How to Structure Your Writing Time, Using the Boice Method

Robert Boice, a psychologist and academic who studied academic writers’ productivity, coined the following maxim, which applies to most writing projects.

_start before you are really ready_
_stop before you are really done_
_repeat_

Boice advocates “brief daily sessions” of writing to increase productivity and decrease frustration with the process. Here’s basically how that works. Plan to write for half an hour to two hours for each session. You might have one session per day, or you might have one in the morning and one in the evening. Working on your project may take up more hours of your day doing research or communicating with other scholars or editors.

The goal is to avoid super-long “marathon” work sessions. You may spend this time in your writing session actually drafting, but you may also be taking notes on research, making to-do lists for your project, drawing a conceptual map, outlining free-writing, or revising. In short, all of these kinds of work on your writing _count_ as work for your brief daily writing sessions.

Be sure to take a break after each hour of concentrating and stretch and move around. Boice recommends that you write every day. But, in truth, _regularity and frequency_ are really the key. So, if you relish having two days off, five consecutive days each week will do just fine. Commit to trying this plan for a week at least. A month is much better as a trial.

Before each week begins, mark the times for your writing sessions on your calendar and stick to them absolutely. Your writing session doesn’t have to be at the same time each day, although many people find that plan works well. For ACW clients, the Writing Room offers a structure for setting goals for your work and a supportive community of other writers doing the same thing.

The key is to start writing exactly when you have planned to work and quit when your time is up. You might set an alarm on your phone to signal when to start and stop. As you end a session, you can always jot down a note to yourself about a good idea you want to explore next.

Also, build in a system of accountability to help you stick to this plan. For example, at the beginning of the week, share your plan for writing times with someone (such as a writing coach, colleague, or friend). Agree to check in at the end of the week to tell that person
how you did in sticking to the times. For ACW clients, the Writing Room offers an excellent structure for accomplishing daily writing, setting small goals for each writing session, and reflecting on what works for you so you can tweak your approach. Your coach is also there to help you reflect on what writing goals deserve top priority and how to break them down into discrete tasks that you can make progress on in an hour or two.

Finally, don’t beat yourself up if you have a hard time practicing this approach to writing perfectly. It’s simply a framework to help you avoid the extremes of perfectionism and procrastination. Everyone misses a day occasionally or learns how to more realistically estimate what can be done in a session. However, writers who give this approach a persistent try for several months have found they produce much more writing than they ever have before in such a time period.

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To read more from Robert Boice...

**Professors as Writers** (New Forums Press, 1990) offers a concise presentation of this research. A psychologist and professor, Boice studied the writing practices of academic colleagues to better understand how successful writers designed and sustained their writing process. His research is available in several journal articles and another longer book, but this short book distills his most valuable findings into practical advice.