

## 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 endnotes 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

used the system to organize my own research and writing with great results. I think of it as a strategic operating system for your writing. Where individual apps focus on a small piece of the overall picture, the 12 Week Year pushes you to think strategically so that you can answer the most fundamental questions about your writing: What is my vision for the future? What are my writing goals? What are the best tactics to achieve those goals? How can I manage my writing process to ensure that I stay focused, productive, and on track? Individual apps help you do one specific thing better. The 12 Week Year will help you do all of them better.

### **How the 12 Week Year Saved My Career**

I'm writing this book for a simple reason: I discovered a fantastic system for getting my writing done and I want to share it with as many people as I can. Simply put, the 12 Week Year has been one of the most important ingredients of my professional success. I think it can be the same for you.

But let me back up for just a minute. They say that authors write the books they need to read. Guilty as charged. I started off as one of the most forgetful and least well-organized people you've ever met. Thanks to having been in graduate school for most of my twenties while getting my Ph.D., I didn't own a day planner of any sort until I was 30. At that point, a new job in the "real world" revealed my total lack of organizational skills. When I had to schedule a team meeting for the first time, I discovered not only did I have no idea how to do that, but I also had nowhere to write down anything about the meeting once it was scheduled. With a shock, I realized that I was going to have to get organized if I wanted to survive in the professional

world. At that point, someone gave me a copy of Stephen Covey's classic, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, which rescued me from some of my worst organizational dysfunctions. More importantly, though, I developed a lifelong passion for productivity systems.

I finally landed my first tenure-track academic job in 2003. Like any newly hired assistant professor, I was panicked about publishing enough to get tenure and at the same time my wife and I were busy raising three young children. After moving into my office, I stood in front of the whiteboard and calculated how much I would need to publish over the next six years. The prospect was overwhelming, to say the least. By that point, I was thoroughly immersed in the productivity literature, but none of the systems I had read about seemed like the right fit.

By happy coincidence, just as I was launching into my academic career, my good friend Michael Lennington was joining forces with Brian Moran to develop and promote the system that would become the 12 Week Year. When I told him that their system sounded like just what I needed, Michael sent me a copy of their materials. I devoured their wisdom about the benefits of creating focused plans based on 12-week "years" and embraced the planning tools they had developed to support the successful execution of my plans. Not only did I become far more productive than I had ever been before, but I also experienced a huge sense of relief when I started focusing on 12-week periods and stopped worrying about what was due six years later. I am happy to say that the system worked so well for me that I published enough for tenure ahead of schedule. Even more importantly, it allowed me to get my writing done while still managing to maintain a healthy relationship with my wife, to help raise our kids, and to juggle all sorts of other projects

and obligations. To put it another way, I could never have had the full and satisfying career and personal life I've had if I had not used the 12 Week Year.

I continued to use the 12 Week Year after I got tenure and eventually realized that my students could benefit just as much as I did from it. Much of the advice in this book comes from conversations I've had with hundreds of students as they struggled with papers, theses, and dissertations. I've had similar talks with former students still facing the same challenges as professionals working in their chosen fields. These students not only broadened my understanding of the challenges facing writers of all kinds, but also inspired me to think more deeply about how to overcome those challenges. The old saying that "you don't really know something until you teach it" is spot on in this case. And one of the most important things I have learned from my students is that pretty much everyone's writing can benefit from the 12 Week Year.

## PLAN OF THE BOOK

The next chapter in Section I provides a brief explanation of the 12 Week Year system and why it works before we dive into the details. The rest of the book is then organized into three additional parts. Section II (How to Use the 12 Week Year, Chapters 3 – 8) walks you through each step of the 12 Week Year system and the creation of your first 12 Week Plan. Section III (How the 12 Week Year Will Help You Write, Chapters 9 – 14) discusses how to get the most from the 12 Week Year. It covers topics like how to make your first 12 Week Plan a success, how to juggle multiple projects, work with coauthors, and how to

cultivate the writer's mindset. Section IV (The 12 Week Year in Action, Chapters 15 – 16) includes my journal – a behind-the-scenes look at how I used the 12 Week Year to write this book – as well as answers to some frequently asked questions.

## IF YOU ARE NEW TO THE 12 WEEK YEAR

I recommend that you pick up a copy of the book that launched the movement, *The 12 Week Year* by Brian Moran and Michael Lennington. In this book you, will learn everything you need to know to master the system but reading their book will give you a different perspective, one that will serve to deepen your understanding of the system and broaden your appreciation of what it can do for both your professional life and personal life.

## IF YOU ALREADY HAVE EXPERIENCE WITH THE 12 WEEK YEAR

. . .this book will still be valuable to you. As with any general system, there is plenty to learn about applying it to a specific domain. I have spent almost twenty years not only using the 12 Week Year as my general productivity system, but applying it specifically to my writing. As a result, I am confident that even people who have a great deal of experience with the 12 Week Year will benefit from a book focused on the specific challenges writers face in using the 12 Week Year effectively.

