

SECRETS OF PROFESSIONAL WRITERS

Some regard writing as a mystery beyond the ken of mere mortals. Yet all professional writers know that it's a skill that can be learnt—just like woodworking, cooking, or golf. Once you start seeing writing as a craft, then you'll understand that adopting a few writers' tricks can dramatically lift the quality of your output from muddled mess to professional perfection (well, as near as it can be in this crazy old world).

Here are some writing secrets that should help:

1. **Manage your material.** One technique used by professional writers of non-fiction books is to get a ring binder and some divider tabs, and sort your topic into chapters. This makes your material more manageable and less overwhelming.
2. **Make it easy to pick up where you left off.** Finish for the day at a point that will be easy to start from next time you work on the document. Ernest Hemingway advised:

You write until you come to a place where you still have your juice and know what will happen next and you stop and try to live though until the next day when you hit it again.

It's so much easier to sit down at the keyboard and start at a place where it's easy to pick up, rather than a difficult head-scratching, tears-before-bedtime point in the document.

3. **Write when you are most alert.** For most people that will be between 9am and 12 noon. Some at the extremes of the bell curve are night owls and work best in the late hours of the evening. Others are natural larks and can function well at 5am. Margaret Thatcher reputedly had only four or five hours sleep a night. Winston Churchill likewise.

But most of us have a natural circadian rhythm that means we're at our best at the beginning of the work day. How does this factor in to writing a report or other large project? Keep those precious hours of maximum alertness for your more challenging tasks. In other words, don't answer your emails when you first arrive at work.

4. **Avoid interruptions.** An interrupted task takes *five times* longer to complete than an uninterrupted task. The brain has to switch modes from the mindset required for the the original task, gear up for the new task (the interruption), deal with that, then switch back into the mindset of the original. Each step takes time. And every time you're interrupted, you increase the likelihood of making mistakes.

So do whatever it takes to ensure you're not interrupted. Wear headphones and pretend to be listening to your iPod. Put a sign on the door. Find an ante-room where you can hide out with your laptop. Or better still, leave the office and work somewhere else altogether.

- 5. Get an early start.** As soon as you've been assigned the writing task, find out what the parameters are, what time-frame you have, and any other key issues. This allows your subconscious to start working on the project before you've done any actual writing. This should lead you to sketch out a framework or some headings, and perhaps do a data dump. Then you might be pleasantly surprised (as I have been many times) to find that all you need do is a tidy up and edit before the final proof.

These techniques, you'll notice, have nothing to do with writing style, punctuation, or grammar, but they are just as essential to turning out a successful final product in a given time-frame as the ability to pen beautiful prose.

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