

Distraction-Free Writing

You finally have time to write. It's been difficult with a full time job and a family to take care of, but you set aside time and it's finally here. You sit down with your laptop (or pen and paper) and start to write. An hour passes and you realize you haven't done much. Maybe a sentence. Maybe a few jotted ideas. But nothing you expected to get done. What happened?

Here are some of my common interruptions/distractions:

- Family interruptions – help with homework, rides places, need to order something online
- My job – emails, text messages, etc
- My desk piles up – bits and pieces of things that need done from various members of my household
- My software – Auto-correct, formatting, file format between devices, file storage
- Email, social media, phone, any other communication device – the last thing I need right now is communication

A distraction-free environment is as easy as perfection. In other words – not possible. We may never eliminate distractions, but we can do our best to minimize them.

It's important to have a plan, so here are some basic steps to set yourself up for success.

First Step: Define your boundaries

With people – Your most-loved people will be the worst enemies to your writing time. Define your writing space and time. Communicate to them how important this is to you.

With your space – Remove what will distract you. A todo list? A pile of DVDs that need recording? Remove anything that grabs your attention. If a messy desk bothers you, clean it. Plan ahead. Make sure you have time to clean it before your writing time. Or write elsewhere.

With your tech – If you write on a computer, turn off your wifi and unplug the network cable. You don't need social networks and email while you're trying to be creative.

With yourself – You already have enough obstacles. Don't be one of them. "I'm not good enough" is not a good enough excuse. You are no better or worse than anyone else out there. The difference between the best person and the worst person is a surprisingly short string of decisions. Make good ones.

Second Step: Tools

Pen and paper

Pros:

- No distractions. Pen and paper have no electronic features. Not much you can do except write or doodle.
- You have a planned editing session as a result. You'll have to type it up at some point.

Cons:

- You have to type it up at some point. Few places accept handwritten manuscripts.
- You may not be able to get your ideas down fast enough, depending on how fast you type.

Computer

Pros:

- Things are saved and easy to edit
- Can be synchronized and/or backed up easily

Cons:

- If you don't backup regularly, you can easily lose all your stuff
- It's not just a writing instrument. Too many other things on your computer

Voice to text

Pros:

- No typing or writing. Distractions removed.
- Talking can be more accessible than typing/writing

Cons:

- Speech to text is not perfect
- If using voice only, have to type it up later

Let's talk about software...

Most writers I know use a word processor for writing, the most popular of which is Microsoft Word. It's a great piece of software, but for certain use cases. Keep in mind that some of the best features of a word processor are the worst detriments to writing first drafts.

- Auto-correct
- Squiggly underlines
- Formatting

Word processors get in your way and distract you from creative writing. Auto-correct, formatting toolbars, all sorts of things to steal your attention away from what you're supposed to be doing: creating.

Here are some tools that are good because they have limited ability to distract.

- IA Writer (<https://ia.net/writer/>)
- Ghostwriter (<https://wereturtle.github.io/ghostwriter/>)
- Byword (<https://bywordapp.com/>)

- Jotter pad (<https://2appstudio.com/jotterpad>)
- FocusWriter (<https://gottcode.org/focuswriter/>)
- Simple text editor – Notepad, Sublime, Vim, TextEdit, Atom, Gedit

Now that you've looked at tools ...

Most Important Step: Prepare

Is your writing time on your schedule? On your calendar? Have you made it a priority? Is your writing time important enough to trump other things? If not, you're not a writer. Go home now.

“The key is not to prioritize what's on your schedule, but to schedule your priorities.” - Stephen Covey

Prepare your boundaries.

Communicate your boundaries to other people. Most importantly, your family.

- Your spouse and kids can figure things out for an hour or two. Tell them to save their questions and complaints.
- If you work another job, remember to keep it in perspective. It supports your life. It isn't your life. Don't set a precedent of answering emails late at night or in off hours. Communicate with your boss and coworkers that you have specific hours outside of work where you will be off the grid. If they want you on-call at all times, tell them to double or triple your salary.
- Be strict with yourself. Don't be your own worst enemy. No excuses. No not-in-the-moods (we'll address this in the next section).

Prepare for the act of writing and the associated preparation. Plan ahead for these things. Put them on your calendar and mark the time as busy.

Prepare your workspace. Clean your desk, shut the door or arrange for others not to be around.

Decide on your software and other tools ahead of time. Don't get stuck playing with new software when you're trying to do your work. Plan that as separate time.

Do your research ahead of time. Gather all materials you need in order to write. When it's time to write, you should be able to sit down and do it.

Had a stressful day or anticipate having one? Not really in the state of mind to write? Here are some helpful exercises to get your mind in focus so you can write successfully. Plan time for this.

- Journal. Emotional about something? Get it out.
- Read your previous chapter. Get in the mood.
- Find a writing prompt that piques your interest and write something short
- Play a short game or a short round of a game. e.g. Solitaire. It makes you focus on something.
- Start with characters. Checklist their emotions and senses for the scene you're going to write
- Go for a walk. It can clean out your mind and give you a reset.