

Writing with Wise Passiveness

“Writers who work with a constancy and shared rationality of their thoughts not only preserve their health but produce the most quality and quantity of prose.” (Adam Smith)

I recently read an out-of-print book that seems to have cracked the secret of how to write painlessly and productively.

“How Writers Journey to Comfort and Fluency” by Prof. Robert Boice published in 1994. Boice is a US psychologist specialising in the field of motivation and the psychology of writing. He based his book on the research findings from workshops he ran for time-poor graduate students and struggling academics.

Among the recurring gripes I read by many writers (myself included) on forums is how can we best acquire sustainable writing habits. Or better yet, just make our writing a pleasurable daily habit.

What attracted me to this book (which is currently out of print and costs over \$200 (AUS) for a used copy online – thanks Sydney Uni Library!) is that it gives unhurried and considered step-by-step advice on how to break down the self-imposed barriers that undermine us from being the kind of writers we dream of. It then offers a very sensible and practical advice to how to write with consistency and no stress.

The kernel of Boice’s advice is the oldest in the world: write, every weekday, in brief scheduled sessions, as short as 10 minutes at first, then getting longer. Reading that, you might be tempted to chuck your \$200 copy across the room in impatience. But that wouldn’t surprise Boice. Because impatience, for him, is a huge part of why writing causes so much grief.

His students, he explains, tell him they can’t afford to limit their writing to short sessions, or try his other exercises: they’ve got deadlines to meet! But that proves the point. They want to have already written – and it’s precisely that manic urgency that triggers panic and procrastination.

The non-excitingness of Boice’s book – from its title to his carefully laid out advice, which you’re meant to implement gradually, over months – is itself an exercise in cultivating patience. It’s slow going because slow is the only way forward.

This gets clearer when it comes to one of Boice’s favourite tips: when your daily writing time is up, stop dead, even if you’ve got momentum and could write more. Maybe you could. But you’d be reinforcing the notion of writing as a mysterious force, to be harnessed whenever it shows up, rather than a humdrum activity you choose, undramatically, to do.

“The urge to continue,” Boice writes, “includes a big component of impatience about not being finished, about not being productive enough, about never again finding such an ideal time for writing.” Stop when the timer goes off, and you’ll build self-discipline. Keep going longer, and you’re just indulging your insecurity.

Boice would have helped nobody, then, had he offered a quick fix – because wanting a quick fix is the essence of impatience. Remember this was 1994. Today we call it a “hack”. Instead, slow down. Make writing only a middling priority in your life. Don’t binge-write. Aim for mild happiness as you work, not storms of passion. And if all this strikes you as a waste of time, ask yourself: could that very reaction be part of the problem? Staring paralysed at the screen is an even bigger waste, after all.

For the past 6 weeks I have adapted Boice's suggestion to stop writing at the 30 minute mark and instead I put my pencil down when my daily writing practice hits 500 words – regardless whether it's mid-sentence, mid-paragraph or mid-thought.

If you don't have a copy of Boice's book in your library, or you balk at the idea of shelling out a lot of money, I have included a summary of the main rules to effective writing that Boice advocates.

Motivation

Rule 1: Good things come to those who WAIT.

This does not mean passive waiting for muses or deadlines. It means putting off writing prose as long as possible while ACTIVELY waiting by noticing, collecting, conversing, and readying oneself for actual writing. Hold off clicking the submit button until you have done all of your rewriting and editing.

Rule 2: Writers fare best when they begin before feeling fully ready. Motivation comes most reliably in the wake of (not in advance of) regular involvement.

Begin early and get involved with pre-writing exercises that make active waiting productive and reassuring. By getting involved in the acts of pre-writing we build a calm, enduring motivation for writing.

Rule 3: Impatience blocks writers with rushed, incomplete work.

Impatience has the bad quality of connecting experience of writing with fatigue and unpleasantness; both motivation killers.

Rule 4: Ensure enduring motivation with a regular writing habit.

Writers don't arrive already as experts. Don't wait for inspiration.

Rule 5: Learning to stop is as important as managing to start writing.

Binge writing is not sustainable in the long run. It tends to lead to impatience and rushing. Therefore write in moderation – in brief daily sessions – in order to accomplish more over the long haul.

Imagination

Writing poems and drinking coffee while walking in the forest can turn the whole thing into a brand new experience.

Rule 6: The most fluent, efficient, comfortable and imaginative writers strike a balance by spending as much time at pre-writing as at writing.

When we pre-write (i.e., systematically notice, collect, organize, plan and share), we take away needless pressure to think and write at the same time once we get to prose. An act of patience that saves time and fosters better writing.

Rule 7: Imagination, or new vision, comes most reliably from revision.

Imagination is an exercise in patience. I know I am not really saying anything new. To quote Hemingway, “The most important thing I’ve learned about writing is never write too much at a time... Never pump yourself dry. Leave a little for the next day. The main thing is to know when to stop. Don’t wait till you’ve written yourself out. When you’re still going good and you come to an interesting place and you know what’s going to happen next, that’s the time to stop. Then leave it alone and don’t think about it; let your subconscious mind do the work.”

Rule 8: Pre-writing short-circuits the abruptness that comes with writing from scratch and the anxiety of trying to imagine while facing a blank page.

Effective pre-writing demands little more of prose writing than rewriting. Pre-writing, together with not stopping at ends – of chapters, paragraphs, sentences – during a brief daily writing session, as well as practicing the constant habit of noticing and noting things that can be added while writing later, will eliminate the feeling of abruptness.

Fluency

Rule 9: The most surprising rule. Writing, in usual practice, need be nothing more than a modest daily priority, one that ranks well below more important priorities like social life and exercising. Unrealistic priorities and goals, like most New Year’s resolutions, typically fail and torment.

In other words, the need for a regular, daily discipline negates the need to binge, write perfectly or in a rush, or to make out that the act of writing is more desirable than it really is. Routines help make things we might otherwise put off, like writing, habitual.

Rule 10: Learn to adopt brief daily sessions of writing as all the writing you need or want to do for the day being able to enjoy evenings, weekends and vacations without feeling pressures for writing is an essential pleasure (and opportunity for unplanned discovery).

Rule 11: Avoid writing during times when you would do better getting rest or recreation.

Failure to heed this rule invites binging, procrastination and its opposite precrastination – by which I mean not leaving things too late, but doing them too early, just to have them done with, even though waiting might have meant less effort overall. That’s how you end up wasting a whole day on trivialities, in search of that satisfying sensation of having cleared the decks – when all the while, the writing sits and waits. The secret truth, especially applicable to email, is that neglecting something for a few days often makes it go away entirely: people find alternative solutions to their problems.

Rule 12: At a minimum, stay in touch with your writing projects on a daily basis; at the least, peruse what you have been doing, contemplate, and make notes so that the work remains fresh in mind.

Rule 13: Make a habit of writing in comfortable, moderately uninterrupted conditions where almost all you do is writing (or things supportive of it).

Rule 14: Use minimally effective forcing to instill (or reinstall) a regular habit of writing, at least until the habit begins to self-sustain.

For example, finish a brief daily session before doing something more tempting, like checking out your facebook updates, checking your email or watching something on youtube. Generate sustainable motivations by building a writing habit muscle.

Rule 15: Okay. So we're still going to encounter writer's block somewhere down the line. So let's give it some realistic perspective.

Boice sees the mystical notion of writer's block as little more than self-defeating behaviours such as self-handicapping, shyness, choking under pressure, learned helplessness, the delusion of the power of spontaneity and ineffective bargaining strategies; obstacles which can be managed and not passively accepted.

Control

Rule 16: The false traditional belief that writers must await the proper mood for writing or, to quote Stephen King – "Amateurs sit and wait for inspiration, the rest of us just get up and go to work." A more proactive approach to irrational thinking that commonly inhibits and depresses writers: the shoulds, oughts, and musts that cause self-doubting. Supplant these irrationalities and control them with rational self-talk. Self-controlled writers learn to pay attention to their emotions and harness their observations as aids to writing and a moderate state of mild happiness.

Rule 17: The worse the writer, the less the attention to emotions while writing.

Self-control, as we master it, is a transition from self-focus – practicing good habits and comfort – to include more deliberate management of social situations. So the productive writer transitions from self-control to incorporate social control.

Rule 18: Social isolation not only hurts writers in terms of loneliness and ennui, it makes the writing harder than it needs to:

Rule 19: Social skill at writing includes the generosity of letting others do some of the work.

Allow other people to inspire, model, critique, redirect, suggest new ideas and sources, collaborate, edit and praise. What keeps most writers from following rule 19? Rule 20.

Rule 20: The worse the writer, the greater the attachment to the writing.

Audience

True phone Rule 21: refers to the writer knowing oneself through a process Boice terms “exteriorisation”, or, in non-technical terms, connecting with readers.

Good writers strike a balance in writing about what they see and say to themselves and putting their writing out to an audience for sharing, listening to what they have to say, so that they can become even better writers.

Spend as much time socialising about writing as writing (and spend only moderate amounts of time at either). Who is your tribe? Do you limit yourself by just writing for one, or do you test your ideas in a supportive group who are there to help you gain confidence and keep you on the right track. Since all of you are reading this post on-line, you will, no doubt, be aware of the plethora of social media channels through which writers seek to connect with the wider world and test their ideas in the public domain.

Rule 22: Put your work as early as possible before the gatekeepers (ie, editors, publishers and influencers).

They are there to keep you honest. Without doubt the hardest of the rules (no one willingly wants to have their confidence shaken by criticism). The best way to handle criticism is to tackle it head on: anticipate it, acknowledge it and learn from it. “It isn’t what happens to you, it’s how you react to it that matters.”

Resilience

Rule 23: The Resilience Rule. The best way to handle criticism is to anticipate it, acknowledge it, and learn from it. It does not mean you have to accept it.

Rule 24: Four common and interlocking reasons why writers lapse from comfort and fluency:

(i) distractability due mainly to insufficient exteriorisation of thinking,

(ii) expectations of perfectionism,

(iii) unanticipated but avoidable problems such as mindless surprise about the difficulty of the endeavour, and

(iv) fatigue and irrationality owing mostly to inefficient pacing of the writing.

Rule 25: the six distinctive acts of resilient writers:

(i) regular, constant practice of adaptive habits connected with writing (sleep, location, rituals, setup, community)

(ii) clear and realistic plans combined with repeated feedback about progress towards a goal

(iii) anticipation of blocks by noticing problems, tracing them back to origins;

(iv) inventing new behaviours to prevent their recurrence;

(v) seeing insights into new writerly habits and broader ways of working)

(vi) movement toward playful flexibility in practicing moderation (i.e. pacing oneself)

Rule 26: Adam Smith's rule, restated, is that writers who work with moderate constancy and a shared rationality of their thoughts not only preserve their well-being but produce the most satisfying prose.