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The Business of Writing

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Time Management Tips For Freelancers, Contractors & Procrastinators

Sometimes the problem with meeting deadlines is not the deadline dates themselves, but your own procrastination and lack of self-discipline. (C'mon, admit it. We all know we do it.) Without good time-management skills, along with a reasonable dose of self-discipline, you will almost certainly let others down. Your self-esteem will take a hammering, not to mention your finances, if you are relying on that writing job to pay the bills. And the work that you do produce under extremely tight circumstances may not be the best that you can do. The end result? Second-rate work, low self-esteem, lack of money. Over time, you can add lack of contracts and work into that mix, resulting in a downward spiral that may be hard to get out of.

For some reason, I have always been able to get work completed on time—perhaps as a result of being a first-born child and desperately wanting approval. That eventually became a quest for seeking my own approval—something that would keep a psychologist busy for years. But I digress. At school, I would always finish the activity first, or hand in the assignment first, and never had a problem with completing my homework. In more recent years, others have marvelled at how well I manage my time and am "so organized," but I can't see what the fuss is about, as it comes so naturally to me.

I was never a big calendar user, much as I liked to believe that I was. Each year I would buy a new calendar and diary and fill in the details of people's names, addresses, phone numbers, birthdays, and so on. For the first few weeks I would religiously use them. But writing everything down by hand and prioritizing my to-dos takes up too much time! (Steven Covey would be horrified!) I have attended time-planning courses, and tried to practice what they have taught; but like that new diary, it only lasted a few weeks before I was back to my old habits. I continue to marvel at those people who use paper-based organizers like the Steven Coveys of this world suggest.

And so it continued through the years. I'd get by on my good memory and by always starting on some aspect of a job immediately after I'd been given it—no matter how much I didn't want to do anything about it. So now I'd like to share some time-management tips that have worked for me, and which may help you regardless of whether you are a freelancer, contractor, or any sort of out-of-hours writer trying to juggle the competing demands of family, work commitments, and publishers.

Start With The Easiest Pieces First

My "getting started" method is to start with the easy bits first. At school, I'd draw the maps first in geography; in math, I'd draw the graphs first; for a research paper, I'd do all the reading and note taking, then let it sit for a while before moving on to the next stage. Later on, when I started writing nonfiction articles with checklists, I'd do the checklists first. For some reason, doing these sorts of activities stirred up the unconscious information in my brain, so that when it came time to pull the whole thing together, I didn't find it hard to do.

But like most humans, I'm basically lazy. So if I could put it off, I would. However, I'm also driven to meet defined expectations, so there's always a fight in my head between being lazy and doing the work.

The work invariably wins. And because I hate letting myself down, let alone anyone else, I make sure that the work is done by the deadline (and usually beforehand). Then I feel really good about myself; the work got done, before deadline. And the client I'm doing the work for is pleased as well, and gives me more work (and money) as a result.

Use A Good E-Mail Program

When I got into computers, nothing much changed until Microsoft's Schedule+ came along, which later evolved into Microsoft Outlook. And now I'd be lost without it. I probably don't use anywhere near all of Outlook's features; those I use regularly include e-mail management, tasks, calendar, and contacts. The best thing about Outlook is that it's a "write-once" system, with built-in reminders and color-coding to indicate when tasks are overdue. Whether you use Outlook or another e-mail/personal information management system is irrelevant as most of them have similar features for managing your time.

Manage Your E-mail Efficiently

The Delete key is the most important key on my keyboard when it comes to e-mail. I get anywhere from 50 to 300 e-mails a day (I'm on several professional mailing lists) and deal with them all in less than one hour per day. I use Outlook's Preview Pane view to quickly scan e-mails, deleting anything that doesn't catch my attention. I also have Outlook set up so that it empties the Deleted Items folder when I shut the program down.

I set up filter rules (use the Tools > Rules Wizard menu option in Outlook 2002) so that incoming mail is separated into folders related to particular people, jobs, mailing lists, etc. I have filter rules to deal with spam mail, which automatically delete these messages before I see them. When such messages do get through, I use the multiple select capabilities (CTRL+click on each unwanted message) and then press the Delete key once to get rid of them.

If I am busy, I only read the unread mail in my personal folder and in the one I have set up for my current job contract. When I have spare time, I'll go through the other folders. If I am really busy, and am not expecting any relevant e-mails, I keep Outlook closed and disconnect from the Internet. Temptations and distractions are the enemies of good time management, and the Internet is the most attractive distraction of all!

Define & List Your Tasks

I try not to have too many items in my Outlook Tasks list at any one time. For me, about 15 is manageable. Whenever I get new work to do, or allocate myself a task to do, I enter it in the Tasks list. Each task will contain some of the following:

- A deadline date that is always before the final due date.
- The reminder turned on.
- The recurring option set if the task is a regular one (like end-of-month/quarter/year tasks).
- A short description of the task if it is long, with "see notes" added to the description. This lets me know that there is more information about this task in the Notes area.
- Any additional notes about the task.

For my notes, I may copy/paste relevant information from an e-mail message into the task so that all information about the task is in the one place, or I'll use the Notes feature to capture quick thoughts. For example, I have a quarterly appointment with a bookkeeper; as I think of things I need to ask her, I add them to a task called "Patti - see notes". I could never remember everything I need to discuss with her from one visit to the next, and jotting down notes on pieces of paper is a guarantee that they will get lost! Just before she visits, I print out the task and we work through the items one by one.

Recurring tasks include such things as end-of-the-month reminders for sending out invoices, or contacting a particular client about updates to their Web site. I write and distribute a quarterly newsletter

to clients and colleagues and anyone else who is interested. So the newsletter is set up as a recurring task. As I come across ideas for inclusion in the newsletter, I add it to that task in Outlook. The reminder for the newsletter is always set one month before the issue date; this gives me time to pull all the information together into the template so that I can publish the newsletter on time.

In my spare time, I go to my Tasks list and check if there's anything I can work on. I might grab some information from the newsletter task and incorporate it in the next issue, or add some information to my own Web site, or update my resume (another perpetual task in the list of an independent contractor!). Without the Outlook Tasks list, I'm not sure that I'd be as organized in getting these activities completed.

When tasks are completed, I check them off; every week or two, I delete the completed tasks from the list. Such a sense of accomplishment!

Use The Whizbangs In Any Calendar Tool

Outlook's Calendar replaces a paper diary for keeping track of appointments, meetings, lunch dates, birthdays, anniversaries, and so forth. Without it, I'd be very lost.

I use a whole day view in the left pane of the Outlook window, which also displays the current and next month in the right pane. Warning reminders are always set, and can vary from one week to fifteen minutes, depending on the type of appointment.

Keep Track Of Your Contact Info

My personal and professional lives are tied up in my Contacts list. I no longer use an address book, and with Outlook's distribution lists I can maintain lists of all sorts of people to whom I send bulk e-mails. For example, on a personal level, I have a Christmas Newsletter distribution list (replacing the old paper Christmas card list). On a professional level, I have a distribution list for recipients of my quarterly newsletter. Prior to setting up a mailing list on Yahoo, I had a distribution list of all technical writers in my home city. The time saved by not having to retype addresses really adds up.

My Contacts list is divided into folders related to my work. I have folders for software companies, mining companies, recruitment agencies, and so on. When a company advertises for jobs even vaguely related to what I do, I add them to the relevant contacts list. When I am near the end of a contract, I target relevant companies from my contacts lists about my availability. By having a ready list of available contacts, I can move very quickly to find more work when a contract ends; time is money when you're a contractor or freelancer, and few contractors can afford to spend even a couple of weeks researching prospects between contracts.

The Contacts list doesn't include just e-mail addresses; I fill in as much detail as I think I may need and that Outlook can handle. So I always have on hand a contact's phone, fax, or cell phone number, their Web address, and so on. This means I can move very quickly if a company does ask for my resume or work samples; I don't have to waste my time, or theirs, with extra phone calls or e-mails to obtain a mailing address or phone number.

Integrating It All

Since I work as an independent contractor, I can be working in all sorts of locations, from my home office to a client's site anywhere in the country. When I am working at a client's site, I invariably use their computers and network, not my laptop. So how do I keep all this information with me all the time? Enter the PDA. I purchased a Pocket PC PDA a year ago, and have found that it is all I need when I am on-site. On an object not much bigger than a deck of cards, I can carry my calendar, my entire list of contacts, and my complete task list with me. And it means that I don't have to put personal information onto a client's machine. When I return to my home office, I pop the PDA back into its cradle and any new information is automatically synchronized with Outlook on my laptop.

Now, I recognize that not all this work is necessary for every working writer out there, but the adoption

of even a couple of new time management tricks can help you put some time back into your schedule. Not working as a freelancer or contractor? Spending your free time working on The Next Great Screenplay? Well, then, using these tips to organize the other facets of your life—such as your church group or your kids' activities—can help you recoup some much-needed extra time to finish that screenplay.

About the Author:

Rhonda Bracey owns her own technical writing company, [CyberText Consulting Pty Ltd](#), based in Perth, Western Australia. She works as a contract technical writer for many companies, mostly doing software documentation and online help. Prior to getting into technical writing, Rhonda was a high school Deputy Principal and Head of Department: Library for many years.

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