

# Getting Into a Good Writing Routine Transcript

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*This is a transcript of the audio seminar, edited slightly for easy reading!*

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Hi, I'm Ali Luke, and this is the September seminar for Writers' Huddle, **Getting Into a Good Writing Routine**.

So, routine and just getting enough writing done is something that has come up for pretty much every client I've ever worked with, and for the majority of the writers who I know, both in the non-fiction and the fiction writing world.

## **There's No One Perfect Routine**

Something that I've come to realize over the past few years is that different things work for different people, when it comes to having a routine and having some structure around your writing.

Somebody else's perfect routine probably won't work for you, although you may well find that they have some ideas or some tips or some suggestions that you can apply to your own writing life.

**As we go through today's seminar, please feel free to discard ideas that you think won't work for you, or just put things to one side and latch onto the things that do work for you.**

Perhaps don't be *too* quick to dismiss things, because sometimes it's worth trying out some new patterns or some new ideas in your writing life to get things going again ... but don't think that you've got to stick to some ideal, perfect routine, or that I'm going to give you a blueprint for exactly how your writing life or your writing day should run, because that's really not the case.

## Don't Compare Your Routine to Others' Routines

Something else to say, because I know I struggled with this particularly a few years ago in my writing: I felt I ought to be as disciplined or as motivated as other writers, and I'd perhaps read their advice, or read about a day in their life, their typical routine, and I'd be disappointed that I couldn't match up to that.

**The truth here is that everyone's life looks different, and somebody else may not face the same commitments or pressures that you have.** They may have been writing for a great deal longer than you, which could lead to a good deal easier discipline and motivation, or they could simply just prefer to work in a different way.

So, don't beat yourself up if you can't keep up what seems to you the routine you should be sticking to, and bear in mind when people talk about routines, they're often talking in terms of ideals.

For me, a good writing day would mean I get lots done in the morning, I might write several thousand words that day and so on ... but the truth is that some of my days are like that, other days I perhaps have different commitments, or I'm travelling, or my writing just doesn't flow for some reason.

I think that's true for all writers, that we perhaps have our ideal day, or our ideal routine. It's easy to talk in terms of that and to describe it ... but **we also have days when things go a bit pear shaped, or we just have too many other pressures, or too many other commitments.**

## Do You Even Need a Routine?

So, then, before we start digging into the details of routine, something else to think about here is that you might not need a routine.

If you're happy with how much you're currently writing, if you feel like you're making good progress, then you're probably doing fine. That's the case even if your writing is perhaps at slightly random times of the day, or if you're writing only when you feel inspired and that you find that days or sometimes weeks go

by without you writing anything, and then you'll have a surge of energy and you'll write lots.

**For some people, that *is* their routine.** It doesn't have to be as structured as that you write X number of words per day, or per week.

By all means, please try to take away some useful material from the seminar, but **if I can only leave you with one thing, I would say that you don't need to feel that a routine has to be a very structured timetable way of approaching your writing.**

I think that too much focus on routine can harm your natural motivation and inspiration to write, and, again, this is different for different people, so experiment, try out some different ideas, maybe talk to some other Huddlers or some writers you know and find out what works for them as well, and just see what you can take from that.

## Finding the Right Place to Write

So, I wanted to begin by talking about place, because I don't think this is considered enough in the context of routine.

The place where we write matters a lot, I think it matters as much, maybe even more than the time when we write – and we often think of routine more in terms of time.

**So, writers are all different here.** Some writers will have a shed where they go and write in the garden, others will have perhaps a home office, which is what I have, it's our smallest bedroom, and it's so tiny that you could perhaps just cram a single bed in here, but in fact we've got a desk and so on so I can write here.

Other writers like to work in, say, a coffee shop. I'm just reading a book by my former tutor, Francis Spufford, and he says in the acknowledgements that he wrote pretty much the entire book while sitting by the window in Costa Coffee in Cambridge, here in the UK.

So that's perfectly possible, it's a perfectly valid option, and it's something that "real" writers do, in terms of big published authors, but also lots of aspiring writers will congregate in places like coffee shops. If you find that sort of environment too noisy you could write in a library, you could write outside in a park, and so on.

**There's no rule on what place you should have for your writing, but I think that it's a good idea to have a special place that is set aside as much as possible for writing, or for at least writing-related activity.**

If your writing is always squeezed into corners – perhaps you write sitting on the sofa, or the bus, and so on – that can work, for some people that's fine.

For others, though, it can be quite difficult to get into something each time, and those people are better off just having one particular location, or perhaps several possible locations.

## **Choosing a Place that Helps You Focus**

I've found that place can make a big difference to attention, so it's not sometimes that we lack the time to write, but we lack the focus.

Certainly for me, if I'm in somewhere like a library or a coffee shop, and I've got a laptop or my notebook with me, and that's my writing time. There are very few distractions, so I can just sit and get on with my writing without thinking I should check my email or unstack the dishwasher, or any one of those thousands of things that pop into our heads when we're supposed to be writing.

**If you're frequently struggling to sit down and concentrate when you're coming to a writing session in your life, then it's worth maybe thinking about where you're trying to write, and possibly trying out some different locations.**

Like I say, different things work for different people here. For some people a coffee shop is too noisy or distracting – personally I quite like the background hum of noise, and I can work quite well in that, but I can see that lots of people don't necessarily find that perfect.

Try to make sure that, wherever you try to work, you won't be frequently interrupted by other people. That can be very disruptive to your writing.

**If you work at home, for instance, try to have a room where you know you can close the door, or where people know that it's your writing space,** and they won't come and interrupt you for a chat.

If you haven't got a whole room to write in, you can try perhaps a desk in the corner of your bedroom, or another quiet area of your house. If your writing downstairs with your kids playing and your partner trying to hold a conversation with you, it's very very distracting, and it's very hard to get into the flow of your writing.

## Writing at Work

Then another option, if you have a day job, is to be writing while you're at work. Obviously it's probably a good idea not to be working on your novel during company time ... but there's nothing stopping you getting to work a little early so you can be writing for half an hour before your work day begins, or you can write during your lunch break, which is something that I did as a student with a summer job.

**I find this works best when you've got a corner to yourself or you're not overlooked by other people.** I personally find it quite hard to write when people are walking past and they can see my monitor, if I'm on a computer. The other option is to just take a notebook and write by hand if you don't like being overlooked.

The slight drawback with this is that if you're at your desk typing, people may well assume that you're working, and that you're available to answer questions, or to do a particular task for them, and so on.

You might find that it's better to get out of the office: maybe during your lunch break you can get to a local park or coffee shop and write there. Obviously this is a bit dependant on your own particular workplace and your colleagues and so on.

So, that's place, and what I would recommend here is that you've never tried writing in a coffee shop, or writing in a park, or writing in a library, and so on,

try something new, maybe this week or next week, and see whether it's a better experience for you.

Do you focus more easily? Do you get into the flow more quickly? Or conversely, is it more of a struggle? Do you find it more difficult to write in that particular environment?

**Do try out different places, and even consider different places for different types of writing.** I find it good to head to a coffee shop or somewhere if I want to really knuckle down on something like a new eBook. If I'm just writing blog posts, I can do those quite easily from home, and I often want to look up some facts, or take a bit of a break after each one and so on.

## What Time of Day is Best for Your Writing?

So, the next issue for us to consider is time. Obviously for many people this is the core of a routine, what they think about when they think routine.

**When it comes to time, again I think it's very important to know yourself, and what works for you.** Different people will have different times of day when they can naturally write more easily than other times of day, and you could be a morning person or an afternoon person, or an evening person, and so on.

You may even find that different times of day suit you for different kinds of writing, so be willing to experiment a little bit here.

You probably already have some idea what works for you. If you're the kind of person who likes to get up at five in the morning, and get straight into the day and do lots of stuff, and head to bed early around nine, then you're probably a morning person and you'll do well trying to get some writing done first thing in the morning.

If you're the kind of person who has an energy surge after dinner, then maybe you want to be writing in the evening, late into the night.

Another consideration here is your particular household set up, so maybe you've got small children, so they're up quite early, but they're also in bed

quite early, and the easiest time for you to write is once they're in bed, or it may be that you have housemates and you have to some extent to fit around their routine, and so on.

**All things being equal, many writers who I've spoken to, or who I've heard speak, suggest that either first thing in the morning or last thing at night work well.**

There's something here about the writing state, perhaps particularly for fiction, being close to the kind of state that we're in when we're dreaming. If you can capture something of that as soon as you've woken up, before the demands of the day crowd in – or conversely by writing at the end of the day, once other people in the house are in bed and the rest of the world is winding down – you can get that creative and quite calm energy into your writing.

However, you may find that you're not somebody who likes writing at the crack of dawn or late at night. For me at the moment it seems like afternoons are good times for working on fiction, and mornings are working out quite well for my paying work – my non-fiction, my eBooks, my blog posts and so on.

**You may find that some different mix works for you, and you may want to experiment a bit with this, to find out what you enjoy particularly now.** Even if you've done this in the past and you think you know what works for you, you may find that your preferences have shifted a bit, so do be willing to experiment.

## What Might Your Routine Look Like?

There are lots of exact routines that you could adopt here.

Some writers like to work for 30 minutes first thing every day, so they get up at 6:00 or 6:30 or whatever it is, they write for half an hour, and then they get into their day.

Other writers like to write during their commute or their lunch hour, because that's the easiest time in the day to actually have a window of time when they can squeeze in some writing.

Others perhaps prefer not to write on weekdays, because they're busy or they have other commitments, but they set aside some time at the weekends to write, perhaps blocking that out in their diary in advance so they keep some time free and don't fill up all their weekends with social events.

There's honestly no right way to do this. Writers have been successful with all sorts of very different routines.

Some novelists will write a novel draft in a couple of weeks flat, which is how I think Amanda Hocking, who has done very well with eBooks, works. Other novelists will write 500 words a day, every day, diligently over a period of time.

**It's really a case of figuring out what works for you, how you feel happiest and also in what circumstances you feel your writing is actually at its best.**

## Short or Long Writing Sessions?

Then something I've found important to consider here in the context of routine, is whether you prefer to write in long or short sessions.

When I was studying for my Master's degree, I was obviously making fiction quite a focus in my life at that point. One of my class teachers suggested that we should all be aiming to do some writing every day, and 20 minutes was enough, and if you could do 20 minutes a day that was fine.

While this is perfectly sound advice, I think that some people, and this definitely includes me, do not write very well in 20 minute little chunks.

I like to really dig into a scene or a chapter when I'm writing fiction. I went through a few months of getting up and writing first thing in the morning. I would always try to do 500 words, it would usually take me about half an hour or 45 minutes, but it was feeling more like a chore than something I enjoyed doing.

It also meant that every scene I wrote was being done piecemeal over about a week or so, which I didn't feel was quite working for the flow of my writing.

**I shifted to a different pattern where I didn't worry about writing fiction every day, but I tried to write in longer sessions, like at least a couple of hours, perhaps 2 or 3 hours a week.**

For me, that was a much more useful way to write. So do experiment here, it could be that you're somebody who thrives on the 20 minutes a day pattern, it might be that the type of writing that you're doing is something that fits very well into short, bite-sized sessions. Or, it might be that you would rather have one long weekly session where you really dig in and really enjoy it, so there are no right answers, you just need to figure out what works for you.

## Getting into the Writing Mood

Then, having considered the place and time of writing, we come to the writing session itself.

You sit down, perhaps in your home office, at the time at which you prefer to write, maybe early in the morning, and then you need to get into the writing mood and get into whatever project you're currently working on. There are all sorts of different ways to do this.

### Music or Silence?

Some writers may like dead silence, and others may want to have the radio on, and so on. This is completely up to you and what works for you, and to some extent what works for you may change depending upon what you're writing and what sort of mood you're in on a particular day.

For me, I usually find that music helps me get into the mood for fiction writing in particular, and music can be a useful way to block off distracting background sounds.

If you have a household with several people who are all moving around getting ready in the mornings, you may find that having headphones on helps you tune all that out and focus in on your writing.

**Obviously this is a very individual decision on what sort of music you like, and maybe what sort of material you're producing, and what goes with that.**

Some writers will want to have classical music playing in the background, others may want to have their favourite pop music or something that really gets them energised.

Others will want to pick something that has a thematic or mood-related link with what they're working on. It could be a film score, it could be your favourite album, whatever works for you, frankly.

**I think it can be distracting to have spoken word audio going on while you're trying to write.** Certainly I can't listen to a podcast and write at the same time, it would just really mess with my head. I like to have music that I know well, so it's not distracting me because I'm not constantly stopping to listen to an interesting bit or try and figure out the lyrics or something like that, I can just let it wash over me.

When I get to maybe a brief pause in my writing and I'm trying to figure out what to do next, I can stop and listen to the music for a few seconds, rather than come to a pause and be stuck in silence, and be tempted to check my email or something.

I'll alternate, particularly with non-fiction: I normally just write in silence, and sometimes if I feel I'm struggling to focus or I feel I just want to shift my mood a bit, I'll put some music on.

So, you know, this is a great area to discuss with other writers, see what they listen to while they're writing, see what works for them, and maybe try out a few different ideas for you.

## **Switch Off Your Internet Connection**

Then something that I think a lot of writers are doing nowadays is turning off their internet connection, or at least installing some kind of block on websites that are particularly distracting during writing time.

This is one of the reasons that I like going to a coffee shop or somewhere if I really want to dig in, because either they may not have WiFi, or I may have to pay for the WiFi, or at least I have to go to the trouble of putting in a password or something. I've got a switch on my laptop keyboard as well, where I can turn off the WiFi, which also makes my battery life better, so all that means that I'm more motivated to write and not mess around on the internet.

I know it's very easy when you're at home, especially if you've got an always-on broadband connection to just think "Oh, I'll just see what's happening on Twitter", or "Oh, I'll just update Facebook" or whatever it might be.

**Those distractions can be really disruptive to your flow of writing.** The more you can do to just keep yourself in the zone, the better, and if that means turning off your internet connection, or unplugging your modem or something, then do it.

## Writing Software

You may find that you like to have a specific program for writing, if you write straight onto the computer, or maybe a specific notebook if you write by hand.

Again, you might vary this for different types of writing. I tend to write straight into Word if I'm producing anything that's non-fiction, so anything from a blog post to a book manuscript.

At the moment I'm using [Scrivener](#) for fiction, which has a nice full-screen writing environment that I can use, and it has lots of features where I can juggle different scenes around, and that seems to be working quite well for me.

In the past I've used [Dark Room](#) for fiction writing, which is free and simple to use. Again, it has a full-screen writing environment, so there were just no distractions on my screen.

## Writing Ritual

Then, some writers have slightly more esoteric ways, I suppose, of getting in the mood. They'll have a specific hat which is their writing hat, or they'll have a lucky t-shirt or a specific mug to drink their coffee from.

Some writers like to have incense or candles, or whatever it might be, to just create a specific creative environment. All these can be helpful, so if it works for you, by all means do it.

**The one thing I would say is to just be careful that you're not setting up such a very elaborate writing session that it takes you forever to align all your**

**pencils on the desk, and light all your candles, and dig out your special mug, or something.**

Even if it doesn't take you very long to set up that specific routine, you're pushing yourself towards a state where you really struggle to write if you can't have all those ideal things around you.

By all means use things for inspiration, but try not to become too dependent on them before you can write at all.

## **Warming Up Before Writing**

Then something else you might like to do, perhaps especially if you're just struggling a little bit to get into your writing, or you're just starting to set up a routine for yourself, is to have some sort of warm-up exercise.

You might have a writing prompt and you just write for ten minutes what comes into your head about that particular prompt. It could be that you don't have a prompt at all, and you just write for ten minutes whatever's on your mind.

Whatever works for you here, and personally nowadays I just want to get straight into what I'm writing, but **in the past I've used writing prompts just as a way to get my fingers moving on the keyboard.**

So one thing that I'm a little bit wary of here is that I've heard some writers say they'll start a writing session by reading over what they wrote before, or in the previous writing session.

I don't think that there's anything wrong with that, but I think it can lead you into an editing frame of mind, so that you end up starting to tweak things from the previous day's work, instead of doing what you should be doing in a writing session which is moving forward. It's not something I would necessarily recommend, but if you find it works for you, then by all means, go for it.

## **Motivation vs Self-Discipline**

Then, something else that perhaps we don't often consider when it comes to routine, or don't consider in quite the right way, is motivation.

People often feel that routine is about being very self-disciplined and sticking to it – so getting up at six every day, or sitting down every evening to write, or whatever it might be.

**I don't really think that rigid self-discipline necessarily goes hand-in-hand with the kind of inspiration and energy that we need as writers.**

Rather than focusing on discipline or willpower, it's better to think about our motivations for writing, the reasons we *want* to do it, rather than the reasons we *should* do it.

Something else I'd say here is don't push yourself too hard, especially when you're just establishing a routine. You definitely don't have to be doing a thousand words every day, or, you know, two hours of writing every day.

**Even if you're only doing an hour or two every week, perhaps it's what's comfortable for you right now, and it's what fits into your life right now.**

Personally I think it's much better to make slow and steady progress over the course of weeks or months than to go all out for a couple of weeks and then write nothing for months on end, because you just feel that it's too much pressure or too much stress, or too difficult.

## Setting a Minimum Target

Something you might want to consider doing is to set yourself a minimum target. **This can be something really small, much smaller than your ideal routine, because the idea is not just to do your minimum target.**

Ideally, often you'll find that once you've hit that minimum target you'll want to continue, but it's a way to motivate yourself to do *anything*.

Your minimum target might be something like "I'll write for ten minutes every Saturday", even though you're perhaps hoping to write for two hours.

It's okay if you only write for those ten minutes, you know, you might have days when that's really all you can manage, and it's an achievement just to do that, but often you'll find that once you get going with writing, you'll want to continue.

I know I find this with other areas of my life, maybe with exercise, or with housework – often the thought of doing it can be very daunting, but once I get into it it's easier, or it's even fun.

**Hopefully you'll find with writing that it does become fun, and all you need to do is just give yourself a little nudge to get into it.**

## Knowing Your Goal

Then, I think a really big part of motivation as a writer is having a goal in mind.

It's quite hard to just write for the sake of writing – though that's a good way to just explore ideas or to learn the craft, or to just get into a particular habit or routine of writing, as we're discussing today.

**It's more motivating by far to have a specific goal in mind.** That might be that you're taking on [NaNoWriMo](#), National Novel Writing Month, which is coming up very fast in November. That's where you aim to write a 50,000 word novel in a month, which is obviously a challenge, it's a big target, but it's something to shoot for. I know that some people find that really motivating.

It could be that your goal is something like you want to write two blog posts every week for your blog, or you want to write one chapter of your novel, or your non-fiction book. It could be that you want to write one poem every week.

If you've got one specific goal in mind, you've got a focus in mind for what you want to produce, and for how each session becomes part of your broader goal as a writer.

Obviously if you're writing blog posts, they're not just isolated pieces, they're going to help you build and grow your blog, and help you build your audience, you know, if you're writing scenes for a novel, you're not just writing one individual scene, you're writing one piece of a finished whole, and eventually you'll have a novel. All of this can really help with motivation.

## Accountability to Others

Then, another factor to consider here is accountability.

This doesn't just work for writing, it works for almost any goal, but I think it's perhaps especially important to us writers, because we're always writing on our own. It perhaps sometimes feels like no-one knows or cares much about what we're writing.

**When you're accountable to someone else, you say "I'm going to write this Saturday for two hours" or "I'm going to write a whole chapter of my book this week" or something like that, and then you tell them that you've done it, or you confess that you didn't quite make it this week.**

Hopefully they can encourage you and support you, or maybe give you the gentle nudge – or the slightly firmer nudge – that you might need if you're not quite making the progress that you've said you want to make.

You might find an accountability partner for this, you can support each other, and that might be somebody from the Huddle, it might be somebody you meet at a writing group in real life, and so on.

**Alternatively, you might be accountable in a slightly broader way.** You could tell your blog readers that there will be a new post twice a week on Mondays and on Thursdays, and then you might feel that you want to get that new post out there to them, because you've said that that's what you'll do.

You might go on Twitter at the start of a writing session and say "right, I'm going to be writing for the next hour" and then you go off Twitter and stay off Twitter for the next hour while you write, and then you go back on Twitter and you say "I've been writing, this is what I've accomplished."

Some of this might sound a bit silly, or it might seem it doesn't have much to do with the actual work of writing, but it does make a difference to us.

**Sometimes just knowing that your Twitter followers or your blog followers or your friend cares about what you're writing, and knows what you're writing can make a difference.** It can help you not pack it in and call it a day before maybe you've achieved what you want to achieve.

## Your Writing Matters

Then, I think something else when it comes to motivation is giving your writing some importance in your life, remembering that it is important, and not feeling bad or guilty in any way for the time that you spend writing.

I know it's easy to think that you should be doing the dishes or mowing the lawn, or in some cases doing paid work rather than working on a novel, or whatever it might be, but writing is important.

**Even if nobody's reading what you write yet, even if publication perhaps seems a very long way off, what you're doing matters.**

We need to remind ourselves that things like creativity and self-expression are not just luxuries that we can indulge in when everything's done and everything's crossed off our to-do list. They're essential for our wellbeing.

Just like exercise is important for our physical health, writing and doing things that we love are important for our mental health certainly, and what you might consider to be our spiritual health.

I know that I am a nicer person when I write, and when I get time to do some creative writing, as well as my day-to-day writing, I'm just a nicer person to be around.

**I'm happier and more grounded, and I think that's the case for lots of writers.**

We feel good after a writing session. We not only feel like we've accomplished something, but that we feel like we've almost been somewhere. It's a little bit like if you meditate or you pray, or if you have some kind of spiritual practice like that.

Writing can lift us out of the day to day, the stream of things that we're constantly doing. It can give us a different perspective, and it can just take us away from all that for a little bit.

I guess this is a little idealistic, or perhaps might seem a bit rose tinted, especially if the sort of writing you do is freelancing or something like that ... but I do believe that **when we write, we're putting something of ourselves**

**down onto paper, we're creating a message, and we're hoping to touch other people with what we write.**

I think that's a very important part of being human, and a very important part of society and of culture, and it's not something that we can dismiss as, oh this is just my little bit of scribbling, this is just my writing, this is just a hobby.

I think it's much more important than that. It's okay and it's good to own that importance, and to tell ourselves that writing matters, and to behave as though writing matters.

Then, the people around us who perhaps don't quite get it, who aren't writers themselves, and who don't understand that importance, will see from our behaviour that it is important to us, and they will come to respect that.

So, that's all for today's seminar. I think that routine's something that's best experienced rather than taught. It's not something that you can just learn from listening to me for half an hour, so please do go and try out some different ideas.

If you've thought of something that I've not specifically suggested, do let us know, and tell us in the forums how you get on.

If you've got a tip, or if you've developed a really good routine in your life, it would be really good for other Huddlers to hear about that, and to just pick up some ideas from you as well.

So do come over to the forums, we'll be really pleased to hear about your experiences, or your ideas, or your struggles.

I've also put a few useful links below, so do take a look at those.

Give yourself the chance to establish writing as an important or even a fundamental part of your life. Find ways that you can do that, **however busy you are, however many other commitments you have, you can find time to write.**