

How To Write a Book A Year...

BY WILLIAM C. DIETZ

The full title of this article is: *How To Write A Book A Year While Holding Down A Full-time Job, Maintaining Key Relationships, Staying In Shape, And Maintaining Your Sanity*. Because, truth be known *wealthy* writers are the exception rather than the rule, and most published authors need another source of income. That means unpublished authors *definitely* need a another source of income, and that brings us back to the purpose of this discussion, which is how to write a novel a year while working full-time.

My credentials: Although I'm a full-time writer now...that's a relatively recent occurrence. I went to work for what was U. S. WEST (now QWEST) in about 1980. In 1985 I sold my first novel to ACE and in 1986 it was published.

From that point forward, ending in 2000 when I retired with 20-years worth of service at U.S. WEST, I wrote at least one book a year, and sometimes more. All while holding down a rather demanding job as a group manager having as many as fifteen subordinates, and traveling once or twice a month. And, whacky as that is, you can do it too.

First, let's take a moment to discuss why anyone in their right mind would want to write a book year while holding down a full-time job. There are at least three good reasons. Writers, write. That's how we get better. Unpublished authors need to throw books at the publishing wall until one of them sticks. And, published authors need to produce at least a novel a year to establish their names (which equates to their brand,) build a loyal audience, and hopefully "own" a slot in their publisher's line-up. Meaning that your publisher knows they can count on you to deliver the second volume of that trilogy job or no job, and comes to depend on you.

Besides, there's a psychological advantage to writing a book a year and pursuing a career at the same time. When things weren't going all that well at work I used to tell myself, "Well, to hell with them! I'm an author..." And walk down to

Barnes & Noble to see how many inches of shelf space I had. Or, if a disappointing royalty statement arrived in the mail, I would say, "Oh well, I know where the next check is coming from," and take pleasure in the fact that I not only had a "real" job but all the benefits that came with it.

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Okay, assuming you're crazy enough, hungry enough, or just plain demented enough to attempt a book per a year here's how I suggest that you go about it. *The goal is to write one-page a day*. Most of you should be able to accomplish that in an hour or less. Not a finished page mind you, but a rough draft, which you will polish later. Because if you write one page per day, 365 days a year, you will eventually wind up with a 365 page book! And that's a good salable length. (If you can write *more* than a page a day—then that's even better!)

Now, if you are one of those authors who likes to write without an outline, then good luck...Because odds are that you will wind up discarding a lot of material during the editing process. So, while I'm not saying it's impossible to produce a book a year that way, it's my opinion that those who follow a nice tight outline will have a distinct advantage. I know outlines were and are critical for me.

Next take a careful look at the way your life is organized to determine where at least one-hour of writing per day will

fit in. For some of you that will be in the morning, *before* you go to work, while others will find a way to carve the time out of their evenings. (One strategy is to give up reality shows.) And remember, the hour does not include sharpening pencils, making coffee, or playing poker online!

And don't attempt to steal that hour a day from your employer! It isn't right, they'll catch you, and then where will you be? And don't use your employer's computer, email, or Internet access in connection with your writing either.

If writing an hour a day during the week simply won't work for you, then put in *two* four hour sessions on Saturday and Sunday. The key is to make writing as much a part of your day as taking a shower, eating food, and getting some exercise. All of which are highly recommended by the way—lest your loved ones find you face down in a box of doughnuts.

Does this require some level of sacrifice? No, not if you are single, and live by yourself. For everyone else the answer is an emphatic *yes*. Be it right or wrong, good or bad, there were times during the fifteen years that I worked and wrote a book a year when my family suffered as a result. Neither one of my two daughters knows how to play soccer, got to go back-packing with their dad, or were likely to spot him at anything less than a major swim meet in which they were virtually guaranteed to win a medal.

That's the bad news. The good news is that thanks to the extra income I made from writing my wife and I were able to take our daughters to Mexico, Australia, and Europe. (The living room remained unfurnished however.) Was that an acceptable trade-off? I don't know—but that's the one I made. And, because writing made me happy (well, sort of), I believe that made me a better dad. So it's my opinion that if you aren't willing to make some level of sacrifice—you shouldn't attempt a book a year.

Assuming that you do make the at-

tempt then I recommend that you communicate with your family about what you plan to do, solicit their buy-in, and come to an agreement about what you can sacrifice without doing damage to key relationships. Because, when all is said and done, life is about people not books.

Having determined when you're going to write—make sure you have a place to do so. If you live alone this won't be a problem, but if you live with others, you're going to need a space where you can lock yourself away. Make sure that you have all of the necessary supplies there, including Internet access, because I believe that's critical for *any* writer. Especially part time writers who have little time for other forms of research.

Then, with your outline in hand, and your life organized in a way that will enable you to succeed, start writing one-page per day. And, as far as I'm concerned, that's *every* day excepting major holidays, your daughter's wedding, or a really important funeral.

Okay, so far so good, but the process is just beginning. The next goal is to achieve a twenty-five to thirty page chapter. Assuming that you remain on-schedule you should produce one rough chapter per-month. I write the first draft long hand—but many authors prefer to compose at the keyboard. Either is fine, but the advantage to writing the first draft long hand is that as a part-time writer you can compose on the bus, at Starbucks, or in a hotel lobby

How 'bout a laptop you ask? It could work, but even the lightest models are heavier than a pad of paper, and tend to attract attention. (I hate it when the guy next to me on the plane spends the whole trip trying to read my stuff.)

Once you have a complete chapter the next task is to type it into you computer. As you do so you will notice all sorts of opportunities to choose alternative words, improve flow, strengthen descriptions and so forth. I strongly advise that you take the time to do so. Once that's accomplished print it out. Here's still *another* chance to work on a plane to Chicago, at lunch in the cafeteria, or while the kids are taking their music lessons. Take the print-out wherever you go, make whatever changes you see fit, and enter those changes into the computer. That won't constitute your *last* edit, but with two reviews under your belt, the odds are fairly good that the next chapter will be constructed on solid literary ground.

Having put the edited chapter aside and start a *new* one. Continue the process until you're done. If you need to write fourteen chapters rather than twelve, or you lose three weeks to a special assignment in California, forgive the world and move on. However, that being said, I would remind you that I had plenty of special assignments, traveled at least twice a month, and still managed to write a book a year. So if I can do it so can you.

But what about quality? Good question! Would my books have been of higher quality had I been able to write full time? Maybe... Probably... But I couldn't, so I wrote what I could, and was fortunate enough to sell it. And that, my friends, is the ultimate test isn't it?

Okay, back to the one-year old book. Print the manuscript out and put the red pen to work. Rather than haul the whole thing around I suggest that you work with no more than two chapters at a time. Once again you will be amazed at how much editing you can get done while commuting on the train, listening to a really boring conference call in the privacy of your cubicle, or waiting for the dryer to buzz.

This part of the process may take awhile, because sometimes it's necessary to make changes that cascade down through the rest of the book, but hey, you wanted to be a writer!

Once the ms. has been edited then enter the changes into your computer *making more improvements as you do so*. (It was sometimes necessary to take two or three days of vacation in order to perform final edits.) Finally, print the whole thing out, go over it one more time and enter those changes as well.

Once that effort is complete paginate the sucker (if you haven't done so already), dedicate it to whoever you ignored, abused, or otherwise offended while you wrote the book, and send it off. Oh, and one more thing... Once you put the ms. in the mail—start the whole process over again! ■

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