

Making Time to Write (Seminar B) 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.

Using Your Writing Time Well

This is Seminar B, when you have some time to write but you're struggling to make good use of that time, or you're just finding that things are filling up your time even though on paper there should be some time available.

So first off, please go easy on yourself. We all need some downtime, and even if you have all day, every day available to write, which I don't think anyone in the Huddle really does, nobody's going to be able to be creative for 8 to 10 hours a day.

It's just not the kind of work that you can do in that kind of intense, sustained way. So please, please don't feel guilty about having some downtime.

If you feel that it's not so much that you're having the downtime that you need and you're having a rest from writing, but you're procrastinating or you're frustrated that you're not able to get on with things, then that's maybe where you need to take some action.

And this is an issue that lots and lots of people, lots of writers, face. Please don't feel like you're the only person who's struggling with this. I've certainly struggled with that over the years, particularly when I did have a lot of time available.

Understanding and Dealing With Procrastination

It can be very difficult sometimes when you've not got a schedule, or you've not got lots of commitments in the day, to really figure out how best to use the time and when to write. It's very easy for your writing to expand to fill the whole time available.

When I was a student I had really long vacations from university, and I didn't really use the time anywhere near as effectively as I could have.

I was part of a writing group that met once a week and normally we'd all take about 1000 words to read every week. So I had a whole week to produce 1000 words.

Inevitably I'd be writing my 1000 words on the day of the group. And it would take me pretty much the whole day – I'd do a little bit and then I'd get distracted, do something else, I'd do a little bit more, and then I'd edit it...

These days, I'm much more efficient because I have to be. And I so wish I could have all that time back again, I would use it so much better.

But if you are in that situation, please understand that I've been through it, lots of people go through it, it can be really tough to create the structure and the motivation to get yourself moving and writing.

Change the Place Where You Write

My first recommendation is to change the place where you write. Because environment has, I think, a really strong effect on us as writers, and we don't always realise that.

I know that I struggle to write if I'm on holiday. When I go away on holiday there's just something in my brain that switches and says "You're not working now, you're on holiday." That's probably a good thing! But it is a bit of a pain if I'm thinking, oh, I'm going to get some of this blog post down, or something.

So maybe it's just that you need to not write at your kitchen table. Because when you're at the kitchen table you see all the stuff in the kitchen that needs

doing, and it nags at you, and you think "I should be doing the dishes," or "I should be paying those bills," or whatever it might be.

Or maybe you're trying to write on the sofa, but it doesn't work for you. I am really bad at focusing when I'm sitting on the sofa. Again, I think it's like going on holiday, my brain just switches into "hey, you're relaxing!"

So, it may be that you need to sit up at a desk, or you want to get out of the house altogether and go to a coffee shop or a library. I really like libraries for this because there are other people in there working, and that makes me switch into my "oh, you're working now" frame of mind.

I think coffee shops are quite good because although they're quite noisy, it's a constant noise, and it can just block out some of the distractions that you might get if you're maybe at home and there's sort of intermittent noise from family members.

So, whatever works for you, honestly, here. I don't care if you write in a treehouse, or sitting on a boat in the middle of a lake, or on aeroplanes, (though that'll get kind of expensive if you have to take a flight every time you're going to write) – just whatever works for you.

Just find a place that says to you 'I'm working, I'm writing, I'm focused, and give it a go. Because you may find that your problem is not so much that you're just a really hopelessly unfocused, procrastinating individual, it may just be that you haven't found the right place to be doing your writing.

If you're not sure here what's going to work for you, or if you need a real boost, you might want to think about booking a writing retreat. Because that's going to be set up to be a really good writing environment.

You need to pay money for it, which I think is always quite a motivation to get on and do something, and it may just give you that kind of kickstart with your writing that will help you carry on at home.

That's just food for thought. If you can't do a whole week of retreat, or something, then there are urban retreats where you can just go and write for a few hours, that kind of thing. Or you can maybe create your own retreat, just book somewhere to go away on holiday for a long weekend.

Writing at a Specific Time of Day

As well as writing in a specific place, you might want to consider making writing a part of your routine, something structured. I don't want to underplay the importance of feeling inspired to write here, but I think there's some extent to which **inspiration comes when you actually sit down to do the writing.**

The act of writing can get you inspired and motivated, and if you are sitting down regularly to write, at the same time every day, you may find it's easy just to switch into that writing rather than relaxing or housework or whatever state of mind that you otherwise would have.

So it could be, say, you're a parent and your kids are in school so they're out between – in the UK – about 9am and 3pm every day. Maybe you sit down and you write as soon as you've got home from taking the kids to school. Or you sit down at say 10am, once you've had a cup of tea, and then you write for an hour. Or whatever it might be. And ideally you do that before you get the chores done.

If that's not working for you, try something else. Take the kids to school, drop them off, go to a coffee shop and write. Take a laptop, take a notebook.

Experiment with these things. Try to figure out where writing could fit into a structured routine in your daily or weekly life. Try to figure out where is a good place for you to be writing.

Being Productive During Writing Sessions

When you actually sit down to write, it's good to look at ways to boost your focus and your productivity. And again, I don't want to get too rules-focused or routine-focused here, because inspiration does matter. You don't necessarily want to always be writing with your eye on how efficient are you being and how many words you're clocking up.

But, if you're spending a lot of your writing time getting distracted, having a look at Facebook, having a look at Twitter, making another cup of coffee, doing the housework, that kind of thing, then it's going to be hard to get much momentum.

I've found the Pomodoro technique really effective, particularly for blogposts. **So that's when you write for 25 minutes and you take a 5-minute break, and then you write for 25 minutes and you take a 5-minute break.**

By all means play around with the times. You might want to do 20 minutes or you might even want to do a 10-minute burst if you're new to this.

I've found that a little bit trickier for fiction, because with fiction I've found I tend to get a little bit more into it and I want to keep going. I did do 15-minute little chunks when Nick was very small, when he and Kitty would overlap on their nap. So even if you're writing fiction you might want to give this timed, small chunks technique a go. You might find it surprisingly effective for you.

Your Workflow and the Writing Process

Then something else to think about here is the workflow of your writing process. Probably you've heard me say in the past that you shouldn't be trying to draft and edit at the same time.

But you may also want to think about, are you planning your blogpost or your chapter ahead of actually trying to write it, are you doing any research you need to do, or are you getting two paragraphs in and then realising you don't know what's going to come next, and then you're having to replan and then you're having to cut some stuff out...

... so you may just find that your workflow is not quite currently working for you and you need to really break writing down into stages. If you need some help with that, check out these Huddle resources:

- [February 2013 seminar: The Writing Process from Start to End](#) – guidance on breaking down writing into a clear workflow, from ideas and plans to polishing and publishing.
- [Getting Started with Fiction mini-course](#) – this breaks down the fiction planning and writing process, if you're right at the start of getting into a novel or short story.

So if you can get into flow and avoid a lot of stop-starting during writing sessions, I think you'll find that helps. Both with how much you can produce during a session and also just the motivation to keep going.

Making Yourself Accountable to Other People

Then the final thing you can do if you are struggling to make the most of your time, struggling to really use the writing time you feel you should have, is to make yourself accountable.

That might be to your partner, maybe you say to them **“Look, I'm going to write 1000 words today, please ask me over dinner how it went.”**

And then you know that somebody knows you should be writing, you know you're going to be asked about it, and that could be enough to kind of spur you on when you get to 400 words and it feels like a long way to go.

You could do this with a friend, and in particular this could be a good thing to do with other writers who maybe will understand when you need a little bit of a kick to get going and when you need a bit of support and encouragement and kindness and gentleness.

Please feel free to use the Writers' Huddle forums for this. If you do want to be accountable to other writers, let us know what you want to get done this week, what you want to get done this month, or even just what you want to get done today.

Something else that I know has been done by Huddlers, and by I'm sure lots of writers, is to have a tick chart so you put a tick (or a check mark if you're American) or a cross or whatever you want to do, a little smiley face sticker if you like, on your calendar every day that you write.

And you try and perhaps build up a chain of days when you've written, or you try to write on a certain number of days each week, and so on. And that can just be a nice visual reminder of progress. And **once you get on a roll with writing it's much easier to stay there.**

So as I say, I do sympathise if you're in the situation of having some time available but struggling to use that time well. Unless you could borrow a small

child for six months, get used to living with a small child and marvel in the time you now have without them, I'm not sure if I really have a perfect solution to this! I think it's just something that you have to feel your way towards a bit.

But do try with the getting a different place to write, try with the getting a routine into your life for your writing, and see how that works out for you.

I'd love to hear your tips and suggestions in the forums, because in many ways I feel this is a harder battle than having a very busy life and very little time.

Because when you've got very little time to write, you think, "OK, I've got 15 minutes, I'm going to use those 15 minutes." When you've got three hours it's easy to think, "I've got to write for three hours," and then you can get a stuck before you even start.

So do share your tips for what you're doing in the forums. Let me know what works for you, and maybe that will help somebody else in Writers' Huddle as well.