

What Does a Writer Need Most? A Deadline.

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Like most writers, experienced and beginner alike, I often used to berate myself for all the writing I did *not* do. I knew I had something to say. I carried stories or opinion columns in my head. I would read Anna Quindlen writing about life in her 30's and think, "I could do that." And best – or maybe worst – of all, I knew I had some talent – because people had told me so. Whether it was a high school English teacher or a local newspaper editor who had published a personal essay that I *had* gotten around to writing, I had been encouraged, now and again, to keep at it.

Most powerful of all, however, was the memory of that profound sense of satisfaction, that thrill unlike any other, of reading something I wrote and deciding it was not half bad. It was akin to a spiritual moment – realizing that I had accomplished one small thing that I had been put here on earth for.

But for some unfathomable reason, I spent a lot more time thinking about writing, planning to write, and mulling over what I would be writing, than actually doing the thing itself. So what was the problem? Why was it so hard – and still so hard, I readily admit – to find that private moment at my computer, or with notebook and pen, and just get something written?

Jobs, raising children, and life's other responsibilities filling my time were an easy excuse. But it was something more than that.

Today, as a published author, essayist, and founder and director of the Westport Writers' Workshop, where I lead workshops and coach writers, I have made it my life's work to knock down those barriers not only in myself, but in others. I have discovered that the resistance many of us feel to getting the writing done – multi-published authors or story-in-the-head-carriers alike – is actually (unless you're Stephen King) quite natural – the simple consequence of being a human being.

Namely, being a human, thinking, and remembering species of animal, means that the stuff inside of us, *wants* to stay inside. We were designed to keep buried

inside us all those thoughts and ideas that might distract us from hunting, gathering, and watching out for predators. Inner feelings, memories, the deeper emotions that fuel the best and most passionate writing? They're *supposed* to stay hidden down there, are they not? To keep each of us a functional adult instead of a distracted, feeling, blubbering mess?

So as writers – or any artist, for that matter – we are salmons swimming upstream. So be it. We accept that challenge every time we retreat to a quiet place to take pen in hand, or at a keyboard, and begin that first, grueling sentence. Because only then do we experience that miracle – and if you're writer, you know exactly what I mean – when the flow begins, and words and thoughts and sentences start flying, and we have little to do except step aside of ourselves and witness the miracle of the writing getting done.

But how to get started upstream? How to overcome that first critical hurdle, which is to get that first agonizing sentence or two?

For me, the number one tool – the holy grail, actually – for what a writer truly needs to write, is this: a deadline.

Whether it's a writing workshop, a regular critique group, or a publishing contract with a six-figure advance, almost every writer has to have in place some kind of externally motivating pressure to get those words onto the blank page. Furthermore, the more frequent the deadline, the more one writes. When I signed up for a writing workshop that met weekly, I wrote something new once a week. When I was part of a self-organized critique group that met once a month, I wrote once a month. And when I did finally have a signed contract requiring me to turn over sixty-five thousand words I had yet to write by mid-August, all my old excuses – "I'm too tired to write in the evening" or "I've got to get this load of laundry started" simply dissipated.

Here at the Westport Writers' Workshop, I usually begin each creative writing workshop meeting the same way. I look around the table and ask, "Who has written for today?" When the hands go up, I sit back, smile at them, and say, "You know what, guys? If you learn nothing today, you have already gotten your money's worth.

"Because that," I say, pointing to the pages around the table, "is where the miracle has already taken place."