

Tips for Staying Focused on your Writing During the Pandemic

Stan C. Smith

Although we're all spending more time at home these days, many people are finding it difficult to stay focused on the things they really need to get done. Surprisingly, my word count has actually gone *down* during the last month or so, although I feel like I'm trying as hard as I ever have. In fact, I'm starting to see more and more similar comments from many other writers.

So, I thought it might be helpful to go over some tips for staying focused on your writing projects.

TIP #1: Limit your intake. We're all being bombarded by pandemic news. You could watch news channels, listen to dire warnings on the radio, or visit countless websites on the topic 24 hours a day. *This probably isn't healthy!* Instead, choose a single news source and decide how much limited time you'll spend with it each day. Perhaps you can allow yourself 30 minutes to catch up during your morning coffee and 30 minutes after you turn off for the day. Set an alarm to help you manage the time and ensure you don't lose yourself in the media coverage. Then stick to your plan!

TIP #2: Create a dedicated writing space. Separate your writing space from your relaxing space (don't try to write in bed). Otherwise, you may feel like you're always "on" and never get enough rest. If you have a room to spare that you can repurpose as a writing office, that's ideal. But any space that you only use for writing, and this can be a corner of the kitchen table, is useful. If you use that space only for writing, then you'll be motivated to write whenever you're there.

TIP #3: Strictly define your working and writing hours and communicate them. When you know when you're supposed to finish, you rush to get things done in time without letting them drag out. You'll be more productive if you let your brain disengage from work completely for the evening and weekend before starting up again. And if you are now working from home, defining your working hours is important too. Let those who live with you know when you need to be undisturbed and when you are available to them.

TIP #5: Use a start up and end ritual. It helps to have a ritual to initiate my writing (or working) time. Some people might meditate for 10 minutes, or brew a pot of coffee. I have a ritual of copying my Amazon numbers (royalties, ad spend, etc.) into a spreadsheet that I keep. When I'm done with that, my brain knows it's time to write. What ritual turns on your writing brain?

Also, what ritual can you do to turn *off* your writing brain. Your brain needs "permission" to turn off, so that you can relax. Perhaps going for a walk, or watching your allotted half hour of pandemic news?

TIP #6: Use writing sprints! I know I've talked about this before, but it really works! Thirty or 45-minute sprints work well for me. Write hard during the sprint, then relax for five to fifteen minutes, then do another sprint. When you use this approach, you'll likely get more words in than if you try to write continuously.

I haven't tried this, but apparently FocusMate (<https://www.focusmate.com>) is a site that is becoming popular while so many people are working from home. You log in, set up a 50-minute session that connects you to a stranger, you tell each other what you want to get done in the 50 minutes, then you work!

Or... don't like the idea of doing that with a stranger? Hook up with a writing buddy on **Zoom or Jitsi Meet** (or Skype, or FaceTime, or whatever!) and do the same thing: Tell each other what you want to accomplish in a designated time, then connect again at the end of that time to report on your success (or failure). I tend to be highly motivated when I know someone is going to ridicule me if I don't meet my goal!

You could even *stay connected* on Zoom or Jitsi Meet during the entire sprint, as if you were in a writing retreat together! Then you can easily chat with your writing buddies between sprints.

TIP #7: Do not stop at the end of a chapter, or at the end of a scene—not even at the end of a paragraph! Instead, go ahead and start the first sentence or two of the next chapter or paragraph. Some very successful authors make a habit of starting a new sentence and leaving it only partially complete when they stop for the day. Why? Because this makes it easier to start writing the next day. If you face a blank page, this can trigger writer's block... which is a big time waster!

TIP #8: Outline! You will write faster if you have an outline for your scene or chapter. If you want to be a pantsier instead of a plotter, that's fine—you can write your chapter or scene outline by the seat of your pants, and don't bother outlining the whole book. Why? Because you will write each scene or chapter much faster if you have an outline for that scene or chapter.

TIP #9: Get out of the house and/or exercise. Even though we have stay-at-home orders, there is nothing wrong with getting outside for a run or a walk. Get that blood pumping! It will stimulate your creativity, allowing you to write even faster and more effectively. Just be sure to avoid crowded places. If you live somewhere where it is impossible to avoid other people, you can walk around the house (or use a treadmill or other exercise machine).

TIP #10: Don't forget to stay in touch with other people! Staying at home can get lonely. We all miss interacting with friends and family. So be sure to use social media and/or video conferencing to interact with others. This will boost your mental well-being, which will boost your ability to write!

TIP #11: Write at your best time of day. When are you most creative? Early morning (like me)? Noon? Evening? Whatever it is, make that your designated writing time. Rearrange your schedule if necessary, so that you can tap into your inner genius.

TIP #12: Prioritize your mental health. None of us have experienced anything like this pandemic. It can be terrifying. Be sure to keep moving, eat healthy, balanced meals (it's okay to binge on Netflix, but it's not so good to binge on cheese puffs). Whether working from home or writing, take a break for meals. Don't stay up all night. Limit your pandemic news. Talk to people. Love each other. Smile.

And write the kinds of stories you love to read.

Oh... and make progress on your READER MAGNET!