



Seven Reminders About Writing a Book

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Writing a book is as much about the process as it is about the content. I'm a process kind of person, so I pay a lot of attention to it.

In the course of writing five books of my own, and ghost writing several others, I noticed seven lessons about my process of which I must continually remind myself. I can't seem to learn them for good, and when I forget them I get in trouble. Here they are:

1. Every sentence is a doorway. When I put a period at the end of a sentence I usually treat it as a signal to move on. That is all wrong. A period at the end of a sentence ought to be a signal to ask questions about the sentence.

Take this sentence as an example: It is dangerous to seek to possess knowledge. I need to remind myself to ask questions like these: What is knowledge? How does one try to possess knowledge? In what ways is it dangerous? Why did I say "dangerous" instead of "silly" or "fruitless"? Is seeking to possess knowledge silly and fruitless as well as dangerous? What examples do I have of the danger of seeking to possess knowledge? Why did I say "seeking to possess" instead of just "possess"? What are all the meanings of the word "possess"?

There are a lot of questions in even the shortest of sentences. If I remember to ask myself questions about every sentence, and then answer those that seem relevant and interesting, I have a book.

2. Put your butt in a chair and stay there until the words come. I am great at distracting myself. There is always someone to call, someplace to go, some web site to explore, a dog to walk. So it is important for me to schedule appointments with my book; times when I pay attention to it even if I do not feel inspired.

Sit down. Stay there. Don't answer the phone. Don't wander into the kitchen to make tea. Once, a friend came knocking at the front door of my house and I didn't answer. Two hour blocks of time work for me. My true friends understand and forgive me.

3. Make the work portable. Along with staying in my chair, I also find it useful to think of everywhere I go as an extension of my writing space. I have discovered ideas in malls, on turnpikes, on river banks, in the woods, at dinners, and in many other places. When I am working on a book I carry a small notebook and digital recorder.

4. Mindless activity can be useful to the mind. When conscious awareness is engaged in writing, the subconscious is also at work. We can't hear what goes on in the subconscious because we are filled up with mental activity. Breaks from the mental activity allow the subconscious to burst into conscious awareness. These breaks ought to be relatively mindless. A long walk works well for me. So does a long drive. I forget this when my need to think of myself as a busy guy gets in the way.

5. Write while you sleep. Another way that I put my subconscious to work is to pay attention to my book just before I go to bed. I might read what I wrote that day. I might start a new section or chapter; just a few sentences or notes. When I remember to do that, getting started the next day is much easier. Often, I can't wait to get started.

6. Don't talk away the energy. When I am writing a book, lots of people want to talk with me about it. Some are just curious, some sincerely want to be helpful, and some want me to write the book that they wish they were writing. Many writers gain energy from such discussions. I often don't.

I need to be careful about whom I talk with, about what aspect of my writing I discuss, and about what point in my process the discussion takes place. If I talk with the wrong person at the wrong time, or about the wrong aspect of my writing, I lose some kind of vital energy that I need in order to write.

7. Manage the process. Writing isn't one single process. It isn't just banging out words. There are lots of varied activities involved: research, editing, reading what I have already written, brainstorming, making outlines, formatting text, and so forth. There is a lot to do.

Usually, when what I am doing isn't moving the work forward, and I am feeling frustrated or even just bored, it helps to shift from one activity to another. If I can remember how writing works I can better manage the work of writing.

Now that I have collected these lessons that I need to remember, maybe I won't forget them as easily. I'm not betting on that! But maybe you will learn them for good and avoid needing constant reminders. Good luck.