

BASED ON THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING *THE 12 WEEK YEAR*

THE
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YEAR
for **WRITERS**

A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO
GETTING YOUR WRITING DONE

A. TREVOR THRALL, PhD

WITH **BRIAN MORAN AND MICHAEL LENNINGTON**

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PREFACE

I am excited to have written, at last, a book about writing. I have worked to help my students get their writing done for many years. My goal now is to share what I've learned with as broad an audience as possible. I happen to be a professor of political science, but the system I use to organize and manage my writing can be applied to any kind of writing you might do.

The 12 Week Year, created by Brian Moran and Michael Lennington, is designed to help people focus on the small number of key activities that will help them achieve their most important goals. After discovering the system, I applied it to my research and writing with tremendous results. In nearly twenty years since adopting the 12 Week Year system, I have written millions of words on all sorts of subjects. I've written books, journal and magazine articles, book chapters, memos, op-eds and blog posts, newsletters, policy analyses, book reviews, conference papers, public lectures, and all sorts of other things. Most importantly, the 12 Week Year allowed me to get all this writing done while maintaining a happy marriage, helping raise three great kids, and getting entangled in any number of time-consuming side hustles along the way.

This book will show you how to use the 12 Week Year to become a more productive writer. But before you get started, I want to be clear: you do not need to be an academic or a full-time writer to make use of this system. I am paid to sit around and write for a living. Unless you are in the same position, you should not imagine that you need to write so much to be successful. The fundamental promise of the book is this: No matter where you want your writing to take you, the 12 Week Year will help you get there, even if you're not sure yet just where *there* is.

I certainly did not wind up where I thought I would be. Hooked by science fiction and fantasy at an early age, I was probably 12 or 13 when I decided I wanted to become a writer. When I was 14, I sent my first and only submission to the science fiction magazine, *Analog*. It was an overwrought poem about outer space, as I recall. I can still remember how excited I was by the rejection letter I received two months later. The editors kindly took the time to encourage me to keep trying and to submit my work again in the future. It was enough to make me feel like I really could be a writer someday. I kept the rejection letter far longer than I kept the poem.

As so often happens in life, however, I wound up following a very different path from what I had imagined as a kid. I never lost my obsession with science fiction and fantasy, but in college I gained a fascination with political science and learned that I was far better at analytical writing than I was at writing fiction. So instead of a novelist, I became an academic. I still have plans to write a novel or two someday, and when I do, you can bet I will use the 12 Week Year to help me do it.

Whether you are a budding playwright, a graduate student writing a thesis, an aspiring novelist, or a full-time writer, the

12 Week Year can help you become more productive on a consistent basis. With this new writing system in place, you will find yourself getting more writing done, more quickly, with less stress than before.

The 12 Week Year for Writers will enable you to:

- Clarify your writing vision and increase the energy and motivation you bring to your writing
- Connect your daily actions with your vision via a 12 Week Plan for your writing
- Focus on only the most important tactics necessary to reach your writing goals
- Create a healthy sense of urgency and motivation by shortening your planning horizon to twelve weeks
- Reduce your stress about hitting goals by increasing the predictability and consistency of your writing
- Build confidence in your ability to accomplish whatever writing projects you can imagine
- Identify and resolve problems in your writing more quickly by reviewing your performance on a weekly basis
- Reduce your anxiety by clearly identifying when it is time to write and when it is not time to write
- Improve your work/life/writing balance by ensuring that your weekly schedule provides adequate time for each
- Keep your projects on track by providing a weekly routine that reinforces your ability to get your writing done

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I need to start by thanking Michael Lennington, coauthor of *The 12 Week Year*, for more than two decades of friendship and inspiration. This book never would have happened if he had not sent me a binder full of the materials that would eventually become known as the 12 Week Year just when I needed it most.

I also need to thank two decades worth of undergraduate and graduate students for enduring both my plentiful writing assignments as well as my advice about how to get their writing done. Special thanks go to the graduate students with whom I have written everything from conference papers to edited volumes. Interacting with students not only fueled my love of teaching and talking about writing, but it taught me more about the craft than I have learned from any book.

No book would be ready for prime time without a healthy review process. I'd like to thank Dominik Stecula, Matt Fay, John Glaser, John Allen Gay, Ryan Nuckles, Michelle Newby, Marcy Gray, Megan Hocking, Keely Thrall, Erik Goepner, and a few others who shall not be named, for invaluable comments on the first draft. They can take credit for most of the good bits; the mistakes are all mine.

Last but very much not least, I want to thank my family. My kids have graciously put up with a year's worth of near-constant chatter about the book and the 12 Week Year. They have read my drafts, given me great feedback, and been endlessly encouraging (my daughter, Eliza, deserves a special tip of the cap for her close reading of the book). But in the end, nothing I have accomplished throughout my career could have happened without the partnership and support of my wife, Jeannie, and this book is no exception. She has always been my first and last reader. I'm looking forward to writing our next chapter together.

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SECTION I

WHY YOU NEED A NEW WRITING SYSTEM

CHAPTER 1

WHY YOU NEED A NEW WRITING SYSTEM

Do you ever wonder how some writers seem to crank out story after story, article after article, book after book? Or why it is that so many people dream of writing a novel, but so few ever do? Whether you are a blogger, a researcher, or an aspiring novelist, how would your life change if you could consistently produce your best writing?

If there is a writer out there who hasn't spent time trying to figure out how to get more writing done, I haven't met that person yet. Getting written work out the door isn't just hard for full-time writers; it's the hardest thing to do for many professionals, especially because most of us must also deal with other, often more urgent, professional and personal demands every day. Whether the goal is to finish another post, finish a lab report, write a book, or finish your dissertation, figuring out how to write given your hectic schedule is a critical task. Figuring out how to do this while staying sane and living a happy life is even more important.

Since you're reading this there is a good chance that you have worried at some point about whether you're one of those people who can't get organized or just can't finish things. If this is you, I have two messages for you: First, you are not alone, second, yes you can.

WRITING IS HARD

Everyone who writes for a living must cope with the unique challenges of writing. It can be lonely. It requires enormous faith, patience, and emotional reserves to see a long project through. No one gets a free pass. Writing is hard, even for famous writers. E.B. White, author of *Charlotte's Web*, once remarked that, "Writing is hard and bad for the health." The German novelist and essayist Thomas Mann once noted that, "A writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people." My own experience confirms this truth. Having worked in writing-oriented jobs for over thirty years, I can still struggle to find the inspiration to write an op-ed, hammer out a blog post, or drag a manuscript over the finish line.

The most common label for this problem is writer's block. But in fact, as experienced writers will tell you, the phrase "writer's block" is something of a misnomer, because only in a minority of cases is a writer truly unable to put words down on paper or on the screen. This does happen, certainly, and when it does it can be crushing. The list of well-known authors who have struggled with writer's block and even left books unfinished is a lengthy one. Gustave Flaubert, the author of *Madame Bovary*, once wrote: "You don't know what it is, to stay a whole day with your head in your hands trying to squeeze your unfortunate brain so as to find a word."

But rather than a complete inability to put words to the page, writer's block is more likely to be shorthand for one of the many challenges that crop up throughout the writing process. In my research into the problems writers have getting their work done, the most common of these include:

- Lack of productivity
- Lack of focus
- Fear of failure/negative reviews/lack of confidence
- Lack of inspiration
- Lack of motivation/burnout
- Feeling overwhelmed/unsure how to start
- Procrastination/missed deadlines
- Lack of time to write/inefficient time use

That's a daunting list. And unfortunately, it is a list that most people are all too familiar with. Worse, many people feel that these challenges are proof that they are bad writers. These feelings have prevented a lot of people from writing a lot of things.

The nature of the writing process is partly to blame for this. Writing is a lonely process. Even if you are working with a co-author or a whole team, eventually it's just you, the keyboard, and a blank screen. Of course, many of us gravitate toward writing-heavy careers for this very reason – we like working alone. A big downside of working solo, however, is the lack of feedback about what is normal and what isn't. It is easy for writers who are holed up in their cubicles, studies, or offices not to realize how common the problems are that they're facing. Alone with their troubles, people beat themselves up for their

perceived shortcomings, which makes grappling with those challenges that much more difficult.

On top of this, like any creative process, writing takes a lot of emotional strength. You have only your own wits and grit to rely on to finish your writing, and once you share it with the world, everyone will judge you for it. Sure, you get the glory if they love it, but you also get all the criticism if they don't. Sharing our writing makes most of us feel incredibly vulnerable. That fear can stop us in our tracks before we begin, or it can keep us from submitting that manuscript even after we've finished it. Fear is just one of the challenges writers face.

Writer's block can strike right at the beginning of a project when you don't know where to start or maybe even what to write about. This sort of block appears quite often among graduate students who are paralyzed by the prospect of picking the topic that will define them as scholars. It also afflicts professional writers who are bored of their usual genres and topics and have no idea what to do next. Many people have trouble getting started simply because they hate writing or find it boring or difficult (this explains why so many projects get finished the night before they're due).

Writer's block can also appear mid-project, whether from boredom or frustration, sucking all the wind from your sails and making it impossible to write another paragraph. These sorts of challenges are especially common on long projects when it's easy for "topic fatigue" to set in, but mid-project writer's block can also crop up thanks to plain old exhaustion. Asking your brain to deliver at too high a level for too long turns out to be a great recipe for writer's block.

For many writers, the completion of a report, manuscript, or thesis is the single most stressful period, and the time at

which they face their most severe writer's block. I have seen students get so nervous about finishing their theses that one poor soul developed an inability to go into his study at home. I've seen others develop serious health conditions. More commonly, when writers worry about whether their work will be good enough, their productivity slows to a crawl. Projects that should take a month or two to write instead take six months, or even a year. I know one tenured professor who has become so concerned about negative reviews that when they do manage to finish a manuscript, they now just file it in their desk drawer.

But here's the deal: All writers face these challenges. It doesn't mean you are a bad writer, that your project is no good, or that you should quit and find a new job. Writer's block is simply an unavoidable reality that everyone who writes must face. Most professional writers have suffered from most of, if not all, the challenges on this list at one time or another. But what successful writers have figured out is that productivity is a matter of pressing on through these inevitable challenges.

WHY SHINY NEW APPS WON'T SOLVE THE PROBLEM

If you're like most writers, you've tried all kinds of things to get more writing done. I sure have. One of the most tempting things to do when you're stuck is to look around for shortcuts and technological fixes. There are thousands of apps out there promising to solve all your writing problems. Who hasn't downloaded a cool new Pomodoro timer, or a social media blocker, or a new writing app that promises effortless productivity?

Thanks to the digital revolution, most writers have spent dozens, if not hundreds of hours researching, testing, and mastering an ever-expanding writing stack. By writing stack, I mean the applications writers use to get their writing done. Some writers have a short stack of just a few key apps, while others might routinely use ten or more. In any case, the goal of every writing stack is the same: to make the process of writing as efficient and enjoyable as possible.

Unfortunately, none of these apps hold the secret recipe for more productive writing careers. The prolific science fiction author Ray Bradbury once put it this way, “Put me in a room with a pad and a pencil and set me up against a hundred people with a hundred computers - I’ll outcreate every . . . sonofabitch in the room.” Like all shortcuts, writing apps only address the symptoms, not the fundamental source of our challenges. Writing is hard, so we look to writing apps that promise “focused” or “distraction free” writing, or timers that will cure our time management problems and help us achieve “flow.” Don’t misunderstand, many of these apps are great at what they do, and I use some of them myself, but they function at the tactical level. They can help you write a bit faster, or get your end-notes done more easily, or block out distractions.

If you’re focused on the tactical level, though, you may be missing what psychologists call the executive functions: planning, strategy, and process control. Recent academic research bears out just how important thinking strategically is. In a series of experiments conducted with students at Stanford University and the University of Michigan, researchers found that the ability to achieve a range of goals (getting good grades, losing weight, learning to program, etc.) and to perform challenging and unfamiliar tasks in a laboratory setting was closely related to

having a “strategic mindset.” A person with a strategic mindset is someone who routinely prompts themselves to think strategically about their situation. In the study, the most successful students were those who reported most frequently asking themselves questions like: “What can I do to help myself?”, “How else can I do this?”, and “Is there a way to do this even better?”

Most writers (like most people generally), however, don’t approach their work strategically. Most writers don’t have a rock-solid system for planning, conducting, and tracking their work on a regular basis. Instead, many writers start with vague and ambitious goals (Write a novel! Publish a world-famous newsletter!) and then fail to create realistic and focused plans capable of helping achieve them. For others, problems emerge when they get stuck or lose motivation halfway through a project. Without a strategy for staying on track their momentum fades, their progress slows to a crawl, and their project winds up seriously delayed or abandoned.

Think of it this way: the greatest writing app in the world isn’t going to help if you don’t sit down to write often enough. The slickest social media blocker isn’t going to do much good if you don’t know what you’re supposed to be doing when you sit down to write. Productive writers, on the other hand, have all uncovered a timeless truth: If you don’t have a strategy and a plan for making the best use of your tools, even the best tools can’t help.

THE SOLUTION IS THE 12 WEEK YEAR

Writing is hard, but a great writing system can make it a lot easier. The 12 Week Year is an execution system created by Brian Moran and Michael Lennington. Over many years, I have