

**WRITING UNDER PRESSURE:  
A JOURNALIST'S GUIDE TO DEALING WITH DEADLINES**

**Elaine Steinmann Award talk SS 2005**

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I wish I could say I have never missed a deadline in my life. But I have. And it always feels terrible. It's a feeling of failure. Because if you miss a deadline you have bungled a major part of writing. Writing, as a professional, whether in the world of journalism or in the academic world, isn't just about getting it down on paper. It's about getting it down on paper *on time*. Otherwise what you have produced is useless. It will not be printed. It will not find readers. And all your hard work will have been for nothing. Plus, on a more practical level, you will have disappointed the people who counted on you. The people you were working for.

Let's face it: Most of us won't sit down to write something unless there is pressure. Because writing is hard. Writing a paper, or an article, or a story, or any kind of report, is creating something out of nothing. Something that simply wasn't there before you sat down and wrote it. So of course that is hard. Writing can be incredibly frustrating, it can even be painful. As a matter of fact, it usually

is. Just because there is something in your head doesn't mean you know how to get it down on paper. How do you start? Where do you start? How do you make your reader follow what you are trying to say? How do you structure it? How do you make it interesting? Most of the time you will realize exactly how vague the idea in your head actually is when you try to write it down. You will stumble over contradictions, you will inevitably find the holes in your logic, you will find the parts that you haven't quite thought through or understood. You will realize that you are convinced something is right but you just can't find convincing reasons to prove it. If you are trying to pull something together from other sources – articles or books –, you will look at those and realize that the exact argument you thought you had seen when you first read them is actually not quite there.

You will be furious at yourself because you just can't find the right words. You'll find that you are lacking the eloquence you thought you had when your text was still locked up in your head. You will berate yourself for using clichés, for not being able to come up with something cleverer, more original. You might spend hours, even days, mulling over how much better everybody else seems to write. You will feel inadequate, stupid, useless, worthless.

There is nothing like writing to be brought up against your own shortcomings. Writing, I would say, is an exercise in humility – but also in self-awareness. And that's not actually a bad thing.

The fact that writing is such a treacherous enterprise is the reason why most of us are scared of it. I'm still scared. The fear doesn't go away with experience, you just learn to deal with it better. So most of us need outside pressure to sit down and actually write. Deadlines provide that pressure. They are probably the most important crutch in a writer's life. They are the whip of discipline. They are the outside world intruding upon your internal struggles, making de-

mands, putting on the heat. Deadlines force you to start – and they force you to finish. With a deadline, you can't dawdle and rewrite and erase and polish forever. You have to get the job done. *Now*.

A novelist once told me that the most important quality in a good agent is that they know when to tell a writer to wrap it up. In other words: They have to be able to provide a deadline.

Deadlines literally shape your life when you are writing on a professional level. There is usually one looming on the horizon, and you know: You have four more days until this article is due. Three more days. Two more days. And this is if you work for a magazine. If you work for a daily newspaper, it's four hours, three hours, two hours, half an hour. And then your editor will appear at your desk and frown. The clock is always ticking when you are a journalist. Your life goes from one countdown to the next.

That takes some getting used to. It actually takes a lot of getting used to. You start structuring your plans around the next deadline. You might even organize your social life around it. A deadline can become a dark force in your life that you are only able to erase once you have met it. And then there will be the next one. A deadline applies pressure, and if you aren't careful you can allow it to run your life. Which is not a good thing.

So how does one learn to write under pressure? How does one learn to live with a deadline – and maybe even learn to love it?

Well, the secret is to make the deadline work for you – and *not* the other way around. I don't know if you have ever noticed that a lot of Hollywood movies, especially action movies and thrillers, operate with deadlines: They will emphasize that the hero has X amount of time to find the killer, to save the hostages, to defuse the bomb, or to save the world. The most blatant example of this is the

display on the timer of the bomb that shows you exactly how much time is left before it will blow up. Deadlines are the easiest way to create suspense. And it's this suspense you can use for your work. Because even if you are not a superhero, a deadline will get your adrenaline flowing. It forces you to put your brain on high alert, to find solutions you wouldn't necessarily find if you had all the time in the world. A deadline can make you more creative and productive than you thought you could be.

But in order for this to work, you have to be organized.

That sounds simple, but for a lot of people organizing themselves isn't. It's a real challenge, especially in regard to writing. I suspect that's because we tend to regard writing as something that needs inspiration. And inspiration, supposedly, can't be forced. Well, to a certain degree it can be. And you certainly won't be inspired if you don't sit down and start working.

So organize yourself. Only if you organized yourself will you get the maximum amount of productivity out of the pressure a deadline creates.

The first thing you need to do is to learn to take your deadline seriously. It's real – maybe not so much if you are writing a paper for a class and your professor accepts your work even if you hand it in two months later than the deadline that he or she had originally established. But if you want to go on to write professionally, either as a journalist or as an academic, or even if you have just to produce a report in your workplace, deadlines are a very, very real part of life. Deadlines exist because somebody needs a certain piece of writing at a certain point in time: And if you don't provide it, it becomes useless. There is a reason why a deadline is called a *deadline*. If you cross the line, your piece is dead.

Whether you can meet a deadline, and how good the work is that you can produce under pressure, is a crucible in terms of how professional you are, and

how reliable. Missing a deadline is not a sign of genius, or even inspiration, it's a sign of being disorganized or lazy, or not committed to your task. You might be trying to show the world how hard you are struggling with your assignment but the world usually doesn't care. Everybody who writes, struggles.

Secondly, learn to make time. If you have a deadline coming up – even if it's still several weeks away –, set aside fixed time periods when you will do nothing but write. Put them in your calendar like you would an appointment. Organize to have writing time! Optimally, those time periods will be whole days, but since life is rarely optimal, at least make it stretches of several hours at a time. You will find that every time you sit down, you will need some time to get back into what you have been writing. You will have to find your train of thought again, as well your tone. You will be tempted to go over what you have already written, rather than add new parts to it. Writing doesn't work like knitting, you can't just pick it up and start where you left off.

And don't find excuses when those writing times come. Don't sneak in a quick coffee with your best friend just because she is feeling low. Don't avoid sitting down and staring at the screen. Sitting and staring – and thinking – is the first step to actually writing. And if you're scared of writing, you will only get more scared if you keep avoiding it.

Thirdly, figure out *how* you write. Become aware of your habits. When are you at your most productive – in the morning, or at night? How often do you need to take a break because all you're seeing is little black squiggles on the computer screen, and not a coherent text anymore? How long can you sit at a desk and concentrate at all? Do you need peace and quiet, or do you feel better with music, or even your roommates clattering around your apartment? Do you tend to get up every five minutes and find something else to do? Can you work

through the night if you really, really have to and if there is enough coffee around? Keep track of how long you usually need to complete a paper, or an essay, or any kind of written assignment. Keep track of the steps you take: How much time do you need to put together the research you have to do? How much time goes into taking notes? How much time do you need to understand and digest your material? Do you first write an outline, then a first draft, and then a final version? Or do you jump right in and work your way from paragraph to paragraph? How much time do you need to polish your piece?

It's extremely important for you to know how you write, because it will help you plan. It will give you a sense of how much time you will need for a future assignment.

Which gets us to my fourth point, which is: Learn to give yourself *enough* time. Now, I can't tell you how much time is "enough time" for you. Nobody can tell you that. The only rule of thumb I can give you is: The more practice you have, the faster you will be able to write something. Practice doesn't make perfect, but it does make for greater routine, and routine means speed. This also means, if you are writing in an unfamiliar form, or about an unfamiliar topic, you will need longer than if you are writing in a familiar form or about a familiar topic. Writing ten academic papers on literary subjects won't help you write a snappy little music review. The snappy little review might take longer than a ten-page-paper.

Still: having practice writing will make you less afraid of an empty computer screen because you will have the confidence that you will be able to fill it. Eventually. And having that confidence is a major plus for any writer.

You have to figure out for yourself what your tempo is, and that takes experience. Now when I talk about giving yourself "enough time", I mean the exact

amount of time you need to work on a piece. “Enough time“ is *not too much* time, because then you will end up tinkering with irrelevant details, chewing off your fingernails, smoking too much, and squandering hours, days or even weeks and months when you could be doing something more productive and fulfilling with your life. If you give yourself too much time to work on something, *it will not get done*. Several of my friends spent years working on their Ph.D.s – there was always another article to dig up, another source to take into consideration, another tangent they could pursue. They gave themselves too much time, and they became overwhelmed with the task they had set themselves. In turn, they became more and more afraid to sit down and actually tackle their dissertations. Some of them have never finished them.

But more importantly, “enough time“ is *not too little* time. Unless you are really sure you can finish a piece of writing in, say, five days, give yourself six. If you start too late, your entire timing will be thrown off. You will not be able to focus the way you need to, you will hurry through your writing in order to get it finished. The countdown that a deadline implies will not become productive suspense, it will become a horror movie.

Only if you have a sense of how you write, and how long you need to write something, can you assess what is going to be “enough time“ for you. Then organize your everyday life so that you will actually have that amount of time to write what you need to write.

After almost 20 years of working as a journalist, I have a pretty good sense of how long I will need for any given story. I am a freelance writer who mostly works for magazines, so most of my pieces take a few days to write. It would be a different situation in a newsroom, of course, where you only have a day to research and write each article.

Here is how I operate. The first day I will waste. Completely waste. I will mope around my apartment. I will read books I wouldn't usually touch with a ten-foot-pole. I will do my dishes, I will do my laundry, I will bring my old newspapers to the recycling station. I will call my friends. I will write bills. Most importantly, I will avoid my computer like it has the plague. And I will feel guilty as hell all day long.

I used to think this wasted day was something I could – and should – skip. Avoid the guilty feeling, avoid being miserable. Discipline myself and just sit down and start. Well, I don't think that anymore. I think I need this wasted day in order to gear myself up to write. Deep down, I know that I will still have enough time to finish the piece that I need to write, even if I waste this first day. It's part of my writing experience. It's the extra day from hell.

And by the next morning, I will be in enough of a panic to actually sit down and start working. Because now I know that it's time. Now I know that I will need every single waking hour that I have left. The adrenaline is up, and the pressure is on. I have created enough suspense – okay, drama – to get myself going. And then I will *not* get up every five minutes to do something else. my Yes, there is something obsessive-compulsive about it. There is for a lot of writers. But when I start writing, I usually realize that during my extra day from hell I have already thought about what I want to say. Sometimes I will have already mapped the piece in my head. So the wasted day is not actually wasted, it just feels that way. And the important thing is: After twenty years, I know exactly how much time I can afford to waste. I no longer sit down too late.

I am *not* recommending this way of working to anybody. I am just saying: If that is the way you need to work, accept it. Deal with it. There is not much point in trying to imitate somebody else's approach to writing and dealing with a



deadline. Find your own approach, and know it well enough to organize yourself so you can meet your deadline.

Fifthly: structure your time. If you haven't given yourself a time frame of, say, ten days to write something, break down the time. Assign a certain time period to certain tasks. Spend the first two days looking at your research materials, spend the third day writing an outline, spend the fourth day writing your introduction, etc. Or if you are somebody who just plunges in, you should at least know many pages you are supposed to have written after the first, the second, the third day. However you write, you should know at which point in your writing you are supposed to be at any given point in time. And make sure you don't fall too far behind. It'll make your assignment look that more manageable. If you have a structure, a timetable, you will have a sense of how much more work is left, and how much more time you have left to do it. That can be very important, and even liberating.

Actually *having* a time structure makes it that much more likely that you will stick to it. Because based on what I remember from my days at the university, way too many assignments get written the very last night before they are due. They get written in a ten-hour tour de force which leaves you not only exhausted but also scared, even terrified, of the next assignment you have to write. And therefore you will leave that assignment, too, to the very last minute. And the same thing will happen again: you will exhaust yourself, you will be even more scared, and you will hate writing even more. It can become a vicious circle. Writing is never easy, but you can make it that much harder on yourself if you postpone it until it's almost too late. Plus if you leave your writing to the very last minute, it will never be as good as it could be. For one thing, there will always be footnotes you can't look up in the middle of the night, and for another

thing, you will not be able to look at your text again with a bit of distance. There will be no time to polish it, no time to check it for flaws.

Most of you are only starting out, and for beginners there is a cheap trick to writing under pressure that has worked really well for me. So this is the sixth point in my guide to dealing with deadlines. Simply move the deadline up: at least in your own head. If the official deadline is, say, on June 15, pretend it's on June 10. The mind is a marvellous thing, and while on one level you will always know that your assignment isn't *really* due yet, these fake deadlines have a way of taking on their own reality. Plus they give you a few extra days if you don't manage to finish the piece. And even if you have finished it, you can use those days to let it sit on your desk – and then take a fresh look at it and iron out kinks you didn't see before.

I frequently finish articles before my “real“ deadline, but I rarely hand them in before I absolutely have to. Because it's amazing how different a text looks if you haven't worked on it for a few days. After a few days, you will almost read it like a reader – like a person who is seeing it for the first time, not like the person who wrote it. And because you are reading it like a reader, you will notice things that you never saw while you were writing it. It's a real eye-opener.

You can take this whole procedure even one step further: If you have *no* deadline, create one in your mind. Put the pressure on yourself. Use the suspense you are creating to get your work done. And make it real: Tell your professor, tell your editor, tell whoever might be interested, that you will hand in your assignment by, say, June 15. That way you will feel embarrassed if you don't make it, at least in your own mind. Nobody else might notice, but you will know that you

have not stuck to the bargain you made with yourself. You will have missed your goal. And is that really what you want?

And my seventh – and final – recommendation would be: Don't take on an assignment you know you won't be able to finish on time. It won't do you any good if you do. It's much better to turn down an assignment right from the start – and explain that you won't have the time to do a decent job – than to have to come back later and admit that you won't be able to do it. It'll hang around your neck like a millstone, and you won't get anything out of it. So spare yourself that experience. Organize yourself so you know how much you can take on.

Deadlines are a pain in the neck. They truly are. Most of us fear them, even hate them. But in one way, they also help you to write. And in another, they take a load off your shoulders. If there is a deadline you can always tell yourself: This is the best job I could do in this time frame. Which doesn't mean, of course, that it is the best job you could have done in an ideal world where there is *no* time frame. A deadline can save you from your own perfectionism. A deadline is nothing if not a terrific excuse. Because of course there is never enough time to write the article you *actually* wanted to write. The article you knew you were capable of writing. So blame the deadline. It helps.

Writing, by the way, can also be an immensely rewarding experience. It can provide you with a sense of intellectual accomplishment that few other activities can match. To *have written* something, as opposed to writing it, usually feels terrific. That's why I keep doing it. It can make you feel proud – and rightly so. To have wrestled with a topic, to have created something in your own words, to have bent and twisted and fooled around with language so it expresses what you want to say and how you want to say it, to have put down thoughts you didn't even know you had, to have organized a coherent argument, to have over-

come the difficulties of leaving out what doesn't fit – all of that adds up to an incredibly satisfying feeling. And it feels even better if you have managed to do it *on time*.

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