

The 5 Essential Steps to Complete a Big Writing Project On Time, Every Time

Imagine this: you wake up and discover a deadline — for a long writing project you’ve known about for weeks or *months* — is suddenly impossibly close. You have no idea how this happened. After all, you had *ages* to finish your project — where did all that time go?

In my 40+ years of working with writers, I’ve seen many people face this situation. *If only I’d started working on this earlier, they say. I wasted so much time.*

Here are some of the most common roadblocks that get in the way of finishing long-term writing projects:

- **Procrastination:** Many of us put off our writing assignments until the last minute. And it’s even easier to delay long-term projects because there don’t appear to be any consequences — at least not right away.
- **Lack of motivation:** Writing is a creative process that requires inspiration, focus and energy. When we lack motivation, it’s difficult for us to sit at our desks and do the work.
- **Distractions:** In today’s world, there are seemingly endless apps and programs that prevent us from focusing on our writing. When we were five years old, the issues were pretty colours and tasty snacks. Now we’re easily distracted by Instagram, TikTok, Facebook and email.
- **Perfectionism:** Some of us struggle with perfectionism, which can lead to a fear of failure and a reluctance to submit our work until it’s “perfect.”
- **Over-commitment:** We may have multiple projects or commitments that make it challenging to manage our writing time effectively.
- **Lack of planning:** Without a clear plan and timeline, we struggle to stay on track and meet our deadlines.

But on top of this list, the Israeli-American psychologist, economist and Nobel Prize-winner Daniel Kahneman has suggested there’s another, even more serious problem. And it’s this:

Human beings typically *underestimate* the time it takes to do just about anything.

Why?

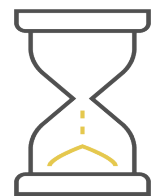
- **We tend to be overly optimistic when planning:** We expect everything to go smoothly and we are reluctant to factor in possible delays — you know, things like cupboards or countertops not being delivered on time for a home renovation project, or interview subjects being unavailable for interviews we need to conduct before writing.
- **We engage in wishful thinking:** We so badly want to finish our project by a specific deadline that we lose our ability to make objective and realistic assessments.
- **We overestimate our own abilities:** We are hard-wired to assume we'll be able to accomplish tasks in a shorter amount of time than is realistic. (Remember those times you assumed you could easily write 2,000 words in one day?)
- **We become carried away with our desire to impress:** Knowing how terrific it would be to turn in our piece of writing by X date, we assume — against all evidence — that we'll just be able to do it.

I see this problem every day with my clients. What's the giveaway? Many of them like to use vague round numbers to estimate the amount of time a writing job is going to take. So, for example, if I ask them how long it will take them to finish chapter X, they tell me they'll have it done “by the end of the month.”

But when I ask them how many words they can write in 30 minutes, *they don't know*. And when I ask them how many words they have left to write in their chapter, they *don't know that* either. Some of them haven't even calculated how many days are left in the month!

If you want to meet your deadline, don't leave it to chance or guesswork. Here are five ways to make sure you submit your big, scary, long-term writing project on time:

1. Understand how long writing takes you



I know, I know. This seems impossible to determine. But it's not! Just keep a record of how many words you write every day and how long it takes you. After two weeks, you'll have a much clearer idea of your writing speed. Sure, some days of writing will be faster — after all, some topics are easier than others — but your records will reveal an *average* or a range. After working with thousands of people over my long career, I've found that slow writers can usually manage 150 words in 30 minutes, while medium-speed writers can hit 500 words in the same time, and fast writers can produce about 750. (If you want to increase your speed, [break the habit of editing while you write](#).)

2. Track your writing, daily, for the length of your long-term project



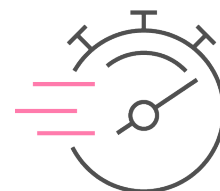
How many words you've written for your project and how many you have left to write should *always* be at the forefront of your mind — just like your banking PIN, they should be numbers you never forget. Don't ever be vague or disorganized about your writing accomplishments. Keep track of them and even celebrate them. I offer my clients a free chart for tracking their writing progress [here](#). If you're anything like me, once you get to the halfway point, you'll discover that your writing pace starts to accelerate, and everything begins to seem a little easier.

3. Realistically determine how much time you have each day



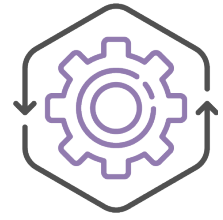
Sure, you might want two hours per day to work on your long-term project, but that's not a realistic number for most people. And the bigger mistake is to underestimate the value of dribs and drabs of time. Even if you have only 20 minutes, you can still get some work done. Even if you have only five! It's always better to do *something* rather than nothing. But, most of all, remind yourself there is *no point* in pretending you have more time than you do. Be realistic and practical in determining how much time you really have, not overly optimistic. And if you're ever in a situation where you really don't have enough time, be sure to ask for an extension as soon as possible. Bosses and academic supervisors are usually much more willing to grant extensions if you ask for them early.

4. Compare your writing time and speed to the size of your project



Imagine you have an 8,000-word report or paper that's due in three months (91 days). Can you really do it in that time? Let's figure it out. Say your average writing speed is 500 words in 30 minutes. This works out to 17 words per minute. Now, let's imagine you have 45 minutes per day to work on this project. Given your average writing speed, simple arithmetic reveals that you should be able to produce 765 words per day. This means you should be able to finish writing the report in 11 days. But remember, you will need twice as much time for editing (another 22 days) and, if you haven't done it yet, twice as much time for researching (another 22 days). That's a grand total of 55 days, which is less than the 91 days available. You have oodles of time! Don't fritter it away. Just take weekends off and reduce your daily writing goal. (Perhaps aim to write 600 words per day, finishing in 14 days. This will make your editing and researching time 28 days apiece, meaning you'll finish in a total of 70 days.)

5. Use reverse engineering to help finalize your plan



Reverse engineering is a neat trick you can use to reassure yourself that you actually have enough time to finish your work. Here's how to do it: Start by writing down the date of your ultimate deadline. Then go two days before that, and consider this your new deadline. These extra two days will give you a cushion if anything goes wrong. Be sure to treat this new date as the “real” deadline, though.

Next, figure out every step you have to take before submitting the project. This list of tasks will be slightly different for everyone, but let me show you what my list usually looks like:

- Think about the project
- Read and do research
- Mindmap
- Write a [crappy first draft](#)
- Let the draft incubate (put it away – no peeking!)
- Edit the crappy first draft
- Share the revised draft with colleagues to get feedback
- Do a final edit, incorporating feedback
- Do a copy edit (check spelling, grammar etc.)
- And finally, do a last proofread, looking for typos

Now, here's the reverse part – turn your list upside down, then figure out how long each task is going to take and *attach a deadline* to it. After that, your list might look something like this:

- Submit project **[Aug 21]**
- Do a last proofread, looking for typos **[1 day: Aug 20]**
- Do a copy edit (check spelling, grammar etc.) **[3 days: Aug 17 to 19]**
- Do a final edit, incorporating feedback **[1 week: Aug 10 to 17]**
- Share draft with colleagues to get feedback **[3 weeks: July 20 to Aug 10]**
- Edit the crappy first draft **[3 weeks: June 29 to July 20]**
- Let the draft incubate **[At least 3 days for recently-written material: June 27 to 29]**
- Write a crappy first draft **[2 weeks: June 13 to June 27]**
- Mindmap **[1 day: June 12]**
- Read and research **[2 weeks: May 29 to June 12]**
- Think about the project **[1 week: May 22 to May 29]**

The reason reverse engineering works is because it *holds you accountable* throughout the process. Without regular deadlines for a project like this, you won't feel any sense of *urgency*, which will make it harder to stay motivated.

Your Next Steps



I know all these numbers may be making your head spin. This is especially true if (like me and many other writers) you're bad with arithmetic. But as creative as writing may be, meeting your writing deadlines often comes down to basic math and three simple questions: How fast can you write? How many words do you need to produce? Can you manage your time?

Don't hope or wish. Don't be mindlessly optimistic. Instead, make sure you can answer all of these questions before you ever agree to a deadline. If you can do that, you'll be able to complete your project on time.

To get more ideas, tips and strategies for writing faster, better, visit www.publicationcoach.com

Happy writing!

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