



# *Working with Procrastination*

*By Jo Gatford*

I am an excellent procrastinator. In the process of writing this article I have managed to make lunch, hang out a load of washing, take my son for a walk around the block and triple-check my Twitter feed – all before reaching a word count of one hundred. What can I say? It's a natural talent. If you challenged me to a procrastination contest I'd probably get distracted and fail to turn up. Fortunately, the benefit of being so well-versed in the art of work-avoidance is that over the years I have managed to track the pattern of my productivity (or lack thereof) and pinpoint when, why and where I write best.

Of course, what works for me may not be right for you, which is why it's useful to study your own patterns of productivity and find out when you're at your most creative. For example: I know I work better in the early morning, or from around 3pm to 11pm. Anything in between is doomed to be pushed aside for toddler-entertaining, housework and snack preparation. And if I'm working late into the evening, I can't afford to be comfortable – no sitting in bed with the laptop allowed – I need a cold room (and possibly a glass of wine) to keep me awake and focused.

Location is important, too. I often work in my little study at home, but since it's usually filled with drying laundry and also doubles up as my husband's art room, it can be something of a pigsty, making for a less-than-peaceful working environment. Working downstairs when the kids are around is an absolute joke, but lovely in the quiet of the evening (definitely with a glass of wine). Personally, I'm least likely to procrastinate if I've specifically set aside time to write and headed out of the house – I like the noise and bustle of a busy café, and public places offer great people-watching opportunities (although I must emphasise the importance of making your stay worthwhile for the proprietors if a café is your location of choice – buy plenty of food and drink and tip generously if you're going to leech off their electricity and WiFi all day!). Changing your writing location regularly can be a good way to keep from feeling stagnant, so try somewhere new: the library, the park, or even the pub.

I'm positive there's a creative 'time of the month' too (yes, for men as well as women), when the words simply refuse to appear and everything grinds to a halt. Conversely, there will be days or weeks when everything comes naturally and in abundance. It's well worth spending a month noting down how productive you are each day to see if there's a rhythm that can be used to your advantage. This way, you can make sure you organise plenty of writing time for when you're most prolific, and use your least creative periods for research, planning, or reading.

So, once you have the time, place and motivation to write, the next challenge is to resist the overwhelming torrent of distractions that threaten to steal your focus away. Here are a few more tips to keep you on track:

- **FOR THE LOVE OF ALL THAT IS SHINY, TURN OFF THE INTERNET!** Or at the very least install a blocking app (I use StayFocused) to prevent you from accessing certain websites for an hour or two. Claiming you 'need' to get online occasionally for research is no excuse either – just note down a list of subjects to look up once your writing time is over and get on with the actual writing!
- Get warmed up. Procrastination is often the result of not being able to get into the groove of a project, so a quick warm up can help you to avoid that temptation completely. Before you start writing, spend five to ten minutes freewriting to get things flowing. If you need a prompt, pick random words or topics from the closest book or newspaper to hand and *just write*. Don't worry about what you're writing, don't try to make it perfect – it's doesn't matter if it's absolute garbage – but whatever you do, keep your pen moving.
- Set a timer and write in stints. Start off with twenty-minute chunks and force yourself to spend the whole time writing until the alarm goes off. Then take a wee break, get up, walk around, make a cup of tea, and come back for another round. It's far more achievable to focus for short periods of time, and often what happens is that once you've immersed yourself in your writing you won't want to stop. As your

attention span grows, increase the stints by ten minutes at a time (though it's always good to take a break after at least forty minutes, if only to prevent backache).

- Lower your expectations. Don't put pressure on yourself to write a certain number of words. Sometimes a productive writing session can be all about re-reading and editing. Don't worry about how prolific other writers might be, or how long it'll take you to finish your story – all these anxieties are just another form of procrastination – concentrate on making your story the best it can be.

It's so easy to come up with excuses for *not* writing, especially when the road to publication is long and paved with doubt, but if your story is important to you then it deserves its own time and space. And sometimes you have to recognise when to just cut your losses and give in to the procrastination monster. The trick is to use the downtime positively – just because you're not actively writing doesn't mean you can't plan a scene or run through dialogue or read an inspiring book – so long as your story is always on your mind, a little time away from the computer can be a good thing.