

Making Time to Write (Seminar A) Transcript

This is a transcript of the seminar, edited slightly for easy reading. You can find the audio version and worksheet at www.writershuddle.com/seminars/may2015.

Hi, I'm Ali Luke and this is the May seminar for Writers' Huddle, "Making Time to Write."

I'm back from maternity leave, I'm really, really pleased to be back with you guys. I wanted to do something a teeny bit different this month with the seminar ... because a question that I get all the time from writers is: "Where do I find the time to write? How can I make more time to write?"

And I know that this is something that has come up within the Huddle over the past few years. When I've chatted to people in the Huddle, again, just finding the time to write has been probably one of your biggest issues.

And I completely sympathise with that, because it's probably been my biggest writing struggle over the years too.

So what's a bit different this month is that I'm splitting the seminar into two separate parts:

Seminar A is aimed at people who really have very, very little time available to write.

So I'm thinking maybe you've got two very small children, which I can very much sympathise with, or you've got caring responsibilities or really long hours at work, or just your day is already packed with responsibilities and just having any extra hours to write is a real challenge.

Seminar B is for people who are in what maybe at first glance looks like a better situation, but isn't always, in terms of writing.

So that's for people who've maybe got some more time available, perhaps they're working but they've got the evenings and the weekends. Maybe they're

working part-time, or they might even be trying to launch into a full-time writing career.

So... I would suggest that you listen to whichever seminar seems to best fit where you currently are. Seminar A if you really have very, very few hours available for writing, Seminar B if you've got the time and it's more about making the most of that time. And obviously feel free to listen to both.

This introduction is going on both seminars, so if you do listen to both you know to skip the first couple of minutes.

Having Very Little Time to Write

So, here is Seminar A, for those of you with very little time available to write. So, first off, I completely understand where you're coming from.

I've been pretty lucky as a writer that most of the time I have had quite a few discretionary hours – the time has been there even if I've perhaps not used it to the full, when I was a student, or even when I was first working full-time, because I did have evenings and some time at the weekends.

And I've definitely found that with small children it's tougher. **It's tough just to find any time at all, and it's also tough to have much energy to write when the time's available.**

So if you've got a young family, if you've got elderly relatives you're taking care of, if you're working 60-hour weeks or something like that, or maybe if you just have a really busy, full life (which is lovely!) it might be hard to find the time for writing.

The very first thing I want to say is to go easy on yourself here. Because I don't think there's much to be gained by beating yourself up and going on a massive guilt trip that you should find the time to write, you should have the energy to write, maybe you should just sleep less and work through the night or something .

I don't think any of that is very healthy, and frankly I don't think beating yourself with a stick is going to encourage or motivate you to want to write.

So please be easy on yourself. **Sometimes life is just really busy, sometimes life is really hard, and it can sometimes be hard for other writers to totally understand that.**

I know before I had kids it was hard for me to envisage just what having small children involved – all the stuff that you might not think of like when they wake you up in the night, or the amount of extra housework, or all the things that impact on your time and energy, that maybe aren't totally obvious from the outside.

So please don't let other writers make you feel bad if they're saying “oh, anyone can find the time to write.” Because not everybody has the same challenges that you might be facing right now.

Carving Out Some Time for Your Writing

Having said that, I think it *is* possible to find some time, for most of us. I think your writing should be something that you prioritise in the sense that it's important and it matters to you, and it's worth doing, and you shouldn't feel bad for trying or for wanting to make some time for your writing.

For probably all of us in the Huddle, we're called to be writers. We're not just writers because it's a job, it's a pay cheque or it's something that we need to do to further other ambitions.

We're writers because we love to write. Or at the very least we love to have written, if we don't necessarily love every minute of the kind of writing itself.

Writing is important, then, to have a balance in your life. It may well be important for your mental health. I know that I'm certainly grumpier if I don't get to write, particularly write fiction, on a reasonably regular basis, and I think if I was prevented from writing at all I would find that really, really tough.

So please do see your writing as something important and something to try and keep up with, even just in small ways, when life is a bit manic.

What Can You Change to Make More Time to Write?

Let's look at some practicalities. Firstly, I would start by seeing, can you just make some time to write? So however busy life is, try to take a look at what's happening on a daily basis.

Is there some stuff that you could just cut out? Is there maybe a committee you volunteer on that you could just say, actually, I need to take a break from this for a few years or I need to stop doing this?

Is there a particular kind of task around the house that takes up a lot of time, that you could just say "I'm not going to do ironing any more?" (I never iron anything, I'd much rather write.)

You know, is there just something you can say, actually, I'm going to just forget this thing and it can be dropped from my life without really any negative impact on me?

That might not be possible, though. **So the next thing, is there some area where you can get some paid or unpaid help?**

I can't really drop looking after the kids. I can't just say "oh, we won't bother to look after the kids today, I won't bother feeding the baby." That would be bad.

But something I can do is ask my mum to help out. She sometimes takes Kitty for a bit. My husband also does a lot of the childcare, so I'm in a lucky position compared to a lot of parents here.

Another option is getting some paid help, so that might be paid childcare. We get a cleaner in once a week just because then the cleaning is done and it's one less thing to be thinking about.

Whatever your life looks like, hopefully you've got some people in your life who you might be able to approach who could just lend you a hand, even if it's just one hour a week when somebody could come and sit with the baby so you could get some writing done without being distracted by the baby fussing.

If that's not possible, as I say, see if you can pay someone to help. I know that money can be an issue here, but even if it's just occasionally, that could just give you a little bit of writing time.

Then if you have a spouse or partner or housemate or somebody who you live with, can you negotiate with them a bit?

That might be them taking the kids if you have kids, that could be them taking on some other chore that you normally do. Even if it's just for a limited period of time, perhaps, while you're really busy with work, say. So just look for ways that you could make a little bit more time on a weekly basis.

And one thing I'd add here is, **don't feel that you need to pack every minute of your day with things.**

In the evenings I like to sit down and have my dinner and watch some TV and unwind a bit, and I'm certainly not going to cut that out for the sake of trying to squeeze in an extra 30 minutes of writing, because I really need that downtime. And I'm sure you really need downtime as well.

I'm not saying here, make more time by just cramming your day absolutely full, but instead do it by trying to cut out some of the things that are already filling up your day.

Using Your Writing Time Efficiently

So then however much time you've got, however much time you've managed to make, you can use it haphazardly or you can use it efficiently.

Say you've got 30 minutes to write, and you sit down and you have a look at Facebook, and you have a look at Twitter, and you make a cup of coffee, and you try to decide what you're going to work on ... then you're not going to have a very efficient writing session.

Writing in Small Chunks

For me, writing in 15-minute blocks worked when Nick was very little and Kitty was still having an afternoon nap, so I used to manage to get a little 15-minute chunk when they were overlapping on their nap and before I maybe had a cookie and a cup of tea.

So you may find that even a really short block of time like 15 minutes can actually be quite good if you just sit down and really, really go for it.

I think that works best if you've got some kind of ongoing project you can just keep picking up on – a short story or novel or maybe a blog post or a blog series, a book or something that's on the go and you can just pick up where you left off each session.

I actually found that I wrote more in some of those 15-minute blocks than I could write in a whole hour when I was a student. Sitting down and focusing and knowing that you've only got a short time really helps.

I would also say set a timer. For me there's something about the act of setting the timer that focuses my attention, and if it's ticking away the 15 minutes, I know I've got to write for those 15 minutes and I don't want to cheat by doing something else.

Writing at Different Times of Day

Then also in terms of making the most of your time, just try different times of the day, because some people are great first thing in the morning, some people are at their best in the evening (I'm really not) and some people have a big surge of energy around lunchtime.

If you've got some flexibility over when you might find a little bit of writing time, maybe see if a different time of day would work better for you.

Focusing on One Writing Project

Then in terms of the writing projects you're focusing on, so I just touched on that briefly a moment ago, I would say focus on one thing.

Don't have five different projects that you're trying to pick up and put down, and decide which one you're going to work on and which you're inspired to do every single writing session. Have one thing, like your blog or your novel or what have you.

If you're not already working on a really big project like a novel, I would suggest maybe focusing on something small while your time is limited.

It's probably a bit more motivating to start and finish a short story in a month or so than to sort of make very, very slow progress on a novel. I know that's not always an option, you know, if you're knee-deep in a novel already and you

really love writing it, please keep going. But if you can work on something that can be finished and completed in a reasonable span of time, that can be a big boost to your confidence as a writer.

Not Worrying About Writing

So there's also one thing you may want to consider if life is just really manic right now – you're pulling long shifts, you're looking after kids, whatever it might be. **And that's not writing.**

And maybe that's a bit heretical for me to say as a writer, and I don't want anybody to shove their writing aside for months or years at a time. But if you're going through a really manic month, then you may just need to tell yourself, “actually, I'm not going to worry about writing.”

If you have a bit of time and the urge strikes you, by all means write. But you're not going to pressure yourself to find or make the time. And that's absolutely fine. **You're still a writer, even if you're not writing every minute of the day or every week of the month or every month of the year.**

And you may want to keep a little notebook at hand where you can jot down some ideas. Some of my best thinking, for my novels in particular but also for my blog, has come at times when I've not been very actively writing but I've just been mulling over ideas and having a bit of time and space to reflect.

So it may be that you're going through a really busy period for your life and a kind of fallow period for your writing, but that could be a good thing. And sometimes all you need to do is just try and reframe that as “OK, this is where I'm in a less active phase of writing, a more contemplative, reflective phase of my writing.”

That's fine, that's OK, that's not something to feel bad or guilty or frustrated about.

So as I say, I absolutely understand if your big challenge with writing right now is just having any time to do it ... or if you do write as your career, then having time to work on some of the things you really love.

It is a challenge, it is tough, and... hopefully whatever your life is looking like right now, you can see a path forwards into the future where things might be a bit less busy.

But hopefully you can also find a way to just connect with your writing right now, whether that's doing a little 15-minute chunk three times a week, whether that's spending a couple of minutes jotting some notes in a notebook when you get a few minutes of peace to yourself, whether that's carving out two hours a week every weekend when you can write and your partner's taken the kids out, or when you've got a friend who can lend a hand with some other responsibilities that you've got.

And just very best of luck with this. Hang on in there. You are a writer. You will find a way to be writing or to be connecting with writing, and hopefully life will get less hectic for you soon.