

revised resolutions

Set and Achieve Realistic Writing Goals—Start Here

BY CATHERINE ELCIK



forget chattering birds and bright perennials—if you’re like many writers in New

England, the arrival of spring means it’s time to face facts: once again, your ambitious New Year’s writing resolutions have held up about as well as First Night’s ice sculptures.

If you blow more personal writing deadlines than you meet, you may seriously doubt you’ll ever demonstrate the discipline needed to finish your novel. But don’t retire your pen just yet. If you consistently fail to meet your writing goals, maybe you’re setting the wrong goals.

“There’s the Natalie Goldberg school—write it all down as messy as it is—and then there’s the John Gardner school—very hardcore, very traditional,” says Toni Amato, director and founder of Write Here Right Now. “I think what happens is that we lose track of the fact that it’s not one or the other.”

From knowing what you want to achieve to creating a schedule that works best for you, Amato says goal-setting is about finding a working balance between the optimism of New Year’s Eve and acceptance of how life competes with writing time.

STEP 1 DEFINE YOUR GOAL

“You can’t work toward a goal unless you know what it is,” says Maggie Lichtenberg, a writing coach in Santa Fe, New Mexico. “Lay out what you really want to accomplish then break it down into realistic, manageable steps.”

Are you trying to meet an external deadline, such as a call for submissions or a contest postmark date, or are you driven by more internal reasons (maybe you’d like to finish a rough draft of your novel or establish a more consistent writing practice)? Amato says external deadlines are great motivators because they keep writers closely connected to their reasons for writing. If you don’t have a clock winding down to a submission deadline, Amato suggests striving for a time quota instead of a daily word or page count. Page counts massage the ego on days the floodgates open and fifteen pages just flow out, but punish you on the days the words dribbled out but you came to an epiphany about a character or scene.

“Writing isn’t just the action of the pencil or the pen or the keyboard. The hour you’re just thinking, you’re actually writing,” Amato

says. “Committing to time is just like athletic training. You’ve got to say, I’m going to show up and I’m going to be in practice.”

If you work best with some tangible daily goal, Amato suggests you keep it reasonable—one or two pages instead of ten.

STEP 2 CONSIDER YOUR STRENGTHS

Writers eager to carve a space for their writing will often submit to the indignity of working against their grain. Instead, Lichtenberg encourages her clients to create a writing plan that builds on their strengths and caters to writing habits that have served them before.

Just because a schedule worked for your favorite author doesn’t mean it will work for you. Advice is only as good as your ability to individualize it.

“As adults, most of us have some idea of how we work best and what we don’t respond to,” Amato says. “You find out what works for you through trial and error, and if it doesn’t work, don’t force it.”

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STEP 3 MAKE TIME

Whether you're trying to finish a novel or you just want to bump writing up to a higher priority, achieving goals takes time. "Franklin Planners talk about how to break your life into small components, and it's the same thing with a writing project," Amato says. "How much time can you make?"

1. Find a time that works for you. When playwright and former writing coach Kelly DuMar is on deadline, she'll block out the time as an appointment in her calendar. "You need to make space if you really value it," DuMar says.

2. "Schedule" your time in a way that works for you. If the thought of using a planner for your writing makes you break out in hives, think in weekly time goals—ten hours is ten hours whether you do two hours on Monday through Friday mornings or one marathon Saturday session.

3. Be creative about finding time. If you can't find a block of time, squeeze your writing into the time that you *do* have. "Keep your writing materials portable," DuMar says. "You can spend 45 minutes of your lunch hour writing." DuMar keeps writing materials with her to fill the unexpected time spent waiting in doctor's offices, airports, etc. Even if it's only enough time to copy edit a page or two, that's work you won't have to do later.

4. Start today. "Stop thinking about writing and write something," Amato says. "Do a writing exercise, join a writers' group, write a column, but start today."

STEP 4 BE OPEN TO PROGRESS IN ALL FORMS

When Amato lived in Vermont, a friend invited him to participate in a writing group that started each meeting with a prompt, allowed participants to write for 30 minutes, and then allowed time to share work. "I was knee-deep in my novel, and I thought why do I want to be bothered sitting around with a bunch of rural housewives writing for fifteen minutes about bumblebees and butterflies?" Amato says. "I thought it was a total waste of time."

But after suffering through two "miserable" meetings, something clicked for Amato, and he says he probably finished the rough draft of his novel because of the focus of those writing exercises.

Amato looks back on his initial reaction to the group as a "total attitude problem." Don't be married to one idea of what progress looks like. If you spend the day writing character sketches for your novel, do you secretly believe that you've cheated or that the whole day's a total wash? If you agree that writing is as much thinking and experimentation, then you have to let go of the fact that you only "wrote" if you reached your minimum word count.

"In Reynolds Price's *Learning a Trade...* you'll see how he was trying to figure something in a scene in one of his novels by writing it twelve, thirteen times," Amato says. "You want to find out what your story's like if Mom's fat? Write a scene where Mom's fat. You could spend a week trying to figure out one little thing, but that's writing. That's valid."

STEP 5 SECURE THE RESOURCES YOU NEED

Even when we define our goals clearly, carve out ample time for plans we've designed to fit our strengths, and commit to open-mindedness on the page, we still have to fight the myth that a writer can or should be a lone wolf. While it's true we're ultimately alone at the keyboard, a community can help motivate to *stay* at the keyboard—DuMar, Amato, and

Lichtenberg are unanimous on this point.

"Get some help," Amato says. "You're not going to be your own best advocate."

If you're looking for support that's more structured than leaning on a friend or signing up for a class, consider hiring a writing coach. Coaches are paid to help writers stay accountable to their work. "I'm a cheerleader who really wants my writers to succeed," Lichtenberg says. "When you meet with a coach, it's not about getting your hand slapped when you didn't do what you set out to do; it's about figuring out what didn't work, deciding what you want to do about it, and moving forward."

Gathering your resources isn't limited to literary support—it's also about supporting the rest of your life. Do you have a writing space in your house? If you're focused on a specific, short-term goal, could you hire out the mundane tasks that siphon time from your writing? Housekeeping, cooking, finances, and food shopping are all time-consuming tasks that are easy places to call in outside reinforcements.

STEP 6 PREPARE FOR RESISTANCE

When resistance inevitably hits, hit back. DuMar suggests keeping a journal where you can write about (and hopefully through) the block. "Start off by describing it—it feels like a chalk board in my gut; it feels slate and hard," DuMar says. "Then you dialogue with it—what does it look like? What does it say? When it turns out to be the chalkboard from your third-grade classroom where all the rules about writing were posted, you begin to realize the very specific message that's silencing you."

If you can't imagine writing dialogue for your feelings, think of it as writing down everything you can think of about a scene. "Being blocked makes us feel uncomfortable, and we want to avoid it on some level," she says. "But that's where the gold is; that's where the treasure is buried. You just have to work a little harder for it."

STEP 7 REEVALUATE

So what if it is spring and you remember with some chagrin how, in a fit of New-Year's-Eve-induced high spirits you swore, perhaps from a precarious tabletop perch, that you'd write four pages a day? If the writing goal you set for 2006 was unrealistic (*ed.note: four pages a day translates to 1,460 pages in one year. The Lord of the Rings trilogy is 1,216 pages long.*), there's plenty of time to re-evaluate your goal and have a successful writing year.

"Sometimes life gets in the way," DuMar says. "Be gentle and accepting of yourself and adjust your expectations as you go along."

Or, as Reynolds Price has said: "Assume you have forever to finish, but start today, and don't look up until it's truly done." ☺

SHAKE THOSE PESKY MYTHS!

From challenging the truism that *real* writers work at dawn to dismissing the idea that word and page counts are always the *best* way to make forward progress, we've called into question some axiomatic writing advice. In that spirit, we sent out a call: which myths madden you most?

Myth #1—Writers have to suffer to write well. "What writers really need, more than anything, is *empathy* for those who suffer and for those who feel joy and ambivalence and ennui, and all the range of human emotions. I can also speak from personal experience that the more "boring" my real life is—and by that I mean, the more I can set myself into a routine of work and play—the more exciting my life gets on the page."

—Erin Falkevitz; Irvine, CA

Myth #2—Writing is fun. "I'm absolutely miserable when I write. The whole thing just stresses me: all the concentration, all the decisions. When I hear people talk about finding a 'zone' or writing for hours on end, in a spell, like Kerouac supposedly did with *On the Road*, I'm like: huh? No. The only part of writing I enjoy unequivocally is having written."

—Steve Almond; Somerville, MA

Myth #3: If you can do something else for a living, you shouldn't write. "Who says you have to write for a living? What about just writing to write? Art for art's sake? I've worn many hats in life; writing is one of them. What would I write about if I never did anything else?"

—Jeanne Kent; Jamaica Plain, MA

Myth #4: Never talk about what you're writing. "I abhor superstition on principle, but this one irks me because it seems to keep writers in their solitary boxes. What's going to happen if you talk about a project? Is your muse going to get mad and go walkabout? Will the idea drain away? Will it get stolen? I've only had good results from talking about something in the early stages—from tough questions to needed support."

—Catherine Foster; Newton, MA ☺

SOURCE SNAPSHOT

Toni Amato (toni@writeherewrittenow.org; 617-877-3853) is the founder and director of Write Here Right Now, an umbrella organization in Cambridge that provides monthly Tools of the Trade workshops, private editing, and individual coaching. The organization's mission welcomes all and includes specific outreach to members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities.

Kelly DuMar (diarydoor@aol.com; www.playwrightsplatform.com) is a playwright and the vice president of Playwrights' Platform. DuMar began playwrighting after the 2001 publication of her non-fiction book, *Before You Forget - The Wisdom of Writing Diaries for Your Children*. DuMar lives in Sherborn, MA.

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