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The Habits of Highly Productive Writers

*There are no tricks to make writing easier, just practices you can develop to get it done*



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By Rachel Toor

Many writers I know love Joyce Carol Oates—some even refer to her as JCO, as if she were a brand as recognizable as CBS or BMW. But just as often, the mention of her name is met by groans and complaints about how much she’s written. Her productivity seems like an affront.

When someone’s doing a lot more than you, you notice it. It brings out your petty jealousy. And if you’re like me (occasionally petty and jealous), it might make you feel crappy about yourself. Which is, let’s face it, ridiculous. No one else’s achievements take anything away from yours, or mine. The fact that another writer is working hard and well should be nothing more than inspiration, or at least a gentle prod.

So I started to think about the practices of highly productive writers. What are the personality traits and habits that help people crank out the pages? Here are a few that occur to me:

**They reject the notion of "writer’s block" the way others shun gluten.** Some people are truly unable to tolerate that vilified protein, but many more leap after a culprit to explain their dyspepsia or inability to refrain from carby deliciosity. Maybe cutting out a big food group makes it easier to stick to a diet than being careful about portion sizes of crusty bread and pasta puttanesca. Certainly there’s a comfort in diagnosis, relief in the idea that suffering can be linked to a thing that others also get. Likewise, it’s a lot easier to say that the muse has gone AWOL than to admit that writing is hard and requires discipline and sacrifice.

**Productive writers don’t reach for excuses when the going gets hard.** They treat writing like the job it is. They show up, punch the clock, and punch out. Nothing romantic about it. They give themselves a quota; sometimes it’s butt-in-chair time, sometimes a word count. Simple math allows you to figure out how quickly 1,000 words a day adds up to a book-length work. These writers know how to use deadlines, whether external or self-imposed, to stay on track.

**They don’t overtalk their projects.**Some writers like to talk about writing more than they actually like to write. Others dine out for years on their topics—giving conference papers, writing journal articles, applying for grants—until they’ve all but lost interest in what they are supposed to be writing. One prolific academic writer told me that he often gets interested in something and spends a few months working before he realizes it’s not going to pan out. He puts it aside without ever having talked about it. Only once it’s well under way will he discuss it. I have been accused of being "secretive" about my work. I’m not; some pieces benefit from yammering, and others don’t.

**They believe in themselves and their work.**Perhaps it’s confidence, perhaps it’s Quixote-like delusion, but to be a prolific writer you have to believe that what you’re doing matters. If you second-guess at every step, you’ll soon be going backward. A writer I know likes to say that over the years he has "trained" his family not to expect him to show up for certain things, because they know his work comes first. You have to be willing to risk seeming narcissistic and arrogant, even if you don’t like to think of yourself that way. The work takes priority.

**And they might hate themselves a little if they slack off.** Along with the necessary arrogance and narcissism, a dollop of self-hatred goes a long way toward getting stuff done. You have to believe it’s your job to be productive and to feel bad if you’re not.

**They know that a lot of important stuff happens when they’re not "working."**I love this passage from Graham Greene’s novel The End of the Affair: "I was trying to write a book that simply would not come. I did my daily five hundred words, but the characters never began to live. So much in writing depends on the superficiality of one’s days. One may be preoccupied with shopping and income tax returns and chance conversations, but the stream of the unconscious continues to flow, undisturbed, solving problems, planning ahead: one sits down sterile and dispirited at the desk, and suddenly the words come as though from the air: the situations that seemed blocked in a hopeless impasse move forward: the work has been done while one slept or shopped or talked with friends."

Productive writers have been through the cycle enough to know it’s a cycle, and sometimes you figure out problems while you’re walking the dog. They know to trust that and don’t get twitchy when the pages stop piling up.

**They’re passionate about their projects**. Too much scholarly work is obviously produced without heat. Some academics take so long to finish a book they can barely remember what interested them about the topic in the first place. Productive people become impatient and seek out new thrills. They like to learn stuff.

Chipping away at something for years or decades can lead to a pile of dust or to a finely made and intricately tooled piece of art. It’s often hard to know which one you’re working toward. It can help to delude yourself into channeling Donatello or Brancusi even if what you’re looking at seems like a bunch of shavings.

**They know what they’re good at.**Dave Eggers wrote that for him, at least at the beginning of his career, writing fiction was like driving a car in a clown suit. It’s important to find the project and the approach that will work for you and will let you use your own real and valuable skills to best effect.

Perhaps academics find themselves traumatized by writing because they’re trying to sound like some "smart" version of themselves. Their writing comes off as inauthentic. Often, however, these same people can talk about their ideas in a way that makes you want to listen for hours. The best writing is a conversation between author and reader. Too much scholarly work reads like someone driving a car in a clown suit. If these folks could write more like they teach—be themselves on the page—the work would surely benefit.

**They read a lot, and widely.**I’m always amazed when professors say they don’t have time to read for fun. How else can you attempt to write something good? If you don’t think that your work should be a pleasure to read, most of us won’t want to read it. Productive writers (should) pay attention to craft and read to steal tricks and moves from authors they admire. Reading becomes a get-psyched activity for writing. Anyone who’s ever assigned (or done) an exercise in imitation knows that.

**They know how to finish a draft.**As with relationships, beginnings are exciting and easy, full of hope and promise. Middles can get comfortable. You fall into a routine and, for a while, that can be its own kind of fun. But then many of us hit a wall. Whether it’s disillusion, boredom, or self-doubt, we crash into stuckness. Productive authors know that they have to keep going through the hard parts and finish a complete draft. At least you’ve got something to work from.

**They work on more than one thing at once.**Of course, when you hit that wall, it’s tempting to give up and start on something new and exciting (see above, re: beginnings are easy). While that can lead to a sheaf of unfinished drafts, it can also be useful. Some pieces need time to smolder. Leaving them to turn to something short and manageable makes it easier to go back to the big thing. Fallowing and crop rotation lead to a greater harvest.

**They leave off at a point where it will be easy to start again.**Some writers quit a session in the middle of a sentence; it’s always easier to continue than to begin. If you know where you’re headed the next time you sit down, you’ll get there faster. There’s an activation-energy cost to get things brewing. Lower it however you can.

**They don’t let themselves off the hook.**If only I had three hours of quiet every day. If only I had the perfect office. If only my hair weren’t so frizzy. People often say to writers, "Oh, I’d love to write a book, if only I had the time," as if it’s merely a question of having a leisurely spell to sit noodling at your computer.

**You have time only if you make it a priority.** Productive writers don’t allow themselves the indulgence of easy excuses. When they start to have feelings of self-doubt—I can’t do this, it’s too hard, I’ll never write another good sentence—they tell themselves to stop feeling sorry for themselves and just do the work.

They know there are no shortcuts, magic bullets, special exercises, or incantations. I am suspicious of strategies that diminish the time and effort required to do good work. Write your dissertation in five minutes a day? Complete a book in 60 days? Maybe you’d like to try the KitKat Diet, or purchase a lovely bridge?

There are no tricks to make it easier, just habits and practices you can develop to get it done.

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