of laziness, it's the encouraging friend when voices in your head tell you to stop and get a real job, and it's the seasoned captain when the gale of self-doubt rages.

ACTION STEP

Take a moment and consider your *WHY*. What is the reason you wish to put words on the page? Write it down.

I want to write because _____.

Write it on a notecard and post it somewhere you will see it every day. Mine is next to my writing calendar and computer. Put it on your desk or in your car and return to it often. This is the core purpose, the reason you get up at four thirty in the morning or stay up after everyone else has long been asleep.

Habit Versus Discipline

Though they seem like the same thing, there's an enormous difference between habit and discipline. Discipline is all about motivation, the ability to continue. You will need this in your writer's toolbox, but you'll also need something even more powerful:

New habits.

Have you ever found yourself wanting to cut down on sweets? Discipline is helpful, but if you constantly have candy in the house sooner or later you'll start to compromise. A new habit would be not allowing candy in the house to begin with.

I don't want to mislead you. Forming new habits is one of the hardest things to do. We are creatures of habit but we tend to be habitual about what is easy. Writing is hard. Creating time and space every day—or even a few times a week—to write can be near impossible.

But people do it.

J.K. Rowling was a single mom when she scratched notes about a boy named Harry Potter on a napkinⁱⁱ. T. S. Eliot worked as a bankerⁱⁱⁱ, and Kurt Vonnegut was once the manager of a Saab dealership^{iv}. Some toiled for years before finding any success in writing.

The key to progress in anything is breaking down tasks into systems that work for you. This may mean creating a spreadsheet of fifty, thousand-word sessions, and crossing off each one. You may have a three-part system like I do: create, edit, polish. In the creation portion, anything goes; experiments are welcome. In editing, everything is challenged. During the polish portion, I finalize details like fonts and layout.

This will help you focus on writing every week, when it works for you, and not at a frantic pace.

ACTION STEP

Review a normal week. Where are your spare hours? In the morning? In the evening? Now create a simple spreadsheet of office hours you'll keep. This is when you are writing exclusively, not returning e-mails or building your website.

This time could be forty minutes twice a week, or one hour a day. Remember your *WHY*. You may have to get up at five in the morning. You may have to watch less football. Make these office hours non-negotiable.

Everyday Action

If you are writing, or have considered writing full time, you have had The Dream.

You write a masterpiece, get paid millions, and become universally recognized as genius. But this rarely happens and most likely won't happen to you. But if you have success of *any* kind, it won't come from writing every once in a while. It will come through a succession of works you've built over time. This is why a schedule is so important.

Before you gain any traction, you may believe because you've written something people should show up and read it. Have you thought this about your blog? Your eBook? Your social media post? We have this innate sense of accomplishment when we've written something, and we feel people should take notice.

Most likely the work will be terrible at first. But by writing consistently our minds will grow accustomed to the creative activity. And when we master everyday action, we can produce art worth sharing.

You could do this by blogging, sending chapters to a close friend for feedback, pitching articles to websites or magazines, but whatever your medium you must keep writing. Personally, I focus on a word count goal during a writing session. There is a careful balance between getting enough done to feel satisfied with your work and writing too much so you burn out and find it difficult to stomach writing the next day.

Write as much as your schedule will allow. If you write two hundred and fifty words a day, it may take fifteen to thirty minutes. If you do this for eleven months, you have a book-length work! Don't daydream about a lucrative publishing contract that may or may not even happen. Instead focus on everyday action.

ACTION STEP

The writing road is long. Take a moment to gain some encouragement in one of these three ways:

1. Email a fellow writer and ask them to meet for food, drink, or dessert.
2. Go back and read your first work, first blog post, first article. Now, compare that with your current work. Much better, yes? Keep going.
3. Write something new. I balance blogging, one nonfiction, and one fiction book.

No More Plateau

After you've discovered your *WHY* and committed to a writing schedule, you may arrive at this unfortunate destination: The Plateau. Chapters blend together. Your writing voice is dull. The once joyful beginning is now a boring plod.

There are two responses to this dilemma. One, you stop working because you are nowhere near the end and you cannot stomach the march forward.

The second is the response of the professional writer. The heels dig in. The pressure squeezes every ounce of creativity out of you but you keep moving, showing up every day, even doubling your effort.

This will happen. I guarantee it. You are working on something that will surely take weeks and months, maybe even years.

Remember Neil Gaiman's quote? To be a novelist you must learn to *finish things*. This means a clean wrap-up to your non-fiction book and a convincing end to your novel. But this also includes knowing the cycle of writing a book too. Some days you will feel the muse, others, you'll write on the edge of quitting.

When you finish, go back and review what you've written. My guess is that you won't be able to tell when you were inspired and when you were not.

I wrote a blog post about this very thing about three years ago. I remember thinking it was alright at the time but I wrote it to fill a schedule not because I felt a rush of inspiration. It became one of my most shared blog posts and requested to be used on a writer's conference website.

ACTION STEP

Have you given up on a writing project? How can you recommit? How can you go deeper, further, higher? Clear out fifteen minutes and write down three things:

1. Where you want to go. Dream here. Don't edit or place limitations on where you want this book to take you.
2. Where are you now? Close? What are your current actions? Do they align with your *WHY*?
3. Write double the word count you aim for in a usual day. Do this for one week.

Dare to Commit

Now we come to it. There will be times when your dream is challenged and your word count starts to slip. Habits reinforce your practice but nothing can prepare you for fear. Fear that you are not good enough. That your book will never compete with the ones on your shelves. Would someone actually pay for your drivel?

But these are not questions for us to answer. They don't mean anything. They merely provide an opportunity to watch more television and eat more ice cream.

To achieve long term success in a marriage, a job, or a book, quitting cannot be an option. There will be days you want to quit or want to scream to the heavens or when you feel like your work has dried up and you don't love it anymore. But when the going gets tough while writing a book the only option the writer has is to keep going.

This ebook is not about easy. This is not *Five Steps to a Surefire Writing Career!* or *Do This and You'll Have the Best Writing Life Ever!* This book is about writing when you are sick, lonely, tired, bored, or uninspired. It's a call to action. To movement, however difficult or slow it may be at times.

Your office hours may be a half hour at five in the morning, a half hour at lunch, and two hours on a Saturday afternoon. This might not be ideal, but if you add it up over a month, that's twenty-eight hours of writing time.

When you are ready to quit, or press the delete button on your entire novel, dig your heels in. Dare to commit to your work. You may have to do this every single day.

ACTION STEP

A journal can be a powerful tool. If you start to think you'll never be a writer, write that lie down and then list three reasons it's not true. Example:

LIE: I will never compete with the professionals.

TRUTH 1: I am just starting out. Even professionals began where I started.

TRUTH 2: I cannot support my family now, but in five years who knows?

TRUTH 3: I am me. I tell my stories for my audience.

Conclusion

I love excuses. They are like signing up to do the work later. It gives such a feeling of accomplishment.

- Next month I'll rent a cabin in the woods to write.
- After the busy season at work I'll get down to business.
- I just need to recover after losing my job, then I'll get working.
- There is no way I can write in this chaotic and disorganized house. I'll write when everything is put away perfectly.
- That's easy for you to say! I have _____. Or, I wish I had _____.

These have been my excuses. I have many more. The problem with these excuses? I was not owning my life in the moment. The day I got momentum and established habits was the day I stopped looking at what I can't do and started focusing on what I can do. Right now.

I can't leave for a mountain retreat for six days. But I can use my lunch hours and one night a week to work on my book. I may not be able to blog every single day, but I can blog twice a week.

The "But I can ___" phrase changed everything for me. I can't be the next J.K. Rowling, but I can write another five hundred words today. There is no way I can compete with *War and Peace*, but I can get my query letter done. I can't finish my book this week, but I can write another page, just one more, today.

If writing is your thing, break down what you want to do each day. Two hundred and fifty words may be all you can do. Then search for the time that works best for you. There is margin in your life for this dream.

If you buy a silver minivan, all you'll see are silver minivans. You'll be looking for them now that you have one. They'll be everywhere. The same is true for writing. When you change from wallowing about lost time or no time and instead begin writing two hundred and fifty words a day, you can finish your book in less than a year.

While in the grocery line you will no longer pull out your phone to wander aimlessly around social media. Instead you'll write three great sentences about your character's struggles or edit three paragraphs using your phone and your notes app.

The only way you will ever become a writer is through purposeful habit. No one ever became a writer by accident. You must intentionally pursue this life, day after day, week after week, building your body of work. I know you can do it. Start today.

Ending Challenge

Things will get tough. Steven Pressfield calls it Resistance^v. On page one hundred and twenty of his book *Turning Pro*, Pressfield says two things about the writing process:

1. Do what you can every day and stay patient.
2. Write for tomorrow.

You cannot be a great novelist today. But if you do the work today and another three hundred and sixty-four, who knows?

Your schedule will be interrupted. You will plateau. You will be uninspired. But writer, how will you respond?

If the only way to become a writer is by writing, it's time you got to work.

If you've enjoyed this little book, please share it with other writers you know or on your social media sites. Also, take a moment to connect with me on the following social media platforms:

My website: robertevenuehouse.com

Twitter: [@parttimenovel](https://twitter.com/parttimenovel)

Facebook: [Robert Evenhouse Writer](https://www.facebook.com/Robert-Evenhouse-Writer)

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