The Myth of 9-to-5 Writing [1]

October 14, 2013 Advice [2]
Distraction [3]

Theme Essay by Nikki Stern

Why Butt in the Chair May Not Work

For more than a decade back in the 1990s, I worked at a series of architecture firms as a public relations director. I spent most of the day either writing or editing. What I didn't write from scratch, I rewrote—and I took for granted that it was possible to do this kind of work for eight hours straight.

[4]The experience contributed to my development as a writer, not least because the senior designer at one of these firms, an erudite fellow, took me aside one day to suggest I needed to put more of myself into my writing.

"You mean in project descriptions?" I asked dubiously.

"In everything you write," he said.

From that point on, I was on a mission to free myself from corporate constraints. My fantasy was to have entire days to dedicate to my craft, to discover and develop my writing voice, to apply it to creations that were wholly mine.

(Cue harp music.)

Then, in the summer of 2005, I found myself free to commit to my dream. I had what I needed: a writing desk in a quiet corner of the house, a laptop, a voice recorder, sharpened #2 pencils, and a legal pad—every means at my disposal for capturing the torrent of words waiting to pour forth. I was ready to work from 9 to 5 or even longer. I would treat writing like a job, albeit one I loved.

Most authors I know are besieged by other obligations that rob them of time to think, let alone work: children, parents, "regular" jobs, life in all its glory and banality. So, if by chance they do get the gift of unfettered time, what happens? Does spending every day with your butt in the chair, as many gung-ho producers like Stephen King have advised, get you to the promised land of creativity and, perhaps, publication?

Here's what my experience was on my first day of full-time writing: I stared at the screen, got up to do a little gardening, went back, edited some of my older pieces, stood up frequently to stretch, raided the refrigerator, looked at the clock, made a couple of calls, answered some emails, wrote a few words, and spent an undocumented amount of time staring out the window.

That pattern repeated itself over and over again in the first week. I wasn't getting anything done—even though, in the years leading up to my new career, I'd nearly completed a book in my "spare" time.

Eight years, two books, and hundreds of op-ed pieces later, I no longer believe that authors must work an eight-hour day in order to be considered—or to consider themselves—real writers. Of course, all authors will wrestle in their own fashion with notions of time invested and output created, but I'm convinced that a 9-to-5 schedule doesn't work for most of us.

What's ironic about the writerly obsession with a full day's work is that some of our forefathers and mothers fought hard to trim the workday. A standard of eight or nine hours was a key demand of newly formed labor unions in the late 1880s. But demands to replace the typical hundred-hour workweek were met with stiff resistance.

The most infamous confrontation occurred in Chicago in May of 1886. A protester threw a bomb; police responded with gunfire. The mêlée, known as the Haymarket Riots, resulted in the deaths of seven police officers and four or more civilians as well as countless injuries.

[5]The violence at Haymarket and disturbances elsewhere dampened enthusiasm for shorter work hours. But during the Depression, President Franklin Roosevelt got Congress to pass the National Industrial Recovery Act, which was, in turn, replaced by the Wagner Act and the Fair Labor Standards Act. The former established the right of workers to form unions and engage in collective bargaining; the latter set standards for maximum hours and minimum wages.

Though the eight-hour day is now considered typical rather than radical, many people put in more time than that. Those with white-collar jobs often believe they need to work early mornings and late nights to get ahead. As productivity expert Tony Schwartz remarks in a 2010 article in the *Huffington Post*:

> The modern model for success is to hunker down for long and continuous hours in front of a computer or at a meeting, answer emails late into the night, and work till we drop.

Moreover, this model, embraced by middle-management types as well as CEOs, has ended up being used as a cudgel. Workers will often put in overtime because they fear losing their jobs. While independent contractors and high-powered professionals may have some control over their work schedules, most employees don't.

In fact, anger at teachers' and other public-sector unions always seems to focus on how "easy" their hours are. No wonder writers and artists—and anyone else who wants to be seen as professionally steadfast—feel compelled to put

their butts in chairs for at least eight hours a day. Anything less is viewed as shirking

I've labored under this misapprehension, both as a working musician in the '80s and as a working writer over the past eight years. I was in thrall to the idea of "pushing through," not just because I had a deadline but because I was afraid I might lose my impetus. Yet, I wasn't feeling more successful or productive staring at a screen. Instead, I ended up fatigued, drained and—dare I say it—resentful of my writing.

Changing the way I work has been dictated in part by physical challenges. I have osteoarthritis, which began to affect me before I turned fifty and necessitates that I move around to keep from becoming stiff or sore. Following a doctor's recommendation, I force myself to get up every hour or so to stretch, walk around, and change positions.

But far from hindering my work, I've noticed my focus is sharper when I come back from a break, even if the break lasts an hour. As it turns out, I'm in sync with my body's natural cycles, which recalibrate approximately every ninety minutes.

Schwartz believes the focused ninety-minute approach is the optimal way to work productively. He cites classic studies by sleep researcher Nathaniel Kleitman—particularly Kleitman's 1960s observations of the basic rest-activity cycle (BRAC)—as the biological basis for recommending that workers take a break to rest and refresh every ninety minutes.

Schwartz's advice extends to creative workers and relies on his own experience as a journalist and author as well as psychologist Anders Ericsson's 1993 study of the habits of successful young violinists. Schwartz says he gets more writing done; the musicians achieved more in rehearsal by marshaling their efforts for an hour and a half. Beyond that point, they became less effective.

While a shorter workday hasn't taken the corporate world by storm, workplace consultants are also revisiting the logic behind Parkinson's Law. The core principal—"work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion," as C. Northcote Parkinson first framed it in the 1950s—is familiar to efficiency experts. Parkinson's Law usually refers to the tendency of bureaucracies to grow large and byzantine, and for work to seem far more complex than it needs to be.

"Thus, an elderly lady of leisure can spend the entire day in writing and dispatching a postcard to her niece at Bognor Regis," Parkinson added in an *Economist* article. At the time, he was wryly refuting the idea that more workers increase productivity, especially in public workplaces like the British Civil Service. Other experts have used Parkinson's Law to argue that workers can do what needs to be done in fewer than eight hours.

The question is, are fewer hours really appropriate for a working writer?

Many profiles of and interviews with well-known authors, including prolific ones like Stephen King, describe their dependence on routine: writing at the same time in the same place, using the same tools every day. But a surprising number of them also emphasize that they like to mix up work with exercise, errands, or food and friends.

King, who's most credited with that butt-in-chair exhortation, admits in his *On Writing* that he takes afternoon naps. He notes that he lied when he "used to tell interviewers that I wrote every day except for Christmas, the Fourth of July, and my birthday."

Kurt Vonnegut, in a letter to his wife Jane in 1965, offered a glimpse into his early writing habits while he was teaching at the University of Iowa and away from home. He told her that he wrote in the mornings with a break for breakfast, then spent the afternoons at his "day" job (teaching), after which he'd "numb my twanging intellect with several belts of Scotch and water."

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[5]Evenings, he'd cook, listen to jazz, do lots of push-ups and sit-ups ("I feel as though I am getting lean and sinewy, but maybe not") and occasionally take in a movie, like *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, which he found "heart-breaking."

I love these comments because they underscore how writing is inseparable from living.

These days, I don't log in more than six hours of actual writing—that is, putting words on paper—and often it's far less. Nonetheless, I'm working as a full-time writer: reading and researching, scribbling notes onto pieces of paper strategically placed around the house, recording in my car, gathering information, or collecting observations. To the outside world, I may appear to be daydreaming, but I consider all this a valid part of my process.

That's why I don't worry anymore about whether I'm putting in the requisite hours or working 9 to 5. I'm thinking 24/7—and that's the most important part of writing.

How to Be a Ninety-Minute Writer

Being in the zone, where images and ideas are bursting to get out, is a glorious experience. Ideally, writers are within reach of pen, paper, recorder, or computer whenever they're inspired. Yet, prodigious output doesn't equal good output. Sometimes, even getting the words to flow can be surprisingly painful, especially if you force the process.

I take a cue from Kurt Vonnegut and leave time for eating, drinking, exercising, errands—and, yes, the occasional heartbreak. When I write, I do so with absolute focus in segments of 75 to 90 minutes, free from distractions until it's time to let those distractions in.

It's better for my back, my mood , and my writing, even if segmented writing seems counterintuitive. Why stop in the middle of a period of creative flow? Because, chances are, it will leave you refreshed and as productive as you want to be. Here are a few tips to help you adhere to a new schedule.

Tip 1: Keep an Hourglass, Alarm Clock, Egg Timer, Hungry Child, or Needy Dog Nearby

Any of these time keepers, animate or inanimate, will help get you up and away from the computer every ninety minutes. (The animate ones are less reliable; you need to make sure they don't interrupt every five minutes rather than ninety.) I sometimes set a reminder on my computer, which then beeps annoyingly at me.

Tip 2: Have a Plan for Your Break

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I stretch. Or I take the dog for a walk. Maybe I run a couple of errands or build in an hour workout. It helps if you have room to stretch, errands to run, and a gym nearby.

Tip 3: Do Other Nonessential Computer Work on a Different Device

If I want to check email or Facebook or Twitter, I use my iPad. Then I can leave my saved writing work exactly as I left it on my main computer.

If you don't own another device, you can try opening another window on your computer for social media interactions, then closing it before you return to work. Closing the social media window is crucial. A friend of mine swears by an app she's put on her computer called Anti-Social; the home page of the company's website promises to "block websites that waste your time." At $15, it seems like a bargain.

Tip 4: Finish Your Thought and Save Your Work

If the alarm pings or the sand runs out and you're in the middle of a crucial thought, get it down. You don't need to be a complete slave to the clock. After all, writing should be fun—and once it starts to feel fun again, you'll know you're on the right track. You may even discover you've gotten more work done.

Publishing Information

- "The 90-Minute Solution: How Building in Periods of Renewal Can Change Your Work and Your Life [6]" by Tony Schwartz, *Huffington Post*, May 18, 2010.
- "Kleitman, Father of Sleep Research [7]," obituary in the *University of Chicago Chronicle*, September, 23, 1999.
- "Parkinson's Law [8]" by C. Northcote Parkinson, *Economist*, November 19, 1955.
- *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* by Stephen King (Scribner, 2000).
- *Kurt Vonnegut: Letters*, edited by Dan Wakefield (Delacourte Press, 2012).

Art Information

Nikki Stern is the author of two books: *Because I Say So: Moral Authority's Dangerous Appeal* (Bascom Hill, 2010) and *Hope in Small Doses* (Humanist Press, 2012). She's working on a collection of short stories. You can follow her most recent work at Nikki Stern's website [9].

Now that she's got her dog on a ninety-minute schedule, Nikki says her writing is going well, although she still permits herself the distraction of sitting by the window.

Links:
[1] https://mail.talkingwriting.com/myth-9-5-writing
[2] https://mail.talkingwriting.com/tw-issue-themes/writing-advice
[3] https://mail.talkingwriting.com/tw-issue-themes/distraction

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