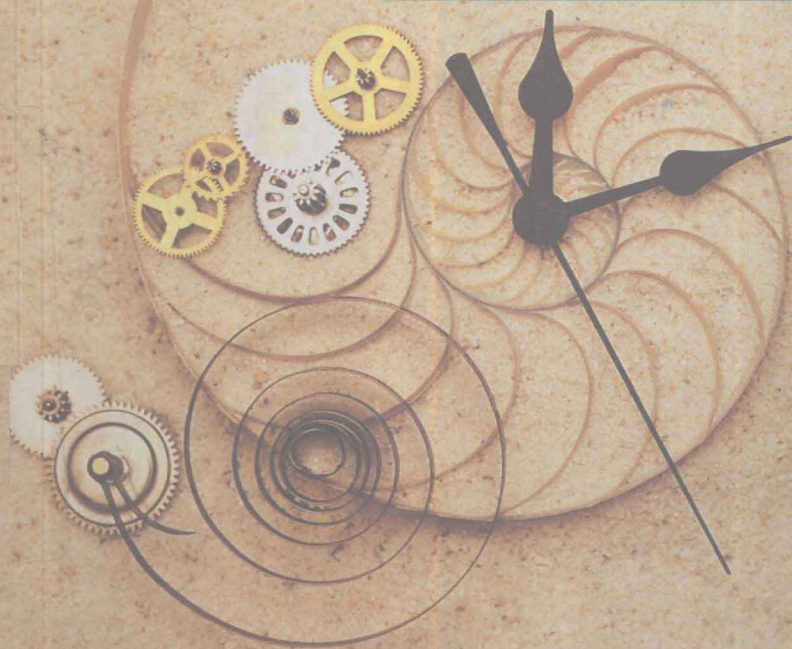


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CLOCKWORK

Muse

A PRACTICAL GUIDE
to WRITING THESES,
DISSERTATIONS,
AND BOOKS



EVIATAR ZERUBAVEL

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THE
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EVIATAR ZERUBAVEL

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The Clockwork Muse

It is almost impossible to live in the modern world and not have to write. This is particularly true if you are a student, an administrator, or a scholar, not to mention a professional writer.

Unfortunately, writing is an activity that tends to evoke a considerable amount of anxiety, often resulting in the paralytic condition commonly known as a “writer’s block.” This is especially true if you are working on long projects such as a grant proposal, an annual report, or a senior thesis, not to mention a doctoral dissertation or a book.

Such anxiety, unfortunately, does not necessarily go away as you gain more professional experience as a writer. Even seasoned writers still dread having to start from scratch on a new book, knowing that they are probably several years away from completion. This situation is even more daunting, of course, for relatively inexperienced writers who are just about to launch their first major project.

While recognizing that such anxiety may very well be an inevitable part of producing theses, dissertations, and books, I nevertheless try to offer prospective writers various strategies of coping with this anxiety in the most effective manner in this book. Thus, I specifically address difficult psychological problems such as having to deal with pressure and timidity as well as procrastination and burnout. I likewise try to offer writers practical solutions to common logistic problems such as how to meet deadlines, how to find the time to write even in extremely demanding job situations, and how to integrate their writing into the rest of their personal involvements and social commitments so as to maintain a more balanced life.

The book builds on the fundamental premise that, unless we learn how to overcome problems having to do with *how* we write, we may never be able to focus on what we actually want to write about. As such, it dwells specifically on the “procedural” aspects of the process of producing a manuscript. Hence its particular concern with our need to develop better work habits (and, consequently, to also regard “writer’s block” and procrastination as technical rather than strictly psychological problems).

Good work habits include effective *planning*, perhaps the key to gaining better control over one’s writing. In this book I present a set of strategies for planning your writing, both generally and at the level of any particular project. These strategies revolve around a particular aspect of the writing process that is rarely explicitly addressed in our training as writers, namely the way in which it is temporally organized. As I shall demonstrate by focusing specifically on this neglected dimension of our life as writers, an effective tem-

poral organization of our writing can help make it far less stressful and thus help us accomplish personal and professional goals we might otherwise consider totally out of our reach.

The key to an effective temporal organization of our writing lies in one of the most remarkable inventions of Western civilization, namely the *time schedule*. Originally introduced

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fifteen centuries ago by an Italian monk as part of a larger attempt to routinize and thereby systematize daily monastic life, the schedule has clearly become one of the cornerstones of modern life.¹ And although unlike Saint Benedict himself I do not regard routinization as an ideal principle for organizing our lives in general (and would therefore never recommend applying it, for example, to such activities as listening to music or making love), I do regard it as one of the most effective means of organizing our writing—a process that, for many of us, may never yield a completed product unless structured methodically. It is methodicalness and routinization, in other words, that help us produce theses, dissertations, and books. And it is the time schedule, along with its functional cousin the *timetable*, that helps us bring them into our writing.

Needless to say, there is an inherent tension between routine and spontaneity, and writing in accordance with schedules and timetables rather than when you simply “get to it” certainly also makes it much less spontaneous.² The very idea of establishing regular writing times clearly contrasts with our vision of writing (or engaging in any other creative activity) only when “inspired.” Submitting yourself in a self-disciplined manner to temporal routines certainly undermines the common Romantic image of the bohemian writer who forgoes structure in order to accommodate essentially unscheduled outbursts of creative energy.

A careful examination of actual writers’ work habits, however, strongly suggests that such an image is by and large a myth. Very few writers actually sit down to write only when they feel particularly inspired. Furthermore, it is a rather dangerous myth, since it might lead you to willingly relinquish much of the control you can have over your writing by opting to rely on some mysterious and rather capricious “muse” that you may actually encounter perhaps a couple of times a year. While you can sometimes afford to do so when working on a short poem, a two-page essay, or an op-ed piece, waiting to be struck by inspiration is obviously somewhat impractical when you are trying to produce a full-fledged master’s thesis, doctoral dissertation, or book. Such projects require numerous writing sessions, and if those were to take place only when you actually feel like writing, they might never be completed at all. Deromanticizing the writing process is therefore of utmost importance to any writer in the making, and it basically challenges the way we traditionally associate creativity with structurelessness and spontaneity.

Writing in accordance with a time schedule offers us con-

siderable advantages. Perhaps most important, it makes it a lot easier for us to establish a routine that ensures that we would indeed get to write. As anyone who exercises or plays the piano on a regular basis knows, scheduled routines make it much easier to “get to” do things we might otherwise leave out of our daily lives altogether. If you cannot “find the time”

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By allotting to writing a specific daily or weekly time slot, a schedule ensures that you will get to do it on a regular basis.

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to write, you will most likely discover that, by establishing a regular weekly schedule that includes just forty-five minutes of writing every Tuesday and Friday morning, for example, you will inevitably manage to get some writing done! By allotting to writing a specific (daily or weekly) time slot, a schedule ensures that you will indeed get to do it on a regular basis.

Furthermore, scheduling helps us integrate our writing much more effectively into the rest of our life. As a mathematically manipulable variable,³ time is a perfect medium for establishing priorities, and involvements that are more important to us are usually also those for which we allow more time. (The number of hours children spend every week in math and art classes, for example, is indicative of the relative respect those two subjects seem to command in the school curriculum.)⁴ In fact, it is hard to imagine a more effective way of systematically regulating our various involve-

ments in life. If writing that book or dissertation is indeed so much more important to you than watching television or reading the newspaper, for example, you can certainly make sure, through the use of a schedule, that you actually allow it much more time than you allow the latter. By the same token, if you want to ensure that you do not spend on your writing more time than you do on playing with your children, you can quite easily arrange that with the help of a schedule.

Following a schedule, in short, helps us allocate our various involvements in the exact proportions we desire and thereby strike an optimal balance among them.⁵ It also allows us to organize those involvements in accordance with a predetermined structure of priorities rather than be at the mercy of our constantly changing whims.

In fact, by making it easier for us to actually disentangle our various daily and weekly activities from one another (thus ensuring that what we normally do on Wednesday mornings, for example, would never conflict with what we usually do on Thursday afternoons),⁶ scheduling also allows us to be more comfortably involved in each of them without feeling the pressure from our involvements in the others. A schedule helps a busy professor protect her highly treasured writing time from the competing demands of her various teaching and administrative duties, not to mention those involved in being a mother and a wife. It likewise helps a student protect the time he needs to spend on writing his doctoral dissertation from the competing demands of friends, various hobbies, and a part-time job. In fact, as John Barth reminds us, it even helps writers engage in somewhat different kinds of writing: "Four mornings a week . . . [I] make up and set down my stories in a pleasant white house in the city

of Baltimore . . . [On] Thursday evenings my wife and I drive across the Chesapeake Bay Bridge to a pleasant red house on Langford Creek . . . where on Friday mornings . . . I refresh my head with some other sort of sentence-making, preferably nonfiction.”⁷

Yet scheduling also helps ensure that our involvement in writing would not somehow take over the rest of our life. In providing our writing with some structure (and therefore also some limits), it helps us make sure that we would also get to do on a regular basis other things besides just writing and thereby lead more well-rounded, balanced lives. Regular writing schedules, for example, can help us maintain a relatively solid family and social life when we write. After all, like many other addictive involvements, writing often makes us somewhat difficult to be around (not to mention live with) from our roommates’, partners’, children’s, or friends’ standpoint. It can also make it quite difficult for many writers to hold a steady job. Writing in accordance with a regular schedule with some built-in “brakes” can help alleviate such problems to some extent.

Imposing a regular temporal structure with certain limits on our writing also helps protect us from various health problems generated by unstructured living. When we are deeply engrossed in our writing, we often tend to forgo not only a more balanced family and social life but also regular eating and sleeping patterns in order to accommodate our intense outbursts of creative energy. While very romantic, such a “manic” work style can rarely be sustained, making it somewhat impractical for anyone who is trying to write a thesis, a dissertation, or a book.

Furthermore, such intense outbursts of creativity are very

often followed by far less romantic hangover periods. Writing in accordance with a schedule with some built-in limits thus makes it somewhat easier to avoid writers' burnout.

Scheduling also enhances the actual pleasure of writing by making it more comfortable. By providing this essentially amorphous process with some structure, carefully designed timetables help to make it somewhat more predictable and thus considerably less intimidating. By allowing us to comfortably "pace" ourselves when we write, they also help reduce the pressure we usually associate with this process as well as keep us from procrastinating.

My own awareness of a useful link between scheduling and writing goes back to the spring of 1976, when I was about to begin writing my doctoral dissertation, a 300-page document I was absolutely determined to complete within the few remaining months before I would become a father and start my first full-time job—both of which, I rightly suspected, would leave me very little time for any intensive writing. The seeds of the system I present here were sown that spring, as I began to experiment with various schedules and timetables that would help me accomplish my goal in an effective yet comfortable manner. The results of those early experiments were quite promising. Not only did I manage to complete my dissertation that summer, I actually finished writing it a few weeks ahead of schedule!

The system I developed turned out to be of even greater help to me during the four following years, when I was working full-time on a rather demanding research job that was totally unrelated to my own research. I had two options of dealing with that situation. One was to be "realistic" and stop

trying to work on my own writing, which was indeed what some of my colleagues chose to do. The other was to somehow develop my own writing agenda and stubbornly stick to it despite the constant pressure and demands of my job. Having chosen the latter, I once again found the solution in various schedules and timetables that helped me rewrite my dissertation as a book as well as complete eight journal articles and a second book during those four years while still keeping my job.

Not only did the system I developed as a result of those experiments with scheduling work so well for me during those early years of my professional career, it also became the foundation for the way I have come to organize my writing ever since then. During the twenty-one years that have passed since I finished my dissertation, I have managed to complete seven single-authored books and more than twenty journal articles, all planned and written in accordance with it. And as my various editors and publishers have come to learn, when I sign an advance contract committing myself to complete a manuscript by a certain deadline, they can fully count on it in their own plans, which is not something one usually takes for granted in the somewhat unpredictable world of publishing.

I should also add that I have had a full-time job and taken only one sabbatical (or any other) leave during those twenty-one years, and have taken an equal share in raising two children. Furthermore, I am actually a rather slow writer, yet one who has come to learn that being slow *but steady* at the level of any single workday allows me to become quite prolific at the level of my entire lifetime.

Although originally developed for my own use, the system

I present here is something that might also be useful to those like the many students, colleagues, and friends I have watched throughout the years giving up somewhere along the way and never completing the very promising manuscripts they had started to write. Having taught for almost twenty years and served as director of three graduate programs (at Columbia, Stony Brook, and currently at Rutgers), I have watched many bright students fail to complete their theses or doctoral dissertations while far less gifted yet highly organized and disciplined ones did, and have come to learn that, in writing as in other professional activities, accomplishment has to do with more than just ability.

As anyone who has ever watched musicians or gymnasts practice a difficult passage or routine over and over again knows, it is never “talent” alone that produces excellence.⁸ Good work habits and perseverance usually separate those who manage to complete their manuscripts from those who do not.

It is my strong wish to help people realize their full potential as writers that has led me over the past fifteen years to offer advice and various tips to students, colleagues, and friends who got stuck at different stages of their theses, dissertations, or books and help them bring their work to completion. I have also conducted special writing workshops for students, many of whom later told me that my advice on scheduling helped them overcome writer’s blocks and other major difficulties they encountered when working on their theses and dissertations. Indeed, it is their often-expressed complaint about the almost total lack of attention paid to such matters throughout their professional training that has pushed me to write this book.

Although the system I present here obviously may not be to everyone's liking (especially to people who vehemently dislike routine and for whom the very notion of a "clockwork muse" may therefore sound somewhat oxymoronic), it can certainly help those who feel even the slightest need to infuse some more structure into their writing. It can thus benefit not only people who already happen to like structure, but also many others who, although generally averse to it, nevertheless recognize that they may very well need at least some element of methodicalness and organization in order to meet their deadlines and be able to eventually complete long-term projects such as dissertations and books. And even people who may not normally like plans and agendas can nonetheless benefit from the considerable relief from both pressure and anxiety usually enjoyed by those who are willing to commit to them.

Using the system I present here, I should add, need not involve having to ultimately choose between all or nothing. There are numerous possible ways of scheduling your writing, any single one of which may very well suit your particular lifestyle and temperament better than others. What I offer here is a general framework for thinking about the temporal organization of your writing. Such a framework obviously needs to be modified to meet your particular needs, and you are therefore encouraged to further improvise on its general thematic principles and thus generate truly "customized" writing schedules and timetables that would suit you best.

Finally, let me also add that, despite its repeated use of various "time-management" techniques, this book has actually very little to do with the modern utilitarian quest for