



Sidebar: Ten Habits of Successful Screenwriters

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## Ten Habits of Successful Screenwriters

BY Kat Montagu

Like most writers, I have good days – focused and productive – and bad days – in which the world conspires against me. And by the world, of course, I mean me. Tweeting, emailing, phoning, novel-reading, tea-drinking, window-shopping... me.

By the time I get my little girl to daycare, put laundry on and check my email, it feels like half the day's gone. Then the mail lady walks my dog... and brings her back. I check out YouTube while I eat a sandwich. I answer a few emails, read a screenplay, chat to my funny husband, order something online, crack up at a few witty Tweets, make five cups of tea, put the laundry away, then suddenly it's time to pick up my little girl again. What happened? How did my seven-hour writing day produce three pages of drivel?

William Faulkner said, "I only write when I am inspired. Fortunately I am inspired at 9 o'clock every morning."

Excuse me while I look him up on IMDB and decide that the brilliance of *The Big Sleep* makes up for the mind-numbing boredom of *The Sound and the Fury*.

Okay, I'm back.

Daegan Fryklind (*iPod*) tweets:

"Writing = 10% writing, 90% rewriting. Rewriting = 10% writing, 90% self-hatred."

I clearly have the 90% down, but too rarely the rest, so I've asked a bunch of very successful screenwriters how they deal with their procrastination demons.

### **1. Coffee, Toast and Writing**

Karen Walton (*Gingersnaps*) says, "If I don't start in morning – first thing, first cup o' joe – am doomed to squander the day."

Vera Santamaria and Claire Ross Dunn, executive story editors on *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, work at night and in the early morning, respectively. Ross Dunn figures two quiet hours at 5 am "equal 4 hours of regular work time."

But almost all full-time writers prefer to start their day's write, working from 9am until about 2pm.

### **2. Use the Snooze**

Laurie Finstad Knizhnik (*Durham County*) writes in the morning, but says, "after lunch, I'm dull and sleepy. Naps are good. If you're facing a problem you can't solve, frame it for yourself then take a nap. Often enough, when you wake up, you've solved it."

Jon Cooksey (*Shattered*) recently wrote 16-hour days for a month straight, but most writers echo Karen Moonah-Ringling (*Majority Rules!*) – "after about six hours of work I find myself moving commas back and forth and I know I'm done for the day."

### **3. No Interruptions Please**

In his online article *Maker's Schedule, Manager's Schedule*, software programmer Paul Graham says, "a meeting commonly blows at least half a day, by breaking up a morning or afternoon," so he only schedules meetings in the late afternoon. "Programmers and writers... generally prefer to use time in units of half a day at least. You can't write or program well in units of an hour. That's barely enough time to get started."

The same is true for screenwriting – if your time at the page is disjointed, the resulting script can be out of joint.

### **4. Get Your Ass Out Of The Chair**

A surprising number of writers use exercise to stimulate the gray matter.

"I walk – a lot – even while reading," says David Shore (*House*). "I try not to read scripts in open traffic – but while walking around the lot... I can handle that level of risk."

Ken Crow (*Heartland*) breaks story while running: “though a few ideas that seem pretty bloody awesome with G n’ R blasting in my ears and the endorphins kicking in turn out to be laugh out loud horrible when I start typing them out.”

“I’m writing this on a laptop I set up over my treadmill,” puffs Jon Cooksey. “It sounds crazy, but it’s the only way I can get exercise and keep up with my work, especially my email.”

## **5. Keep Your Ass In The Chair**

Denis McGrath (*The Border*) and Rick Drew (*Shattered*) both recommend The Pomodoro Technique™ to stay focused. It’s about 25 minute sprints of work with a five minute break between – accomplish four Pomodoros, and you earn a bigger break. See [pomodorotechnique.com](http://pomodorotechnique.com)

“Other people started doing it and it worked for them and I felt like a real superstar,” says McGrath. “The only problem was that everybody was being so productive with their little 25 minute Pomodoros that I could never get anybody on the phone when I just wanted to procrastinate. That, my friends, is a bitter pill.”

“I didn’t realize I was using the Pomodoro Technique,” says James Phillips. “I thought of it more as the “keep your ass in the chair” method.”

Not that everyone writes in a chair. Claire Ross Dunn writes on the sofa and Jane Espenson (*Caprica*) admits, “I write scripts just as I’m writing this email, lying on my bed, with just my head propped up on pillows. I think it works because I’m totally relaxed, so nothing is distracting my brain.” Which brings us to #6...

## **6. Write Everywhere**

Lots of writers go to coffee bars, but James Phillips (*The Guard*) says, “when I’m working on my own projects and creating my own deadlines, it’s really about finding an hour here and there. So I’m the dad in the ice rink pecking away on a laptop during my son’s hockey practice, or the guy sitting in the Starbucks during dance class, only to return an hour later during TaeKwonDo.”

## **7. Rewards and Consequences**

As a feature story editor, I crack the whip for other writers, but some manage this solo.

“I do deadlines,” says Laurie Finstad Knizhnik, “and I’m a bitch about those. Make them, or suffer the consequences. I tell myself I’ve got two weeks to get to the next stage or else. If I’m not there, I work late. When I get there, I celebrate.”

“When I have a seriously difficult project ahead of me,” says Andrew Wreggitt (*Mayerthorpe*), “I go into my calendar and write page numbers for each day. I have to be happy with everything up to that page in the script before I can move on. The idea being, that if I can over achieve I can steal a day off to play golf.”

## **8. Procrastination is Process... Until It Isn't**

According to Karen Walton, “experienced writers know the difference between simply avoiding the hard stuff to do, needing a break, and needing to play to free up their thinking. You have to procrastinate somewhat to write well - when procrastinating means doing anything else that ultimately will stimulate you back to the boards. We've all read the bash-thru drafts where it's clear someone didn't sit back and goof off *enough*.”

Some use Scrabble (Espenson), Hearts (Cooksey), soundtracks (Drew) or a blog (McGrath) as a reward or as a way to fool themselves into sitting down to write. But many writers feel that their own procrastination is largely unproductive.

“I have a bad habit of playing online poker while I write,” confesses James Phillips. “I made more money playing poker while writing an episode of *The Guard*, than I did for the script itself.”

“The Internet is one big baited trap,” says Alex Epstein (*Bon Cop, Bad Cop*). He recommends the time-management program *RescueTime* but says, “*Freedom* will actually turn off the Internet for as many minutes as I tell it to (see [macfreedom.com](http://macfreedom.com)). Amazing how much work you can get done when the Internet's down.”

Virtuous procrastination can be the most enticing. “There's no shortage of play-dough to pick out of the carpet,” says Karen Moonah-Ringling. “If I don't do it, it'll just sit there, mocking me with its colourful crustiness.” See #5.

## **9. Just Keep Typing**

“I'm from the school of 'just keep typing’” says Vera Santamaria. “So I think putting a placeholder and moving forward in your script, even if you don't know every single element, is a good habit.”

Elan Mastai, whose script *The F-Word* made it onto the Black List last year, agrees: “even if I'm in suck-mode that day, I can fix it later. The point is to crank out the pages. That's the only way to write anything good.”

## **10. Oooo... Oooo... You Make Writing Fun**

“I would generally rather be confabulating than having dinner in a nice restaurant,” says Alex Epstein. “Unless I can be confabulating in a nice

restaurant. I took Lisa out to dinner for Valentine's Day. We got our appetizers, and I said, "so, about Brenda's show, what if..." We spent the rest of the dinner working up the bones of a pitch for a new show. Which meant we could, y'know, put the dinner on the corporate credit card."

Terri Tatchell, a Golden Globe nominee for *District 9* with her romantic partner Neill Blomkamp, "found that writing with Neill was the best antidote for procrastination. Once we hammered out the story, we wrote alone, passing the script back to each other roughly every four days. That small crunch of time really didn't allow for any procrastination."

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Ten great pieces of advice for easily-distracted writers. So what will I take away from this?

Writing articles, analyzing scripts and teaching feed my family and give me something creative to do while I'm procrastinating but – like mess – they expand to fill the space available. Successful screenwriters have one important thing in common: they schedule time to write and make the most of (almost) every precious moment.

I'm pulling out my iPhone Calendar right now (and buying that Final Draft app)... after I take the dog out for a pee... and make some tea.