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Come in...and be captivated...

### [Writers' Craft Box](#)

What this section is intended to do:  
Give writers suggested hints, resources, and advice.

How to use: Pick and choose what you feel is most helpful and derive inspiration from it- most importantly, **HAVE FUN!**

What a Writers' Craft Box is: Say you're doing an art project and you want to spice it up a bit. You reach into a seemingly bottomless box full of colorful art/craft supplies and choose only the things that speak to you. You take only what you need to feel that you've fully expressed yourself.

Then, you go about doing your individual project adding just the right amount of everything you've chosen until you reach a product that suits you completely. So, this is on that concept. Reach in, find the things that inspire you, use the tools that get your writing going and see it as fulfilling your self-expression as opposed to following rules.

Writing is art and art is supposed to be fun, relaxing, healing and nurturing. It's all work and it's all play at the same time. A Writers' Craft Box is whatever your imagination needs it to be- a lifeboat, the spark of an idea, a strike of metaphorical lightning, a reminder, or simply the recommendation of a good book. Feel free to sit back and break out the crayons. Coloring outside the lines is heartily encouraged.



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"Fun" N.M.B Copyright 2009

Writer, editor, and writing coach and consultant, Noelle Sterne publishes widely in writers' and mainstream magazines. Articles have appeared in Archetype, Children's Book Insider, Long Ridge Writers eNews, Pure Inspiration, The Write Place At the Write Time, Writer's Digest special issues, Writers' Journal, and The Writer, with additional pieces scheduled for later in 2009 and beyond. A short story about a middle-school boy who discovers his healing powers appears in the Star Stepping Anthology (Wild Child Publishing, June 2008). Based on Ms. Sterne's academic consulting practice, she is completing a psychological-spiritual handbook to help doctoral candidates finish their dissertations (finally). Other book-length projects include a collection of essays for writers, *First You Find Your Desk: Start Writing and Keep Writing with Less Agony and More Joy*. In early 2010 a craft piece will appear in *Writing-World* (online) and an interview with the publisher/editor of *Children's Book Insider* will appear in *Writer's Journal* (hard copy).

#### FOURTEEN FUNDAMENTALS FOR MORE PRODUCTIVE WRITING

By Noelle Sterne

For years I called myself a writer but managed to do everything but write. Sure, I'd make stabs. Watching the sauce at the stove, I'd scribble a rough outline. Standing at the subway platform, I'd dash off a four-line poem. Waiting for my sandwich at the coffee shop, I'd take down the entire argument of the two women at the next table. But rarely did I go sit at my desk for a dedicated stretch to rework, revise, and polish a piece, much less send anything out.

After reading countless break-your-block articles and whining endlessly to my friends, I recognized that my writing habits and approaches were seriously deficient. If my difficulties sound familiar, the following fourteen principles should help you finally get to your writing and keep at it.

1. Make your work space comfortable. Writing is hard enough without feeling your work area is out to get you. Arrange proper lighting to minimize the glare of your lights and screen so your eyes don't get overly fatigued. Whether you use a computer, typewriter, pen, or stone tablet, invest in an ergonomically sensible chair and desk setup. One of the most frequent complaints of writers is pain and cramping from wrongly positioned chairs, surfaces, computer monitors, and mouses. A friend told me that for months, after a half hour of editing, her hands and legs went numb because her monitor was too high and her mouse too low.

2. Make your work space motivating and nurturing. A writing friend props affirmation "cards" behind her keyboard. As she's typing, her eyes automatically fall on the right words: "I deserve writing success. All the ideas I need flow effortlessly to me." In a variation, above my monitor I taped two lines by the American poet Richard Wilbur that constantly sustain and urge me on:

Step off assuredly into the blank of your mind.  
Something will come to you.

Play music, if it doesn't interfere with your concentration—CDs, iTunes, customized playlists, podcasts, your old stereo. Classical music, a lifelong love, soothes and feeds me. I explore Internet radio stations that are local, across the country, and in different parts of the world (Italy favors Baroque, Romania has a great baritone announcer, a Japanese station plays 24-hour hardcore Mozart).

3. Stay neat. Especially if you're chronically haphazard, at least for your writing work stay as neat as you can. Put your best effort into getting and staying organized. Complete one task a week—collect all the drafts in a file and label it; file the rejection letters together; make a list of editors' names and requirements; throw out expired contest notices, returned SASEs, and all the fragments of paper under, over, and beside other things. It's not "artistic" or "freeing" to live in a mess.

A longtime writer and editor confided recently, "For years my desk and work area looked like a tornado-torn library. Then I begged a friend to help me get organized. She attacked my mess methodically, and we threw out fourteen large garbage bags of junk and put everything into labeled files. Now I love going to my desk. I work better and—still can't get over it—I can find things!"

A cluttered desk reflects a cluttered mind, and you want to stay clear for your work. When you write in neat surroundings, you'll not only find things faster, but you'll stop finding excuses to approach your workspace. Instead, it will beckon, and you'll feel a new sense of freedom and lightness.

4. Decide on the time you're writing today. Choose a time for working, and write down in your calendar or schedule the hours (minutes) you'll unconditionally devote to your project today.

Some writers are able to write for an hour a night from 10:00 to 11:00, after all household duties are done, kids bathed and bedded. Some writers get up religiously before going to work and write from 4:00 to 6:00 in the morning (I never had such discipline). Others write only on weekends, or on bank lines and in waiting rooms.

Whatever your chosen (or pried out) time, decide and stick to it. Success and completion come not from how many hours you write but how many hours you write consistently.

5. Decide on the project you're working on today. Sometimes we have no trouble sitting down at our chosen time, but we flit from one project to another—from a few sentences on the novel's protagonist to an email draft for an editor to a line that's a perfect ending for the next short story to a grocery list . . . . Some may call this creativity and object to its obstruction. True, "flow" has its place (don't get me distracted into another essay), but to make real progress, choose one project and stick with it, even if you do a lot of fidgeting and space-staring.

Depending on the time available and your writing interests, you may want to divide your writing time among projects, or between projects and other necessary related activities. One full-time writer works on her novel every morning from 9:00 to 12:00, her articles from 2:00 to 5:00 three afternoons a week, and queries and marketing the other two afternoons. If you're part-time, fashion your schedule to target projects by the day or week.

6. Set specific times for project completion, by month and day. Even with short pieces, set specific completion times. But be realistic; we all know how the rest of life can intrude. If, as the days go by, you see there's no way you can make your promise to finish, change your target and stay definite. Forgive yourself and just keep going.

I had planned to complete a project by December 31 but saw in November that this was impossible. So, forgiving myself (many times a day), I tacked a note to my bulletin board: "Complete self-help book by June 15." Now, every time I look up, this note serves not only as a reminder but an affirmation.

7. Make a master list of the tasks involved to complete the project in logical, chronological order. Despite the current touting of multitasking, like everyone else, you can do only one thing—well—at a time. List all aspects of the project that come to mind, and picture yourself doing each in turn. A journalist wrote this master list for finishing an article:

- a. Type handwritten notes.
- b. Research background on Internet.
- c. Type rough outline.
- d. Interview Bob, Sandra, Margaret.
- e. Call the guy at Consolidated for an interview.
- e. Type interview notes.
- f. Do rough draft.
- g. Do next draft.
- h. Check all facts.
- i. Send draft to interviewees for approval.
- j. Do final draft
- k. Send to editor!

Such a list will greatly help organize you. And more, it will prove that the project, contrary to your dismayed assumption, isn't endless and overwhelming. Then, instead of frantically trying to complete everything at once, you can choose one task and hone in on it. And you'll have the added bliss of checking off each as you go.

8. Compartmentalize. If the constant sight of all the tasks and piles gives you a headache, do what a college freshman English teacher advised me during my first year of teaching. When I felt depressed and snowed under by the huge pile of student papers to grade, he said, "Take out three term papers and hide the rest under the bed." That is, arrange your physical environment to reflect your present choice. Hide all the stuff you're not using in a drawer, file, or carton, or under a blanket until you need them. Out of sight, out of anxiety attack.

9. Start easy. Because it's hard to get going, start with a task on your master project list that's obvious, easy, or short. Some time management gurus advise starting with what's hardest, but I've never found this to work. All I do is sit, gnaw my nails, try to resist the refrigerator, and agonize, wishing I were someplace else.

Starting easy is first cousin to labeling a file. You're warming up. And most of the time, it's necessary. What's more, completing an easy task will give you a sense of accomplishment. At the same time, you'll gain confidence in what you're doing, and, as many writers have found, you'll find yourself (one called it "mystically") drifting into actual writing.

But a caution: All of us occasionally misjudge what to start with. A novice writer chose to begin with the scene in which his major characters resolve their conflicts. He found himself sitting blankly, getting more confused and dismayed as thoughts collided in his brain, and the idle minutes mounted.

When he told his writing group about this episode, one member sensibly pointed out that such a major scene needed to "percolate" in his mind. It would evolve much later, after he'd lived with his characters through much of the book. Another member suggested that he'd find it easier to work first on the seeds of the conflict and each character's motivations. So the next day he chose one character, describing her background and making notes of her desires and experiences that would lead to the main conflict. After a few of these sessions, the major resolution scene uncovered itself, and he tackled it eagerly.

10. Move. Especially if you feel restless and find yourself getting up too often, leave your usual writing space and take yourself and your work in progress to a different room or another place entirely. Many writers work well in cafés, restaurants, libraries, bookstores, mall courtyards, park benches. We've got enormous mobility with the blessings of clipboards, notebooks, pads, and the proliferating gaggle of electronic writing wonders. Like me, at your local coffee shop, you've probably often been greeted by a sea of laptops.

If you don't like leaving your office or main writing environment, an alternative, à la Maugham, is to face the other way. Sometimes I do this. Half my office is clogged with cartons, sometimes stacked two or three high, of projects I need to get to (my files have long been crammed to capacity).

This is not a pretty picture. So I've set up my corner desk and computer to look the other way—out the window. The view is a lovely one—a great expanse of sky, greenery, and majestic high-rises. Back turned on those nagging cartons, I take in the scene, rest my eyes, and muse about the work before me.

11. Take breaks. It's a well-known fact of learning that attention and focus are greater when you take periodic breaks. Get to know how long you work best at one time. For some people, it's forty-five minutes or an hour. For others, it's two or even three hours. You know you're reaching the limit when you feel headachy, blurry-eyed, mentally fatigued, cranky, and slightly depressed.

So, take mental breaks: leaf through a magazine, meditate, make a phone call, watch 15 minutes of television (set a timer). Take physical breaks: a little cleaning, a short walk, a few yoga moves, or walking on that treadmill gathering dust in your bedroom. I have one of those large, air-filled exercise balls and drape myself over it on my back for a few minutes. It's a great tonic for stretching all the computer-cramped shoulder and neck muscles.

A full-time children's book writer said she loves to take cooking breaks. After a stint at her desk, she goes to the kitchen, puts together something that takes time—soups and casseroles are her favorites—and goes back to work. Then, at her next break, she gets up, peers at her pot, stirs, tastes, and adjusts.

"Cooking is relaxing and creative," she said. "My mind bubbles around with what I'm working on as I keep fixing the dish. I like cooking on all cylinders." And she gets the added bonus of a meal ready when she wants it.

12. Keep your promises to yourself. Whatever your writing time for the day, stick to it, whether it's a full eight hours, an hour or two, or even fifteen minutes. Choose your time and show up. A wise mentor once said, "There are no writing blocks. There are only unkept promises to get to the desk and stay put."

13. Before wrapping up for the day, decide, with your master project list in

hand (#7), what you'll work on next. One of the most difficult parts of completing a project is picking up again next time, and this often stops us from carrying through to completion. A writing friend, whom I'd always admired for her steady productivity, shared her secret.

She said, "I used to have the worst trouble starting. Once I got going I was all right, but I'd do anything not to start—you know, clean the house, rearrange the linen closet, obsessively check email. Then another writer told me his technique. Before ending your current session, decide what you'll do next, even if it's small and seemingly mindless, like typing your notes from the interview. Then set out what you'll need to continue with the article. Put the materials on top of your pile or desk so they're the first thing you see when you go back to work next time."

Now I understood why she was so prolific. With this method, using similar techniques to starting easy, #9, she'd headed off procrastination. Here are some variations.

The night before, choose several things from your project master list. Typing in your notes won't take long, and then you may be tempted to veer off into the day's TV offerings. So instead, pinpoint several successive things to do next.

For example, if you decide to start or recheck your research, get out your list of key words for Internet searching, phone numbers and questions for interviewees, clippings, reports, or brochures on your subject.

If your next task is to continue with writing, use the computer "bookmark" feature to go directly to the page you last left so you won't waste time scrolling. At the bookmarked spot, write a few notes of what you intend to do next. Here's how I tagged the bookmark for this section (it won't work with numbers, spaces, or punctuation):

Beforewrappingupfortheday

When I next sat down, my notes reminded me where to start: "Rachel's method. Other ways to set up night before."

14. Reward yourself. When you finish a task, a section, a day's work, or a whole piece, congratulate and treat yourself. Your choice may be a double brownie fudge cookie, a wallow in a writing magazine, a long walk, or scrubbing the sink—whatever pleases you.

It's important to mark and acknowledge our progress. Few understand our daily victories, except maybe other writers. Our successes, as small as we think they are, should be recognized and valued, especially by ourselves.

A well-known novelist was asked in an interview what he does after finishing a difficult chapter or completing a book. The interviewer anticipated, "Call everyone you know? Go out and buy something extravagant? Get drunk?" The novelist smiled and said, somewhat embarrassed, "Oh, no. In my studio, I just dance around a little." Most of our triumphs are solitary, but we are entitled to celebrate them, however we choose.

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These fourteen fundamentals have worked for me for a long time. With them, I tease myself to work sooner and stay at it longer. My stalling has diminished, my anxiety has dropped, and my confidence has grown. Ideas and solutions come faster, and my writing is more consistent and productive.

Try a few of these suggestions. They'll not only lure you into working but will help you work faster and better. And, possibly to your surprise, your productivity will increase more than you ever thought it could.

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