

The Daily Routines of 12 Famous Writers

by [James Clear](#) | [Creativity](#), [Habits](#)

How many people die with their best work still inside them?

We often assume that great things are done by those who were blessed with natural talent, genius, and skill. But how many great things could have been done by people who never fully realized their potential? I think many of us, myself included, are capable of much more than we typically produce — our best work is often still hiding inside of us.

How can you pull that potential out of yourself and share it with the world?

Perhaps the best way is to develop better daily routines. When you look at the top performers in any field, you see something that goes much deeper than intelligence or skill. They possess an incredible willingness to do the work that needs to be done. They are masters of their daily routines.

As an example of what separates successful people from the rest of the pack, take a look at some of the daily routines of famous writers from past and present.

E.B. White: “A writer who waits for ideal conditions under which to work will die without putting a word on paper.”

In an [interview](#) with *The Paris Review*, E.B. White, the famous author of *Charlotte's Web*, talked about his daily writing routine...

I never listen to music when I'm working. I haven't that kind of attentiveness, and I wouldn't like it at all. On the other hand, I'm able to work fairly well among ordinary distractions. My house has a living room that is at the core of everything that goes on: it is a passageway to the cellar, to the kitchen, to the closet where the phone lives. There's a lot of traffic. But it's a bright, cheerful room, and I often use it as a room to write in, despite the carnival that is going on all around me.

In consequence, the members of my household never pay the slightest attention to my being a writing man — they make all the noise and fuss they want to. If I get sick of it, I have places I can go. A writer who waits for ideal conditions under which to work will die without putting a word on paper.

Haruki Murakami: “The repetition itself becomes the important thing.”

In a 2004 [interview](#), Murakami discussed his physical and mental habits...

When I'm in writing mode for a novel, I get up at four a.m. and work for five to six hours. In the afternoon, I run for ten kilometers or swim for fifteen hundred meters (or do both), then I read a bit and listen to some music. I go to bed at nine p.m.

I keep to this routine every day without variation. The repetition itself becomes the important thing; it's a form of mesmerism. I mesmerize myself to reach a deeper state of mind.

But to hold to such repetition for so long — six months to a year — requires a good amount of mental and physical strength. In that sense, writing a long novel is like survival training. Physical strength is as necessary as artistic sensitivity.

Ernest Hemingway: “I write every morning.”

In an [interview](#) with George Plimpton, Hemingway revealed his daily routine...

When I am working on a book or a story I write every morning as soon after first light as possible. There is no one to disturb you and it is cool or cold and you come to your work and warm as you write. You read what you have written and, as you always stop when you know what is going to happen next, you go on from there.

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 through until the next day when you hit it again. You have started at six in the morning, say, and may go on until noon or be through before that.

When you stop you are as empty, and at the same time never empty but filling, as when you have made love to someone you love. Nothing can hurt you, nothing can happen, nothing means anything until the next day when you do it again. It is the wait until the next day that is hard to get through.

Henry Miller: “When you can't create you can work.”

In 1932, the famous writer and painter, Henry Miller, created a work schedule that listed his “Commandments” for him to follow as part of his daily routine. This list was published in the book, [Henry Miller on Writing \(Kindle\)](#).

1. *Work on one thing at a time until finished.*
2. *Start no more new books, add no more new material to “Black Spring.”*
3. *Don't be nervous. Work calmly, joyously, recklessly on whatever is in hand.*
4. *Work according to Program and not according to mood. Stop at the appointed time!*
5. *When you can't create you can work.*
6. *Cement a little every day, rather than add new fertilizers.*
7. *Keep human! See people, go places, drink if you feel like it.*
8. *Don't be a draught-horse! Work with pleasure only.*
9. *Discard the Program when you feel like it—but go back to it next day. Concentrate. Narrow down. Exclude.*

10. *Forget the books you want to write. Think only of the book you are writing.*
11. *Write first and always. Painting, music, friends, cinema, all these come afterwards.*

Kurt Vonnegut: “I do pushups and sit ups all the time.”

In 1965, Vonnegut wrote a letter to his wife Jane about his daily writing habits, which was published in the book: [Kurt Vonnegut: Letters \(Kindle\)](#).

I awake at 5:30, work until 8:00, eat breakfast at home, work until 10:00, walk a few blocks into town, do errands, go to the nearby municipal swimming pool, which I have all to myself, and swim for half an hour, return home at 11:45, read the mail, eat lunch at noon. In the afternoon I do schoolwork, either teach or prepare. When I get home from school at about 5:30, I numb my twanging intellect with several belts of Scotch and water (\$5.00/fifth at the State Liquor store, the only liquor store in town. There are loads of bars, though.), cook supper, read and listen to jazz (lots of good music on the radio here), slip off to sleep at ten. I do pushups and sit ups all the time, and feel as though I am getting lean and sinewy, but maybe not.

Jodi Picoult: “You can’t edit a blank page.”

The last seven books Jodi Picoult has written have all hit number 1 on the *New York Times* bestseller list. In an [interview](#) with Noah Charney, she talks about her approach to writing and creating...

I don’t believe in writer’s block. Think about it — when you were blocked in college and had to write a paper, didn’t it always manage to fix itself the night before the paper was due? Writer’s block is having too much time on your hands. If you have a limited amount of time to write, you just sit down and do it. You might not write well every day, but you can always edit a bad page. You can’t edit a blank page.

Maya Angelou: “Easy reading is damn hard writing.”

In a 2013 [interview](#) with The Daily Beast, the American author and poet discussed her writing career and her daily work habits...

I keep a hotel room in my hometown and pay for it by the month.

I go around 6:30 in the morning. I have a bedroom, with a bed, a table, and a bath. I have Roget’s Thesaurus, a dictionary, and the Bible. Usually a deck of cards and some crossword puzzles. Something to occupy my little mind. I think my grandmother taught me that. She didn’t mean to, but she used to talk about her “little mind.” So when I was young, from the time I was about 3 until 13, I decided that there was a Big Mind and a Little Mind. And the Big Mind would allow you to consider deep thoughts, but the Little Mind would occupy you, so you could not be distracted. It would work crossword puzzles or play Solitaire, while the Big Mind would delve deep into the subjects I wanted to write about.

I have all the paintings and any decoration taken out of the room. I ask the management and housekeeping not to enter the room, just in case I've thrown a piece of paper on the floor, I don't want it discarded. About every two months I get a note slipped under the door: "Dear Ms. Angelou, please let us change the linen. We think it may be moldy!"

But I've never slept there, I'm usually out of there by 2. And then I go home and I read what I've written that morning, and I try to edit then. Clean it up.

Easy reading is damn hard writing. But if it's right, it's easy. It's the other way round, too. If it's slovenly written, then it's hard to read. It doesn't give the reader what the careful writer can give the reader.

Barbara Kingsolver: "I have to write hundreds of pages before I get to page one."

The Pulitzer Prize nominee has written over a dozen books, the last nine of which have all made the *New York Times* bestseller list. During a 2012 [interview](#), she talked about her daily routine as a writer and a mother...

I tend to wake up very early. Too early. Four o'clock is standard. My morning begins with trying not to get up before the sun rises. But when I do, it's because my head is too full of words, and I just need to get to my desk and start dumping them into a file. I always wake with sentences pouring into my head. So getting to my desk every day feels like a long emergency. It's a funny thing: people often ask how I discipline myself to write. I can't begin to understand the question. For me, the discipline is turning off the computer and leaving my desk to do something else.

I write a lot of material that I know I'll throw away. It's just part of the process. I have to write hundreds of pages before I get to page one.

*For the whole of my career as a novelist, I have also been a mother. I was offered my first book contract, for *The Bean Trees*, the day I came home from the hospital with my first child. So I became a novelist and mother on the same day. Those two important lives have always been one for me. I've always had to do both at the same time. So my writing hours were always constrained by the logistics of having my children in someone else's care. When they were little, that was difficult. I cherished every hour at my desk as a kind of prize. As time has gone by and my children entered school it became progressively easier to be a working mother. My oldest is an adult, and my youngest is 16, so both are now self-sufficient—but that's been a gradual process. For me, writing time has always been precious, something I wait for and am eager for and make the best use of. That's probably why I get up so early and have writing time in the quiet dawn hours, when no one needs me.*

I used to say that the school bus is my muse. When it pulled out of the driveway and left me without anyone to take care of, that was the moment my writing day began, and it ended when the school bus came back. As a working mother, my working time was constrained. On the other hand, I'm immensely grateful to my family for normalizing my life, for making it a requirement

that I end my day at some point and go and make dinner. That's a healthy thing, to set work aside and make dinner and eat it. It's healthy to have these people in my life who help me to carry on a civilized routine. And also to have these people in my life who connect me to the wider world and the future. My children have taught me everything about life and about the kind of person I want to be in the world. They anchor me to the future in a concrete way. Being a mother has made me a better writer. It's also true to say that being a writer has made me a better mother.

Nathan Englander: “Turn off your cell phone.”

Englander is an award-winning short story writer, and in this [interview](#) he talks about his quest to eliminate all distractions from his writing routine...

Turn off your cell phone. Honestly, if you want to get work done, you've got to learn to unplug. No texting, no email, no Facebook, no Instagram. Whatever it is you're doing, it needs to stop while you write. A lot of the time (and this is fully goofy to admit), I'll write with earplugs in — even if it's dead silent at home.

Karen Russell: “Enjoy writing badly.”

Russell has only written one book ... and it was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. In an [interview](#) with *The Daily Beast*, she talks about her daily struggle to overcome distraction and write...

I know many writers who try to hit a set word count every day, but for me, time spent inside a fictional world tends to be a better measure of a productive writing day. I think I'm fairly generative as a writer, I can produce a lot of words, but volume is not the best metric for me. It's more a question of, did I write for four or five hours of focused time, when I did not leave my desk, didn't find some distraction to take me out of the world of the story? Was I able to stay put and commit to putting words down on the page, without deciding mid-sentence that it's more important to check my email, or “research” some question online, or clean out the science fair projects in the back for my freezer?

I've decided that the trick is just to keep after it for several hours, regardless of your own vacillating assessment of how the writing is going. Showing up and staying present is a good writing day.

I think it's bad so much of the time. The periods where writing feels effortless and intuitive are, for me, as I keep lamenting, rare. But I think that's probably the common ratio of joy to despair for most writers, and I definitely think that if you can make peace with the fact that you will likely have to throw out 90 percent of your first draft, then you can relax and even almost enjoy “writing badly.”

A.J. Jacobs: “Force yourself to generate dozens of ideas.”

In an [interview](#) for the series, How I Write, Jacobs talks about his daily writing routines and dishes out some advice for young writers...

My kids wake me up. I have coffee. I make my kids breakfast, take them to school, then come home and try to write. I fail at that until I force myself to turn off my Internet access so I can get a little shelter from the information storm.

I am a big fan of outlining. I write an outline. Then a slightly more detailed outline. Then another with even more detail. Sentences form, punctuation is added, and eventually it all turns into a book.

I write while walking on a treadmill. I started this practice when I was working on Drop Dead Healthy, and read all these studies about the dangers of the sedentary life. Sitting is alarmingly bad for you. One doctor told me that “sitting is the new smoking.” So I bought a treadmill and put my computer on top of it. It took me about 1,200 miles to write my book. I kind of love it — it keeps me awake, for one thing.

Jacobs has advice for young writers, too...

Force yourself to generate dozens of ideas. A lot of those ideas will be terrible. Most of them, in fact. But there will be some sparkling gems in there too. Try to set aside 20 minutes a day just for brainstorming.

Khaled Hosseini: “You have to write whether you feel like it or not.”

In an [interview](#) with Noah Charney, Hosseini talks about his daily writing habits and the essential things that all writers have to do...

I don't outline at all, I don't find it useful, and I don't like the way it boxes me in. I like the element of surprise and spontaneity, of letting the story find its own way. For this reason, I find that writing a first draft is very difficult and laborious. It is also often quite disappointing. It hardly ever turns out to be what I thought it was, and it usually falls quite short of the ideal I held in my mind when I began writing it. I love to rewrite, however. A first draft is really just a sketch on which I add layer and dimension and shade and nuance and color. Writing for me is largely about rewriting. It is during this process that I discover hidden meanings, connections, and possibilities that I missed the first time around. In rewriting, I hope to see the story getting closer to what my original hopes for it were.

I have met so many people who say they've got a book in them, but they've never written a word. To be a writer — this may seem trite, I realize — you have to actually write. You have to write every day, and you have to write whether you feel like it or not. Perhaps most importantly, write for an audience of one — yourself. Write the story you need to tell and want to read. It's impossible to know what others want so don't waste time trying to guess. Just write about the things that get under your skin and keep you up at night.