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Time management is an issue in each of our lives and a skill we all must master in order to be successful ☺ whether it be in our personal lives or our professional lives. Our to-do lists are often too long for our days ☺ at least our waking hours. Add to the mix a creative endeavor like writing and it's easy to fall behind on everything. Whether you're a full-time, experienced writer or brand-new to the craft, a writing schedule can be a terrific tool for staying caught up and staying sane.

### **Create a writing schedule**

Which sounds very nice, but what exactly is a writing schedule? Basically it's a writing blueprint for a period of time in your life. It says how much you're going to write on any given day, and it even includes time off for personal time and vacations. The most important thing to remember is that it is a working document and you'll need to be disciplined enough to stick to the calendar you create but be flexible at the same time.

Writing schedules can be as simple as some notes scribbled on a calendar or as detailed as a calendar spreadsheet done in four colors. Susan Mallery explains that she prints out blank calendars from her computer and uses different colors of pen to fill in her schedule. She puts days off in one color, time set aside for writing proposals in a second, time for writing the actual books in a third, and deadlines in bright red.

You can buy half-off calendars in January and fill them out. What you use to make your schedule will depend on your personality, but regardless of how right or left brain you might be, there are a few simple rules to keep in mind when creating a writing schedule.

### **Write consistently**

It's better to write one or two pages five days a week than to write in great bursts then avoid the computer for several days or weeks. Consistent writing does several things —all positive. By writing consistently, you are training your brain to be creative on a regular basis. Over time, you can develop a writing habit. That habit means when you sit down at your computer and open your word processing program, your brain knows it's time to be creative.

Writing consistently means you are constantly practicing your craft. With regular writing, you are able to put new ideas and concepts into practice very quickly. Writing consistently improves the quality of your writing and how prolific you can become.

For those of you with full-time jobs and/or a family, finding the time to write can be a challenge. Many writers will get up an hour early or stay up late and work into the wee hours of the night. Some people write during their lunch hours at work. If you have a long commute in a car, you could try dictating your book into a small tape recorder, and then transcribe the work that evening. With little kids at home, writing time is where you find it. Having a notepad and pen handy at all times will allow you to write down a few lines of dialogue or description of a scene as the ideas come to you or when there are a couple of minutes of quiet time at home —I know, easier said than done!

### **Set realistic goals**

If you're working full-time and have a husband and kids and a dog to come home and make dinner for and then have to get off to bed, you're probably not going to be able to write twenty pages a day. However, you probably can commit to two or three.

Three pages, five days a week is fifteen pages a week. Over time those pages add up.

Writing fifteen pages a week means you can write one Silhouette Special Edition book every 5 months. Many published authors are able to complete two or three books a year with only a few pages a day.

Second, build up your page count slowly. If you're determined to get serious about your writing and you're going to give it more time, that's great. But don't try to jump from three pages a day to fifteen. You'll only frustrate yourself. It's better to add a half page every couple of weeks and stay with it than to try to increase too much too quickly and get burned out or worse, quit.

### **Schedule time off**

Yes, even the most successful writers need vacations from writing. Regular writing is the key to success, but regular writing only works when we have balance in our lives. When you create your writing schedule, the first thing to put on it are nonworking days. Holidays, family vacations, conferences. Remember to give yourself time to get caught up with the laundry after being gone for two weeks.

Think about summer vacation when the kids are off, visiting relatives, and don't forget to schedule in an emergency week every six months. Because life happens. These emergency weeks will be flexible and should be moved around the calendar because we all know emergencies are not predictable—but you still need to allow yourself to schedule in time for unexpected events.

### **Plan your writing time**

Once the nonwriting time is on the calendar, go ahead and put in the actual writing time you plan to dedicate to writing your book(s). Write in your personal goal for each writing day in terms of pages written. If you're the kind of writer who does several drafts, don't forget to schedule those in. If you spend a lot of time plotting your book, doing character charts and research, those all need to go on the schedule as well. Not every writing day has to be spent at the keyboard.

But while scheduling your work, don't commit to more than five days of writing work a week. The brain loves to be creative, but it needs time to rest, too. If your weekends are your best times to write, then consider taking off Wednesday and Thursday. You can use Friday to gear up for your big writing session.

### **Be flexible**

Go into this with an understanding that your writing schedule is going to change. While Susan Mallery tends to plan her time for the next 12 to 14 months, she has never had a schedule last longer than five months.

Why? Because life interferes. Her editor, Karen Taylor Richman, will sometimes call and suddenly ask her to set aside the book she's writing to work on a special writing project. Deadlines get moved around and she may have to switch the order of the books she had planned to write. This may seem like no big deal, but the author then has to change gears in terms of her thinking and then go back to revise her writing schedule.

Or you may be invited to a surprise wedding, or a new baby has entered the family. All of these things throw wrenches into your schedule, but if you stick to your writing calendar, they are workable obstacles.

When your schedule gets completely messed up, the best way to handle it is to start over. Think about where you are right now, not where you would have been. Plan a new schedule and then stick to it.

If you write consistently, schedule time to work and time to play, you'll find that your writing energy is always high. Discipline and a good, strong writing habit can keep you motivated through difficult times, be they about your writing career or your personal life.