

Seven ways to build a writing habit in 2022

Ready to make the new year your best year yet? These tips from the pros will help you keep writing all year long.

By Melissa Hart for *The Writer Magazine*

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The pandemic has not been good for my fiction. It's been too easy, since March 2020, to knock out articles and essays for a paycheck and forgo the pleasures of novel writing in favor of making the family yet another meal or suggesting mother-daughter activities that don't involve my teen's smartphone. Colleagues around the world tell a similar tale, admitting to profound anxiety in this changed world, along with a lack of motivation and focus.

A new year, however, brings the gift of starting fresh and honoring the writing we most want to accomplish by building the habit of putting words to paper or screen. Hoping for inspiration, I interviewed experts across the country about how best to cultivate a new writing practice or jumpstart a stalled routine.

1. Quiet your mind

Authors Paulette Perhach and April Dávila met at the 2020 AWP Conference in San Antonio. Perhach had a booth promoting her book, *Welcome to the Writer's Life*, and Dávila – who had just launched her debut novel, *142 Ostriches* – stopped to chat. They found that they were each leading groups back home that combined meditation and writing practice.

“We got to talking and said ‘What if there was an organization that provided a yoga studio model of meditation and writing online?’” Perhach explains. “There are different teachers, and so each class is a little different, but you know you can go in multiple times a week to work out.”

The result of their conversation is A Very Important Meeting (AVIM), an online space in which writers can sign up for an hour, which includes 10 minutes of mindfulness meditation plus 45 minutes of writing time, and then 15 minutes of chatting with the instructor and participants, if desired. The classes are open to any writer at any stage of their career, with a suggested \$5 donation.

On a Tuesday morning in September, I logged into a session hosted by author and Buddhist nun Faith Adiele. She asked us to close our eyes, then led us in a series of breathing exercises and stretches for the neck and shoulders before delivering a short dharma talk. Then, it was time to write.

I turned off my camera and fell into a story I'd been working on, not even tempted to check my email because I knew Adiele and the other participants were also writing. The next week, I signed up for another meeting. There's something about taking 10 minutes to quiet the mind before sitting down to write that keeps my inner critic at bay and facilitates deep work.

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“Going from meditating straight into that creative space is a really nice transition from being still and calm and accessing that deeper level of your consciousness where your creativity lies,” Dávila says. “It feels like you're writing from your best place.”

Perhach explains it this way: “I feel like my mind for the first few decades of my life was like this wild horse that was dragging me along, and now I've figured out how to put the reins on the horse and take it where I want to go. I put that power of my mind that used to keep me up all night with worry and anxiety toward my creative projects and use that imagination that used to tell me everything that could go wrong into creating captivating stories instead of telling myself a story that makes me lose sleep.”

2. Set an intention

Before you sit down to write, it can be useful to determine whether you'll work on a novel, short story, nonfiction chapter, or poem. Some writers commit to working for a set amount of time. Others aim for a certain number of pages or words.

Anyone who's ever participated in National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) knows the magic formula for churning out a 50,000-word manuscript in 30 days is 1,667 words a day. During the months of April, July, and/or November, over half a million people commit to writing a novel, memoir, or nonfiction book with support from the nonprofit.

Co-Director of Programs Marya Brennan explains that breaking down the seemingly insurmountable task of writing a book into a daily word count for a month helps writers to achieve their goals. The practice works for kid authors as well. "I used to teach seventh grade, and the students would walk into class and beg me to let them work on their NaNo projects," Brennan says. The young writers' version of the program allows children to set their own word count goal for the month and provides educators with tools to facilitate the process.

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Some writers prefer to set a time goal instead of committing to a word count each day. They write for an hour or two hours or in 20-minute sprints. Some, like myself, swear by the "Pomodoro Method," setting a timer for 25 minutes of writing time, then taking a five-minute break away from your computer before you sit down again. Social psychologist Dolly Chugh, author of *The Person You Mean to Be: How Good People Fight Bias*, uses this method constantly.

"My writing coach, Rena Seltzer, talks about 'sacred minimums,'" she says. "That's the amount of time you write each day, even when the world comes crashing down. The idea helps you to maintain a writing streak and a sense of confidence."

Chugh's current sacred minimum is one Pomodoro a day on weekdays, and, at times, it is as low as five minutes based on other demands in her life. "Missed days erode my confidence," she explains. "When I miss a day, I lose touch with my project. Maybe there's a good reason to miss Monday, and then because I missed a Monday, I miss Tuesday, too. I do the sacred minimum to deal with that problem."

3. Find your spot

Some writers prefer to write at home. Others prefer the stimulation of a coffee shop or library. I've trained myself to write in the car outside my teen's dance

studio. Before the pandemic, Chugh rolled out of bed at 5:30 a.m. and headed for her attic. “I got up before the kids and the world got up, before the email lit up,” she says. “I’d go from my bedroom straight to the attic, and I’d be too tired to, like, critique myself and talk myself out of writing. I’d just wake up and spill myself into my laptop before my brain got going.”

At the end of each writing session, she implements a technique called “parking on the downhill,” leaving a note for herself about precisely where to start writing the next day. “Not like, ‘I’m on chapter four,’ but, ‘Work on that first sentence of the paragraph that starts page 29,’” she explains. “Parking on the downhill gives you this immediate place to go. There’s no trying to remember where you left off, feeling overwhelmed.”

For her, writing in the same place every day is useful, though not always practical in her current circumstances as a professor and a parent. She points to research showing how a specific environment can trigger knowledge and memories. “Let’s say you’re going to take a math test. It’s helpful to study in the place where you’re going to take the test. If you’re studying the Pythagorean theorem in a classroom, and you take the test in the classroom, the location will remind you of the theorem,” she explains. “So there’s a benefit to sticking with one location, but there are also so many successful writers who say they don’t need to be in the same place every day.”

4. Determine a reward

I used to train owls for educational presentations at our local raptor rehabilitation center, and so I know well that rewarding desired behavior is crucial. An owl steps up on a perch because it earns a snack. Likewise, people need to reap a reward for writing. For some, the process of sitting down to put a story into words is enough. Others need a more tangible incentive.

When you’re developing a writing habit, it’s critical to choose a reward that works specifically for you, whether that’s a special drink or 20 minutes of guilt-free Instagram scrolling or National Novel Writing Month’s emailed pep talks and fun graphics.

“We have all sorts of other bells and whistles to help motivate writers as well,” NaNoWriMo’s Brennan explains. “If you’re writing directly on our Young Writers Program website and you hit a certain percentage of your word-count goal, you cue a burst of trumpets. On the NaNoWriMo site, you can earn different virtual badges based on your progress. We also have special winner graphics you can share on social media when you hit your goal. Bragging can be very motivating!”

Participants can update their manuscript word count on the NaNoWriMo website, which moves a tiny arrow on a red and white target graphic closer to a bull’s eye. That target was enough to motivate me to write the first draft of my newest middle grade novel...well, that and the occasional coffee shop latte.

Chugh likes to reference behavioral scientist Katy Milkman’s book, *How to Change*, when talking about rewards. She points to Milkman’s technique called “temptation bundling,” which pairs a difficult task with a pleasurable component. “Let’s say you hate revising and keep putting it off,” Chugh explains. “You take the thing you hate and bundle it with something you love, so anytime you revise, you get to eat ice cream or take a hot bath or whatever. When people temptation bundle, they make a lot more progress and form longer-lasting habits.”

5. Embrace community

Some people find it motivating to bundle their writing practice with the reward of co-working in a group of others remotely or in person. Dávila of A Very Important Meeting believes something special happens when writers get together to sit quietly together, then write, and conclude the hour with 15 minutes of talking with other writers.

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“There’s something about looking up on Zoom and seeing this tile collection of other people who are writing that feels very much like a community,” she says. “Writers tend to find their rhythm with a particular meeting among the 18 a week we’re holding right now. For example, if you come Wednesdays at 9:30, you start to see the same people over and over. People give each other advice. Maybe someone has submitted a piece, or they have a story that they’re looking to place

somewhere, and someone else says, ‘Oh, you should reach out to this editor at this magazine. I sold something to them that was very similar.’”

Perhach appreciates the age range of people who come to her meetings. “It’s just so awesome to have a 22-year-old writer who’s talking to older writers and getting life advice,” she says. “I love the mix of people from all over the country and, sometimes, from all over the world.”

The concept of writing with a community inspired author Rennie Saunders to found Shut Up and Write! in 2007. “I moved to San Francisco, where I didn’t know anybody, and I needed other people being creative around me,” Saunders explains. He chose a coffee shop and put out a call for others to join him. “I told myself I’d show up, and if nobody else did, at least I’d get an hour of writing done,” he says. “The first week, I had two people. The second week, I had five, and the third week I had 12.”

Now, the organization has nearly 100,000 members in 335 cities and 50 countries, meeting both in person and online. People join the group to work on fiction or fanfiction, memoirs or dissertations. “We’ve had lots of people get published, and we’ve helped people get their doctorate,” Saunders says. “Our goal is to create a robust community so that every writer in the world has a place where they can come and find support and connection and tools to help them.”

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He believes that the more we listen to other voices, the better we become. “In the midst of the loneliness and the mental strain of the pandemic, you can get together with the same people once a week to write and not talk about our problems. Maybe we’re just writing together for an hour, but you see me, and I see you, and we acknowledge each other. People want that consistency, that habit, the accountability, and the community.”

6. Create accountability

Whether you’re writing with a group or entering your daily word count on an organization’s website, you’re creating accountability – a powerful motivator, according to Chugh. Last January, she started an online community with other

professors in her fields; they do a Pomodoro, then chat for five minutes, and then do two more. It became so popular that they set up a Google Calendar.

“And now, on any given day, there’s usually at least three different ‘retreats,’ as we call them. They make us accountable,” she explains. “It’s so easy to be pulled into everyone else’s priorities. But here you are showing up for this thing on your schedule. We usually type in the chatbox at the beginning what our goal is for that retreat. It’s very light accountability. Nobody goes back and says, ‘Well, did you accomplish your goal?’”

Another way to create accountability, she notes, is to pay for the privilege of writing in a group. Though the retreats she’s established are free, she sees the wisdom of charging a small amount to participate, as Perhach and Dávila have done with *A Very Important Meeting*.

“You’ve invested something. You’ve committed, and you’ve gone through some mental exercise to say, ‘This hour is worth my money,’” Chugh explains. “You feel like you want to get your money’s worth because you paid the five dollars for this very important meeting, and so you’re going to show up and focus.”

If this technique doesn’t jumpstart your writing, she suggests a site like *e* which capitalizes on the fear of financial loss by asking people to choose a goal and sign a commitment contract. Participants provide a credit card number and choose what the organizers behind *Stickk* call an “anti-charity,” defined as “any organization whose views you strongly oppose, or one which promotes values that are contrary to your own.”

“So maybe you commit to writing 250 words a day,” Chugh says. “But here’s the catch. If you don’t meet your commitment, the money goes to your anti-charity. You meet your goal because you’ll die before you give your enemies a penny.”

7. Prompt success

But what happens if you’ve meditated and chosen a place to write and a goal, when you’ve identified a reward and a community, but you sit down at the laptop and find yourself overcome with writer’s block? Hope Lyda is the author

of *My Unedited Writing Year: 365 Invitations to Free Your Creativity and the Writer Within*. It's a book of writing prompts, including suggestions to "write a brief announcement describing your morning as if it were breaking news" and "go ahead, confess something."

"Writing to a new prompt each day is an opportunity to tell your inner critic you don't need their services for a simple 10-minute writing exercise," Lyda explains. "And while the inner critic is perusing the Food Network or ordering crimson red pens online, you can enjoy expressing yourself unhindered on the page." She explains that a daily prompt practice can translate directly into a larger body of work. "For example, a prompt centered on the senses will inspire a greater dimensional lens when you shift to your essay or book manuscript. An invitation to describe your favorite hideout as a fifth-grader can usher in the warmth of nostalgia and an affinity for keen detail recall. A fiction or poetry prompt can breathe new rhythm and language into your nonfiction endeavor."

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The people who run National Novel Writing Month send out prompts to participants, with the goal of helping them to start or finish a book or to break them out of writer's block. "We looove writing prompts at NaNoWriMo," Brennan told me via email. "On the Young Writers Program website, we have something called the Dare Machine. Each time a writer clicks it, they get a different dare, or prompt, like 'have a character wake up with a mysterious accent,' or 'your character scuffs the dirt and discovers something mysterious.'"

Organizers encourage young writers to use dares if they're feeling stuck in their stories. "They can be a great way to spark a new idea, explore different directions, or go further along a path they've already started. They're also a great way to boost word counts," Brennan says.

The NaNoWriMo site for adults doesn't feature a Dare Machine, but organizers pair prompts with what they term a "Word Sprint." "The goal of a Word Sprint is to let go of trying to make your story perfect, or even make perfect sense, and just write as much as you can in a set period of time – usually five to 10 minutes," Brennan notes. "Limits can often be really inspiring; for some reason, it's easier to write for 10 minutes trying to use the words *goblin*, *rollicking*,

and *marshmallow* versus if you're just trying to write about anything for an indeterminate amount of time.”

They also use craft-based prompts in their materials. They offer plot-based prompts to help authors construct complex story outlines – suggestions like “introduce a new character or characters who will eventually help the protagonist learn their life lesson” and “show your character at their lowest possible point.”

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Honor your sacred minimum

With so many resources available to help writers create or resurrect a regular practice, there's almost no excuse to do otherwise. Whether you choose to write alone with intention and a thoughtful reward or with a community in a coffee shop or online, adopt the process that works for you with an open heart and an open mind. In the midst of whatever new chaos life throws your way, commit to honoring your “sacred minimum” with an open mind and an open heart.

—*Melissa Hart is the author, most recently, of Better with Books: Five Hundred Diverse Books to Ignite Empathy and Encourage Self-Acceptance in Tweens and Teens. Twitter/Instagram: @WildMelissaHart.*