

The 13 Most Common Time-Wasting Mistakes Writers Make — and Proven Techniques to Boost Your Productivity by 30% (While Avoiding Marathon Writing Sessions)



Do you have the best intentions to be a productive writer, but still somehow never manage to get enough words on the page?

It might help you to start thinking about time as the single most valuable thing you have. After all, it's worth *more* than money — because lost money can often be regained but lost time is gone for good.

Here are 13 mistakes that stop us from being as productive as we want to be (and an idea for how to fix each and every one of them).

1. We overestimate the amount of time we actually have



The myth of the eight-hour workday leads us to believe that we have, well, eight hours of time for writing (or other work) every day. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Think about what interrupts you at the office: phone calls, emails, chats with colleagues, chats with your boss. And working from home can be even more distracting: phone calls, emails, dealing with the dog and neighbours who arrive at the door.

In fact, most of us work most efficiently in bursts of time ranging from 15 to 90 minutes, no more. If you can safeguard one 15-minute session for writing today, congratulate yourself on being productive!

2. We underestimate the value of small actions



Most of the new clients I meet with tell me they aspire to write for at least an hour a day. They are usually shocked when I tell them that's way too much time to start.

Small, regular actions we do daily — like writing for just 15 minutes — are far more likely to pay off for us. The value comes from the daily repetition. That's why it's better to write for 15 minutes every weekday than it is to write for 75 minutes on Fridays — even though the ultimate investment of time is exactly the same.

If you don't want to kill your productivity, remind yourself that what you do daily makes you much more productive.

3. We multitask



People used to believe multitasking demonstrated superior intellect and control — think of CEOs who dictate new documents while signing existing ones. Now, neuroscientists have shown that multitasking leads us to accomplish less and to feel worse while we're doing it.

The ultimate and most destructive multitasking I see writers do every day is this: they edit while they write. Many of my clients are addicted to this way of working, and I always view it as my important job to teach them how to break that habit.

Stop editing while you write, and you'll find writing much more enjoyable. And you'll be able to write faster, too.

4. We allow ourselves to become distracted



Two types of distractions derail our writing plans — external and internal ones. The big external distractions are phone calls, texts and other people showing up beside our desks. The big internal ones are email, the internet and our own self-doubts.

To keep external distractions at bay, have a talk with your boss and get permission for some “protected” writing time. Ask for 30 minutes a day. Then turn off your phone and post a sign on your office door or on the side of your computer that says, “On deadline — please do not disturb.” Then, plop a large pair of headphones on your head (not discreet earbuds but BIG ugly headphones so others can’t miss them) and start writing.

Dealing with internal distractions is harder, but turn off your email, shut down your internet and start writing. If you have difficulty staying with the program, then invest in some software that will cut off your access to email and the internet. Two good options are [SelfControl](#) (Mac only) and [Freedom](#).

5. We’re perfectionists



The word “perfectionist” sounds like a lovely thing, doesn’t it? It makes me think of rainbows and unicorns and a delicious piece of chocolate cake with fantastic fudgy icing and no sloppy centre.

But in fact, focusing on perfection is the most effective way to kill your productivity. Trying to achieve perfection only *frustrates* us. It makes us accomplish less, and it increases our stress and predisposes us to depression. We’re human beings for goodness’ sake! Nothing is going to be perfect, and the sooner we can let go of that absurd and unworkable idea, the more we’re going to be able to accomplish.

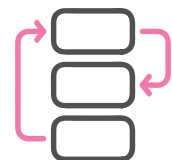
6. We don't know how to say "no" to anyone



Time is short, and if we want to be productive with the tasks that are important to us, we need to be able to say no to requests in other areas. Saying yes too often is what will kill your productivity.

Saying no is never easy, of course. To be able to say it successfully, you'll need some practice. I like to begin with a policy of not agreeing to anything right away. Instead, I ask for more time to think. Here's the phrase I use: "Can you give me a couple of days to think it over and make sure I have the necessary time to devote to it?" This sentence is an excellent transitional one, as you work to become better at saying no. It gives you the chance to marshal your arguments (which are often arguments with yourself). And if you do want to say yes, you will have preserved that option.

7. We fail to have a work routine



If we don't plan what we're going to do every day, the demands of other people will quickly take over our lives.

To make sure your schedule reflects what you really want to do, I suggest using a strategy called "time blocking." I had heard about this system for many years before working up the guts to use it, roughly five years ago. Initially, I thought, "This isn't for me," because my days are filled with meetings and phone calls.

In fact, those are the two *best* reasons for using it.

Once I started time-blocking, I became at least 50% more efficient. Here's how it works: First thing each morning, I schedule my day, 6 am to 6 pm, in pomodoros – 25-minute units of working time, divided by five-minute

breaks. (No, I don't work a 12-hour day. Some of my time is scheduled for meals, personal email, exercise and other non-work tasks.)

Here's why time-blocking works: If I've bitten off more than I'm going to be able to chew, I'll understand that fact early in the morning. This gives me the chance to decide what I'm going to do and what I'm going to postpone. As a result, I've never worked in the evening since I started my time-blocked schedule. (Before that, I had to work in the evening all the time.)

Time blocking also gives me a sense of urgency that makes me far more productive every day. Learn more about it [here](#). Time-blocking will stop you from killing your productivity.

8. We don't automate recurring tasks



Anything we do irregularly (less often than once a week) is something we have to relearn how to do each time.

For one of my clients, I have a series of website-related tasks I need to do once a quarter. It's so confusing and overwhelming, it's almost as if I've never seen the task before. For this reason, I've created a "dummies guide" for myself, typed out as a step-by-step document. Each quarter, I open this document and follow the steps and it's easy.

Yes, it took me some time to create the document, but the value I get from it each quarter made it pay off the first time I used it.

9. We let ourselves get sucked into too many meetings



Sometimes, you may have no choice about attending meetings — and if that's the case, you have my sympathy. But avoid as many meetings as you can.

Remind yourself of the anonymous quote: “A meeting is an event at which the minutes are kept and the hours are lost.”

Here are five questions to ask the next time you’re invited to a meeting:

- What is the exact topic?
- What is the timing, location and (most importantly) duration?
- Who else will attend?
- What decision(s) will be made at the meeting?
- Why, specifically, do you need to be there?

The last two questions will help you determine whether the meeting is worth your time. If it isn’t, plead “lack of time” and ask the organizer to email you the results.

10. We don’t track our results



When I ask clients how many words they can write in 30 minutes, many of them can’t answer me. (This isn’t to criticize clients. Many of my writer friends can’t answer the question either.) But without knowing numbers like this, how do you plan your day?

I urge all writers to track their writing and to have a good handle on how long it’s going to take them to do any project *before* they start it. I even provide a [tracking chart](#) on my website, available at no charge for anyone who wants to use it.

11. We set unrealistic goals



We tend to be overly optimistic when planning. We engage in wishful thinking, and we chronically overestimate our own abilities. Instead of planning with rose-coloured glasses, become a dire pessimist if you truly want to meet your goals.

And most of all, make future plans based on your *past* performance. Don't guess how long it's going to take you to finish writing project XYZ. Instead, look at how long writing project ABC really took you (again, not your goals, but the actual achievement) and use that past performance to predict your future one. It will make you much more realistic.

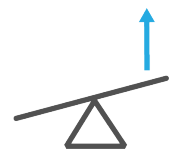
12. We don't leave enough room for downtime



All work and no play makes Jack or Jill a dull person. Or so the saying went when I was a kid. But as a writing coach, I've found that all work and no play makes Jack or Jill a blocked writer.

Writing is a creative act, and it requires more than just work. It also demands relaxation time, such as reading novels, going for walks, listening to music and meeting with friends. We are human beings, not machines. If you want to be more productive, make sure you get enough downtime.

13. We don't use an accountability lever



Many writers procrastinate. They put off until tomorrow the job they should be doing today. This is just human nature, and if you want to be really productive, you need to figure out a way to persuade yourself to do just a little bit of writing every day. But to make this happen, you're going to need some help. Make a pact with a colleague or a family member that both of you are going to work on your writing every day for a minimum of X minutes. (You both get to determine what X represents.) Make sure you report to each other when you do it.

And if that doesn't work — because friends and family are often too forgiving — then up the ante a little by getting professional help. I offer an affordable program called [Get It Done](#) that, since 2013, has used daily accountability to help thousands of writers start and finish their writing projects.

Your Next Steps



Becoming a more productive writer isn't complex, like nuclear physics or astrodynamics. Instead, it requires being mindful of your writing habits, setting realistic goals and allowing yourself to have fun along the way.

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

Happy writing!

Daphne Gray-Grant