Dopamine & Distractions: Why You Won’t Write & Why the Famous Guy’s Do

Presented by S. G. George

Let’s have a look at one famous writer’s words about how he writes:

Ian Fleming

*So far as the physical act of writing is concerned, the method I have devised is this. I do it all on the typewriter, using six fingers. The act of typing is far less exhausting than the act of writing, and you end up with a more or less clean manuscript. The next essential is to keep strictly to a routine—and I mean strictly. I write for about three hours in the morning—from about 9:30 till 12:30—and I do another hour’s work between 6 and 7 in the evening. At the end of this I reward myself by numbering the pages and putting them away in a spring-back folder. The whole of this four hours of daily work is devoted to writing narrative.*

Writing Automatic

The goal in having a routine is making your writing a habit. Habits follow a standard order of operation.
Cues > Cravings > Response > Reward

Cue: prompt to desire Craving: unmet need

Response: the habit Reward: relief from the craving

Brandon Sanderson’s routine:

Wakes up at noon. Works 1 – 5 p.m. Has family time 5 – 10 p.m. Works again 10 p.m. to 2 a.m., stopping to record his word count in a spreadsheet as he goes for motivation, then has fun time 2 – 4 a.m.

The Chunk

This seems to be the ideal amount of time to work. It’s a four hour block set aside that facilitates two hours of concentrated work with an hour of wind up time and wind down time where you’re not as productive. You see this among the writing routines of many famous authors.

Making Motivation

Motivation is caused by the need to fill cravings and avoid punishment. Humans are motivated by approval, respect, and praise while trying to avoid lowering our status. Create motivation by reward your routine with something like a visual word/work/time tracker and by putting yourself in the position where failure makes people think less of you.

Octavia Butler’s routine:

Woke up “before dawn” at two in the morning to write until it was time to get ready for her day job, at which point she worked for eight hours. She came home exhausted and read. Her routine asked her to write even when she was uninspired despite the quality of the words.

Fixing Writer’s Block

Remove all distractions and sit until your time is up. Eventually you will get so bored that your brain will figure out the problem, even if it’s just to entertain itself. Write whatever comes to mind without worry of quality. This kind of isolation reduces cues for non-writing things and reinforce repetition, building up strong neural pathways.

Donna Tartt’s routine:

She writes three hours in morning and will stop there on bad days. But on days when she’s on a roll, she’ll write until she’s exhausted. As a reward, she reads a book she wants to read, not necessarily one that she thinks she should read. Although these novels often tie back to what she's writing thematically. Tartt often finds herself writing on location for her novels, spending time working in hotels or libraries featured in her works.

Location Location Location

Then environment around you informs habitual success because spaces are absolutely chock full of cues. If you’re looking to start a new habit, new places makes changing easier. If you can’t make it to a new space, redefining or rearranging your work space can have a similar effect. In general, one space gets one use, so don’t play games where you want to write.

Physical Spaces

Tailor your physical space to have as few distractions as possible, somewhere away from food images and hobby cues. It should be comfortable to be in and close to where you already go. Tailor it to your writing process, and when all else fails, get out of the house. Coffee shops, libraries, and hotels are all great places to get writing done.

Digital Spaces

Your digital spaces are just as important as the physical ones. Devices are bad habit cue boxes. They’re always begging for attention. Turn off your notifications. If you can’t have a computer for writing, at least have a program you only use for writing. Leave your writing project open when you walk away from your computer so it’s there for you when you get back. Try turning off your Wi-Fi if you’re in a slump.

Steven King’s routine:

He wakes up, eats breakfast, then goes for a 3.5-mile run. Between 8:00 and 8:30 a.m. he takes his vitamin pill, starts his music, and grabs a drink (water or tea). Then he goes to the little office he works in where the last page he liked is on the top of his in-progress manuscript. His office is set up to be completely distraction free, even the desk is in the corner away from the window. For two hours, King writes new material then he goes back and revises. He'll print what he likes then leaves it at the top of the pile.

What you can do:

Observe & record daily routine for between a few days to a week. Don’t change anything at first, but look for times when you’re impulsively doing things instead of mindfully deciding to write. Then you can decide when to add writing to your schedule. Add it after something else you do frequently, like making coffee or going to a yoga class. Don’t feel the need to jump straight to four hours. Start at even just twenty minutes. Be specific when you decide to do this. Write it down. “After [current habit], I will write at [location].” Be consistent. It doesn’t have to be daily, but it should be often. Find a way that works for you to track your progress in a visual way, spreadsheet, sticky notes, pretty notebook, whatever. And if you’re not motivated by numbers, find accountability, either set yourself deadlines or find a group that will help you.

Whatever you end up doing, the goal is to make writing easier than not-writing. Mostly by becoming addicted to the dopamine you get from it, but you can also use negative reinforcement (humiliation, deprivation, etc.). By removing negative triggers from your writing time (notifications, television noises, food visuals, hobby supplies), it will become a much more attractive option.

Sources

*Atomic Habits* by James Clear

https://www.youtube.com/@christy-anne-jones playlist on trying author routines

https://youtu.be/UMI21xuZB5U?si=HPDOBq2YCT2y6S0-

https://lithub.com/ian-fleming-explains-how-to-write-a-thriller/