

30 TIPS FOR 30 DAYS

**KICK-START YOUR
NOVEL AND GET OUT
OF YOUR OWN WAY**

BY DEVON ELLINGTON



**30 Tips for 30 Days: Kick Start Your Novel and Get Out of Your Own
Way**

By Devon Ellington

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Dedicated to
Writers who just sit down and DO it

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Other material was developed through the series of writing workshops I taught over the years. I’m teaching less, but the lessons still stand.

If you get the chance to do Nano, jump at it at least once in your life. It’s fun to write in community and to get out of your own way. Many of the techniques with which you experiment during that month of community creative insanity can be applied to the rest of your work, be it fiction or non-fiction. Eventually, you will outgrow it and it will no longer serve you, but it’s a good way to light a fire under yourself and get started on a project.

But the most important thing to do is show up at the page, every day, especially on the days you don’t want to. Books don’t need to write themselves. Writers WRITE them. Be a writer who writes today, not maybe someday in the future.

PART ONE:

PREPARATION

Blogs/Journals

It can be very helpful to create a blog or journal to help you through the process. You can write it in longhand in a blank book, or keep it on your computer. In her wonderful book *WRITE AWAY!*, Elizabeth George shares entries from journals she keeps for each book she writes. My preferred blog host is Word Press (www.wordpress.com). They are easy to use, have terrific customer service, a variety of customizable templates, and they're free.

The only rule about journal entries is to date each one. That way, you can refer back and keep the entry within context. There will be many ups and downs on this road, and it's helpful to look back as you're moving forward; see where you've been to help you get where you're going.

It's a great way to play with characters and ideas. It's a wonderful way to explore tangents that might not make it into the book, but help you flesh out your characters and situations. If you keep your journal in a notebook, you can tote it around with you and make entries whenever you've got a free moment, then take it back to your desk and integrate the material into your WIP.

You might want to write before you start your work, as a warm-up. Or you might want to write after you've completed your day's work. In either case, daily entries will help you in the process, and will help you once you've finished.

Don't publish excerpts from a WIP online. First of all, you only want your best, most polished work out there. Second, many places consider material online "published", and thereby, you've used up your First Rights. If you want/need feedback, find trusted readers and swap manuscripts. Don't send a raw manuscript out into the public cold.

Creativity Altar

The Creativity Altar is a useful, inspirational tool. It doesn't have to be attached to any particular religious system, and the sky's the limit on how you put it together.

I have a steady creativity altar in my office, set on a glass tray I received from my grandmother. It holds shells, candles, a small crystal ball, a smooth wooden Buddha statue, crystals, stones, and an assortment of other objects that symbolize creativity to me. When I sit down to write, I like to light the candle. When I am done with that day's writing, I extinguish the candle. The ritual of lighting the candle helps me drop down into my creativity; the gesture of extinguishing it allows me to return to the world, leaving my sacred space of imagination.

At the same time, I often create project-specific altars. For instance, I taught a year-long novel writing class. At the beginning of the class, I set up an altar dedicated to that year's work, also in my office. I assembled a group of objects to inspire me for the coming year, adding to the space as new objects appeared, removing those as things changed over the year, and, at the end, ritually disassembling the altar with thanks for what it meant to me throughout the year. The items were either returned to the earth, or used as inspiration for other projects.

Friends have multi-tiered creativity altars, where one tier has permanent symbols, with other tiers represent specific projects. See what works for you.

Some terrific books on this topic are:

MOVE YOUR STUFF, CHANGE YOUR LIFE by Karen Rauch Carter – the best Feng Shui book I've ever read. Fireside Press: 2000.

ALTARS: BRINGING SACRED SHRINES INTO YOUR EVERYDAY LIFE by Denise Linn. Ballantine Wellspring: 1999. (gorgeous photos)

SACRED SPACE. Denise Linn. Ballantine: 1995.

ALTARS MADE EASY. Peg Streep. HarperSanFrancisco. 1997

Word Count

The type of book you write determines your word count. Romance novels and many mysteries often come in between 75,000 and 90,000 words, while literary fiction and fantasy hover around 100,000. Some category romances are now down to either 50,000 or 60,000. Do some research within your genre and figure out a rough number.

If this is your first novel, try to stay in the 100k ballpark. It will make it an easier sell when you get to that point.

Take your number and divide it by the number of days you plan to work. That will tell you your daily quota. Your quota is the number of words you need to hit every day in order to complete the work on time.

Carolyn See, in her wonderful book *MAKING A LITERARY LIFE*, states that you should write 1000 words a day, 5 days a week, for the rest of your life. That's a good goal. It's only four pages a day, which adds up quickly, gives you a steady writing pace, builds your stamina, and keeps you in the flow of your manuscript. It also allows you to take off two days a week (such as weekends). I prefer writing 6 days/week most days, taking at least one day off or sometimes having a "floating" day off.

If I know I need more than one day off – I adjust my daily word count to reflect that.

If you're doing Nano, the goal is only 50,000 words in 30 days, which means you only have to write 1667 per day to meet the goal. I prefer to frontload Nano, writing 2500 words per day. That way, I complete my goal by November 20 and don't have to stress out during times such as American Thanksgiving. Also, by getting ahead, I leave myself room in case life gets in the way.

If you've got a book you figure will come in at 100K, and you want to finish it in three months, figure 5 working days per week x 12 weeks, which is 60 writing days. Divide 100K by 60 and you have 1666 words/per day, which is just over 6 pages. Similar to Nano.

If you figure roughly 250 words per page, in Standard Manuscript Format, you can figure a page count along with the word count. Standard Manuscript Format is the BEST way to draft anything you write, because it is the standard in the publishing industry. It's much easier to work in it than to single space with double-space between paragraphs and then have to re-format everything.

There will be days when you don't want to write. Show up at the page and complete your quota anyway. There will be days when the writing flows and you write more than your daily quota. Good. Bank 'em, you'll need them, because something will happen during your writing days to throw you off track.

Don't stop because it's hard. The hard days are the most important ones to get through. Those are the days you lean on your craft rather than your art. That's why a solid foundation in craft is so important.

Every book has its own internal rhythm. However, too often, inexperienced writers confuse "resistance" with "rhythm". Writing takes work. Books don't write themselves; writers write them. There will be days where you flow and days where you struggle. The days you struggle and do it anyway are vital to survival as a writer.

Rituals, Routines, Timing

I prefer to write in the morning, before I am “tainted by the day”. I get up, feed the cats (or nothing gets done), do my yoga and meditation practice, and then I sit down to write.

Then and ONLY then, am I free to start my day – breakfast, shower, other freelance work, catching a train to a site job, etc. Now that I write full-time, I do my first 1K of the day on whatever is in first draft, and then, after breakfast, blog, check email, and switch between other freelance projects, depending upon deadline and money.

It’s fine to occasionally skip a day; it’s when you start skipping a sequence of days that you trip yourself up. It gets very easy to let the writing slip away, or use “life” as an excuse not to write. We all have to work when we’re tired or don’t feel like it or anything else. If you don’t treat writing as a second job, it will never become your only job. That doesn’t mean you can’t love it – you can and you should. But you can’t just do it when you feel like it.

I use my creativity altar as a place to brainstorm, or I go out in the garden and do some yard work. Weeding, folding laundry, and working out problems in the shower are my best places to work past “stuck.”

The ritual of lighting the candle at the beginning and end of a session helps me drop into my creative zone, and also rejoin the world in a positive manner.

Outline or Blank Page?

There are two traps here: one is to over-outline and use that as an excuse to not get down to writing. The other is to blank page (also called “pantsing”, an expression, which, to me, means “lazy amateur” and sounds like an STD) and then not know what to do next.

There is nothing wrong with either technique, unless it prevents you from doing the actual writing.

If you have tight deadlines or juggle multiple projects, I suggest that you outline. That way, you can sit down each day and have an idea of the day’s work, thereby meeting your quota. When you Blank Page, it’s very easy to sit down, be overtired or unfocused, say “I can’t”, get up and walk away. Do that for a few days, and you’ve blown your goal.

You’re not in competition with any one except yourself, but unfinished projects drain creative energy. I even have a workbook on this topic, called **THE GRAVEYARD OF ABANDONED PROJECTS** (links on the Topic Workbook page at the end). Make the commitment to do this, fulfill the commitment during the month, go past it if you need to in order to finish, and THEN decide where you’ll take it.

Remember, you are under no obligation to ever publish this. So don’t look at it and think, “it sucks, no one will ever want it.” If you choose to keep working on future drafts, it will have a life beyond the first one. If you choose to stick it in a drawer and use what you learned on a different project, that’s fine. It’s your CHOICE. But make sure it’s a CHOICE and not a cop-out by not finishing.

If you decide to outline, it doesn’t need to be anything fancy. I do what I call a “Writer’s Rough”, which is basically a scene list with a sentence or two of description or dialogue about each scene. When I sit down to write, I fill it in. For me, that is the best of both worlds – I’ve got a framework, but I’ve got room to explore.

There’s also nothing wrong with keeping it all in your head, if you’re good at that. Sometimes, writing it down dilutes the creative pressure, and you need to build it in order to have the momentum to carry you through.

Don’t be afraid of tangents – the focus of a first draft is words on paper. You cut and shape in the next draft(s).

Character or Plot?

That depends on the way you like to work.

I'm character-driven. The character has to speak to me strongly, tell me his or her story. Then I start asking questions, and asking "what if?" and we go from there.

Sometimes, a situation will intrigue me, a premise will intrigue me. But until I have a character to drive the piece, I'm stalled.

Some people work better from plot and shape characters to serve the plot. It's personal preference.

Also, remember this is a playground. Don't be afraid to switch up your process. Every novel involves a bit of reinventing the wheel. Insisting "this is my process" will often hinder you rather than help you. You're trying to create, not follow a formula, even in genre work.

When you're making a living off your work, then you have a "process" that works for you. Inevitably, just when you think you've settled into "your process", you'll hit a roadblock and have to change it.

Quantity over Quality

This is where many get frustrated. The point of writing a great deal of material, quickly, in a first draft, is to get it down on paper, so that you know what you're writing about and can shape your book in subsequent drafts. First drafts are where you see what you have, if your characters and ideas have the stamina to make it through a novel. If it's not on paper, it can't be shaped and molded into something better. If you wait until you've written the perfect sentence in your head, you won't write.

There are times when you figure out you need to go down a different route. That's fine. But don't go back and rewrite what you've done up until now. You need to *move forward*.

What you can do is to go back and mark, in a different color, what I call "placeholders" – notes where you want to make changes in the next draft. And then continue from your stopping point with the new direction.

If you keep going back to revise, you won't finish. I believe that it's detrimental to revise until you have an entire first draft, because you need to get the big picture before you can focus on the details. In subsequent drafts, you can work on each chapter as much as you want before moving on; you can flow back and forth. But in first drafts, keep moving forward.

In my experience as a writer, a Trusted Reader, a mentor, a teacher, and a critiquer, 97% of the people who keep going back to revise and claim it's because they're "perfectionists" are really afraid of finishing. Because if they ever finish, they have to take the next steps, and someone might reject them. Fear of failure keeps them from finishing, but they pretend (often even to themselves) that it's because they're perfectionists.

Perfection is for final drafts, not first drafts. You won't reach perfection until you have a draft on paper to perfect.

Commitment

How badly do you want this?

That is a question each individual must ask and answer for him or herself.

There's nothing wrong with writing on the side, or writing only because you enjoy it, not because you plan to make it your career. It's simply a different approach.

If writing is to be your vocation as well as your passion, it must be a priority. There are no excuses, there is no such thing as "no time to write". You re-shape your life and people in it with those who will support your work.

That doesn't mean surrounding yourself with people who only pamper and praise you. Constructive criticism is important. Nor does it mean you get to be selfish and never consider the needs of anyone else in your life. But it means having people in your life who respect your needs and your boundaries.

If you want it badly enough, you make the changes in your life necessary to make it work.

If you don't, take responsibility for that choice and act accordingly. Don't blame others, and don't use friends and family as an excuse because you don't have the courage or commitment to go for it. Say, "This was fun, but only a hobby." There's nothing wrong with making that choice. It simply defines a different career trajectory.

Longhand or Computer?

I still prefer to write first drafts in longhand. I think better in longhand, and it requires fewer revisions.

However, when I'm under deadline pressure, I work on computer, simply because it's faster.

I find each piece "decides" if it wants to be handwritten or computer-written first.

And I carry my notebook around all the time to jot down scenes and ideas.

Music

I used to write to music.

However, when I write, it needs to be instrumental, or the lyrics distract me.

One of my favorite procrastination techniques is to create Character CDs – a CD for each of my main characters, filled with the music to which I think that character would listen.

I'll play it before I write about the character; or, if it's instrumental, while I write about the character.

Writing the romantic suspense novel *Assumption of Right* (recently revised and re-released as *Playing the Angles*), I told the tale in chapters from alternating points of view. Each day's chapter was from one or the other's point of view. So I'd pop in that character's CD, listen to it for a few minutes, and I'd be in the right mindset to write.

That was when I lived in New York, and it was noisy and full of interruptions. Once I moved to Cape Cod, for the most part, I stopped writing to music. Weather-permitting, I have the windows open and listen to the birds and the wind and sometimes, even the rain.

If someone's running a leaf blower or some other power tool, and I'm ready to strangle them with their own cord, I'll put on the iPod and crank up the tunes.

But, still, it has to be instrumental.

I never, EVER use a soundtrack from a play or movie. That music was created and assembled to support someone else's creative vision. It bleeds into your writing. When students turn in work that was written to soundtracks, I can tell exactly which ones, because it shows up in the writing.

PART TWO:

30 TIPS FOR 30
DAYS

Day 1: And We're Off!

Are you in your first frenzy, as exciting as falling in love? Or are you paralyzed and panicked?

Just remember – words on paper. That's what counts.

Set down a word. Invite a friend for the word. Pretty soon, it's like the Pied Piper, one following the other!

Day 2: Recover and Keep Going

Have you recovered from your first day?

I want to keep going, past that first chapter. When it goes well, I want to go with the flow, and “write myself out”. However, I don’t want burn out, so I make myself stop. Usually the most I’ll allow myself in a single day is 5K on one project (unless I’m behind

My goal is to do one chapter per day. It takes me between an hour and a half and two hours to do the pages for the day, so I’m factoring that in to my daily life.

I try to get a bit ahead in the early days to give myself some breathing room.

The point of a first draft is to keep moving forward. Track changes – either in your manuscript in a different color or in notes. That way, you don’t lose ideas, but you keep moving forward.

I catch myself in some of my usual bad first draft habits. I overuse the word “just”. I’m aware of it, but I’m not going to stress about it until the next draft, when out comes the Red Machete. If it’s important to a particular character’s speech pattern, I’ll leave it. Otherwise . . .out it goes. One year, I caught myself using the word “entice” a bit too much – time to get out the thesaurus!

Day 3: Distractions

Click, click, click go the typewriter keys. Scratch, scratch, scratch goes the pen on the paper, when I'm writing away from my desk.

Somehow, we move forward.

Now, my big challenge is not to get distracted by interesting secondary characters. I like large, ensemble casts. But some pieces need to keep a tight focus. Sometimes, it doesn't think it will work if I sprawl and then cut back.

And today's biggest challenge was to keep the internal editor from banging down the door. Every few sentences, I kept thinking, "I'm going to have to change this." But I kept going, because it's the polish that the changes will add, not the basic plot and character development.

When the internal editor starts annoying me, I send her on vacation to Tahiti for the month, promising we'll do good work together when she returns in a few months. If she bothers me during the month, I say, "Aren't you supposed to be on a beach in Tahiti? See you later!"

Having that conversation with that other part of my psyche helps me keep the focus where it needs to be for these thirty days – on the writing.

If you get a "great idea" for something else – take a moment, jot it down, but get back to what you're working on NOW. Don't keep getting distracted by the shiny. Stay focused. Very often "great ideas" are only other forms of self-sabotage and procrastination. If they are truly "great", they will still be there when you're done with this draft.

Day 4: Discovery

The first draft is always a discovery of the creative process for me – and sometimes it has nothing to do with the current manuscript!

Notice techniques this month, both that work and don't work for you, and see how you can apply them to your other writing.

One of the great things about the first draft is how much you learn about your characters, your plot, your setting, yourself. Even if you have a very detailed outline, discoveries will crop up. It's part of the joy of the first draft process.

Day 5: Keep Ahead of the Pace

I got some scribbling done in the notebook, and because I got ahead of myself this week, I could ease up today and not worry about a slower pace due to physical and mental fatigue.

So, whenever you have a chance to do a few pages or even more words than your daily goal, grasp it and build yourself a cushion for the days when life gets in the way.

My personal goal was to hit 12,500 words by today, and I've fortunately passed it. I'm going to push hard again on as many days as possible this week, with a hope to hit 25,000 words by the 10th. Again, this is more than necessary, but it allows me to bank words. As long as you keep your minimum daily quota, you're fine. If you're having a good day, keep going as long as you can; if you're having a bad day, push yourself to make the minimum.

Day 6: Speed

Should you write fast?

1000 words per day is not fast. It's steady. Some days you'll do more; some days you'll fight to reach your goal. But 1000 words per day is a steady, sane pace that will serve you well in most situations. If you fall behind and you have a hard deadline (such as a contract), you will have to compress your process and write faster. If you don't have a hard deadline, you can slow down, but if you slow too far down, you run into the risk of stopping the daily writing and not finishing.

Once you get it down on paper, you can rearrange it and make it pretty. It's good to sometimes push yourself. Challenge yourself. Go beyond your self-imposed limits. And just do it.

Thousands of people ran the New York City marathon. This is a marathon of words.

But doubt definitely lingers, and, at least once a day, I think to myself, "whatever am I going to do with this big fat mess?"

Shape something out of it, once all those words are vomited out.

There never will BE time. You MAKE it.

Day 7: Competition

The only person you're in competition with is yourself.

Publishers, agents, and editors like to pit us against each other, but, in reality, we're all in this together. Some of us will go farther because we bothered to learn the protocols and the grammar and the business side of it. But all of us are in competition with ourselves to write the best book possible in our own vision.

Sometimes that's difficult to remember when you look around and see higher word counts from other writers on blogs or websites or Facebook or Twitter or in sprints.

Good for them.

I like to get a good daily word count in there early because I'm well aware that, at any point, I could hit a wall.

And then I'll have to figure out how to:

Climb over it

Burrow under it

Plow through it

Go around it

Blow it up

One of the most positive aspects you can take away from this experience, is that, for one month, you had enough self-respect for your writing to sit down every day and do something.

If you can take that beyond this month, you'll have won, no matter what your final word count.

Day 8: First Week/Inspiration for the Weary

This is the one-week point. You've survived an entire week! Woo-hoo! Congratulations! Have I told you recently how proud I am of you? I am – very, very proud.

The second week is difficult because that's when you tend to hit a wall. The fresh bloom of love sometimes passes in the project, and it becomes hard work. And sometimes that's what writing is – work. You push through the tough parts until you reach another place where it flows and you get that inky high again.

Here are some of my favorite books that I read over and over again when I start having trouble putting words on the page. I don't use any of them as the be-all and end-all, but I use bits and pieces to help fuel me:

MAKING A LITERARY LIFE by Carolyn See

ESCAPING INTO THE OPEN by Elizabeth Berg

SOMETIMES THE MAGIC WORKS by Terry Brooks

WRITE AWAY by Elizabeth George (my process is sooooo different, but she has some good ideas)

THE RIGHT TO WRITE by Julia Cameron (the only one of her books I like)

THUNDER AND LIGHTENING by Natalie Goldberg (the best of her writing books, in my opinion)

Any of the Paris Review interviews edited by George Plimpton

There are plenty of other writing books worth reading, but these are the ones I go back to, time and time again, when I get tired.

Day 9: Go With the Flow of Your Novel

So, we're into week 2 now.

Hopefully, you've started trusting your characters, and you can keep self-doubt at bay. It's a case of just sit down and do as many words as you can each day. Keep moving forward.

This is the point where, in one instance, my book switched genres.

Right now, I have to let the book be what it is. I have to trust in it, and in my subconscious. Yes, ultimately, we are the god in the process – we are the creative beings who manipulate and make the decisions in our fictional worlds. But when we consciously try to control too much, we often shoot ourselves in the foot (or in our collective feet).

Letting go, going with the flow, trusting the characters isn't about losing creative control – it's about getting in touch with the part of your subconscious that knows what will work better than you do.

So trust it.

Day 10: Daily Pace

“Comfortable” for me, is a steady pace of about 1500 words a day.

There are many days I struggle with it; there are days I flow far past it. But my daily quota must be hit in order for the day to be a “success.”

In order to achieve my goal during this month, I have to push myself. That’s good, because it makes you stretch and grow. It’s bad, because too many days in a row past the comfort zone can wear you out.

In daily life, beyond this month, find out what you feel is a comfortable pace, and set that as your goal every day. Whether it’s pages or word count, find your personal flow. Make that your commitment to yourself -- you are going to write X pages per day. And do it. If the writing is going well, keep going. If it’s a struggle, work your way through the struggle and don’t give up until you reach the goal.

Don’t set “hours”. Although “stolen time” is often necessary in our overwhelmed lives, if you say, “I’ll write for three hours today”, you may spend two hours and 55 minutes of that time staring at a blank screen and only write three words. Set a word count or a page count. If you need to “steal time” to meet it, do so. But words and page goals will serve you better than time goals.

Day 11: A Day Off

Today's supposed to be my day off from writing. I'm going out of town to play for the day.

I got nervous about getting behind (even though I'm ahead), so I started a chapter last night, and did 1533 words, which counts to today's word count. I hate stopping in the midst of a chapter, but I did. My two characters are tired and cranky and annoying each other and that's where I've left them, for now. After all, I didn't expect them to have this particular argument in this particular spot, but they are!

I love it when my characters surprise me. I love the joy of discovery inherent in writing. If I already knew every detail before I started, I couldn't write the book. It would no longer interest me.

Don't forget to back up your piece, or, if you're writing in longhand, to start typing up chapters regularly. If I do the first draft longhand, I usually try to type up each chapter, or, at the most, every three chapters. That does become a bit of a "next draft" – make sure you don't let it derail you.

I keep each chapter in a separate file, and each version of each chapter in a separate file, because in revisions, I rearrange sections. It's much easier to do so when I can manipulate the chapters. I back up obsessively, and print out each day's work as I write.

Day 12: Stuck

I didn't want to today.

I did not want to get my butt in that chair and work on my novel.

I slept in. I barely had enough coffee to make one big Nano-cup. I was still full of yesterday's playfulness (and the 52 books I bought at the second hand bookstore).

I didn't want to.

The first 113 words were such a slog, I thought I was going to have to sit there until midnight.

And then, pushing on, it got easier and easier.

There was the argument I left the characters in yesterday to resolve, the tension to rise between them, the attraction rising, and then an action scene with an attacker. So there was plenty to do.

Today, I set up for a bit of B-line story in the next chapter or two.

The bulk of the action of the novel takes place over the course of three days. So my characters have a very long night ahead of them.

The point of this little piece is that there's plenty of resistance to sitting down and doing the work. But once you get through the first couple of hundred words, you re-enter the world of your story, and it gets easier.

So, on the days when you don't want to, do it anyway.

On the days when the first hundred words seem to take a hundred hours, keep going.

And you'll get there.

If you feel like you're stuck, throw them a curve ball. Have something happen to them, have a character come in, one who doesn't seem like it has anything to do with anything. And see how the characters respond. That will give you a lot of information, even if you end up cutting the scene in future drafts.

You're not going for publication in this draft. You're learning about your story and your theme. You'll go back and polish in the drafts – and there will be more than one – you do when you're done with this one.

Day 13: Working Beyond This Month

Write the 1000 words/day on what I call my “Primary Project” – the piece that needs the bulk of my attention – each morning before I start my day.

If it’s flowing well, I’ll keep going until I’m written out for the day. If it’s a struggle, I’ll stop at 1000 –but I’ve met my goal for the day.

We all write for different reasons. This is my life’s work, my vocation as well as my passion – so I need to develop techniques to get the work done even on the bad days.

There’s nothing wrong with being an occasional writer. You’ll have a different type of career then, that’s all. There’s nothing wrong with not having this as your career. But, if you want it badly, the way I do, you make it happen, you don’t wait for it to happen

What is your goal for your work outside this month?

What are you learning about yourself and your process?

These are important questions, and the answers can carry you far beyond the days in this book.

Day 14: Priorities/Reality Check

A few years ago, the first week I started a new book, a colleague of mine at the theatre was diagnosed with liver cancer and given two weeks to live. He died during my second week of the book. I found out right after I finished my Nano pages for the day. He was only 48, and the theatre is a dimmer place without him. Another year, I was frantically trying to finish a novel as my grandmother was dying. Yet another year, I was in the middle of a book and of teaching commitments and had to pack up 38 years' worth of my family history to move to another state.

It was hard, and there were times when I thought I would shatter, but I kept writing.

When mortality slaps you in the face, you reassess. You have to figure out what your priorities are, and what you need to do to keep them in the forefront.

Writing is my priority, and, therefore, I plan my life to support the writing, not the other way around. If it doesn't add to my life in a way that makes me a better writer, and allows me to use my best energy of the day for writing, it's eliminated.

Every person must answer the question for himself, and sometimes, over the course of time, the answer changes. But knowing how important the work is to you helps you get it done.

Some days start rough, but then flow. At the end of the chapter, I was ready to go on.

Happy writing! And even if you're behind where you think you should be, don't get discouraged. Just do as much as you can. Every day.

Day 15: Week 3/Half-way point

Welcome to the start of Week 3!

The third week is both more difficult and easier than the previous two.

Hopefully, you're far enough into your story so that you're getting out of your own way.

However, there are two more types of resistance you may face this week:

If you're on count, you'll be tempted to take time off because you're ahead of yourself. Don't fall into this trap. Keep on pace. You can ease up once you've finished your draft.

If you're behind, you're likely to say to yourself, "I'll never make it anyway, so why bother?" Don't fall into this trap, either. Simply do as much as you can. Every word is a word more than you had before. Eventually, the words all add up.

What if you've hit this point and you truly hate what you've written? To the point where you can't continue?

Create a temporary ending – write a scene to end the piece. Start the next piece as soon as you type the last period on this one. Put this piece aside for a few months and then reassess. Even a temporary/false ending is better than leaving something unfinished. Unfinished projects drain creative energy.

The point of all of this is to keep writing.

This is where I hit the point where I resent every minute I spent away from the manuscript. Real life is nothing more than an annoyance.

Until I sit down at the computer. Then, I have trouble again. I almost skipped today, because I was ahead of my goal. But I didn't. Because every time you skip a day, or a series of days (which is different than a conscious day off), it's harder to get back to it. That's why so many professional writers emphasize the importance of writing every day. This doesn't mean you can never have a day off. It just means approaching the work each day as you would any professional job. Scheduling the time and meeting the page, whether you feel like it or not.

Part of this journey is finding out where writing sits in your life, and then restructuring things around it, if appropriate.

Happy Third Week!

Day 16: Comparison/Contrast Between Experiences

Since we're just past the half-way day count, it's time for more comparison/contrast.

I'm going to use four years of Nano experiences for today's comparison/contrast. I did four consecutive years of National Novel Writing Month, where I completed 50K in 30 days. Usually, I did far more than 50K.

In some ways, I found the second year easier than the first year. I was warned about "sophomore slump", but, although some days were more difficult than others, the second year flowed better.

Part of that is where I stood in my writing life. During the first year, I WANTED writing to be the priority of my life. The second year it WAS. I was further along in my transition from dual careers into writing full time. That's bound to help Nano.

Part of it how I structured my preparation for Year 2.

In Year 1, I got my idea in summer – July or August. I outlined it in a frenzy, did the historical research, and then didn't look at it for a couple of months until Nano started. Although I liked the idea, I was in the midst of other projects, and it was hard to make it a priority.

In Year 2, I got my idea in September. And I worked on it every day until Nano began, even just a few minutes reviewing notes, to make sure it was fresh and exciting to me on Day 1.

In Year 3, I played with three ideas during the month of September. One idea was a comic mystery, with whose premise I've played for several years. Then, in The Muse Online Workshops (where I both attended and presented), I developed material for two new novels. One of them grabbed me and wouldn't let go. I did a scene-by-scene outline, and that's the one I decided to pursue for Nano.

In Year 4, I knew I wanted to write a mystery, so I took classes in mystery writing to prepare.

I took a few years off, and then, in 2015, I did what I call "Tandem Nano". I continued working on a novel I'd already started, thanks to a conversation in a ladies' room with author Claire Cook, called *Tie Cutter*. Because I was hosting Write-Ins at a library space, I also felt I should "do" the complete Nano, and I started a contemporary mystery set on a New England island, called *Death of A Choleric*. The latter idea just appeared, either right at the end of October or on the first day of Nano. At the time of this third edition, I'm still working on *Tie Cutter* (as a non-genre novel, I find it sets its own pace). *Death of a Choleric* is out on submission.

In Year 1, I set my quota, but there were days where I went far beyond it, writing myself into exhaustion. And then, I could barely squeeze out the words the next day. I forced myself to do it until I hit 50K, then only did 2 or 3K additional until the end of the month, and only sporadically worked on it after that. I realized that it was really two books, and it is being restructured and re-envisioned.

In Year 2, I set my quota – 2500 words/day. If I wanted to go beyond that, I only allowed myself to do so if it meant finishing a chapter. And then I MADE myself stop, and work on other things. Novel #2 was rewritten over a period of five years beyond that Nano, and eventually published by Champagne Books as the romantic suspense novel ASSUMPTION OF RIGHT under the Annabel Aidan name. It went out of print, rights reverted back to me, and, in 2017, it was reworked and re-envisioned as the cornerstone of the Coventina Circle Paranormal Romantic Suspense series and re-released as *Playing the Angles*.

In Year 3, I planned to use the same quota system as Year 2.

I found it frustrating in a different way, but I didn't feel the exhaustion and despair I often felt in Year 1. By the end Year 1, even though I hit the 50K goal, I never wanted to do Nano again.

Part of the reason I did it in Year 2 (in addition to wanting to socialize more with other participants) is that I wanted to see if I could create a different experience. Which is weird, because in Year 1, I tried to “make” certain things happen and was disappointed. In Year 2, I “let” them happen, even though I'm consciously trying to create a different experience, and it worked.

For Year 3, I took a more business-like approach. I want the writing to be a playground, but I'm setting up a structure to allow me freedom within the next structure. I wrote a combination fantasy/sci-fi book. At the time of this publication, it is still in the editing process.

In Year 4, I kept up a steady pace. However, my grandmother was dying, and I had to go back and forth to Maine frequently. When the draft was finished, I put it away and could not look at it for several years, associating it with my grandmother's death. It's only recently I've been able to pull it out and look at its potential.

In Year 5, I wrote a minimum of 1K/day in longhand on *Tie Cutter* (because I'd started the draft in longhand, and how I start is how I continue) and usually about 1.5-2K on *Death of a Choleric*.

For the year-long novel-writing class I taught, everyone was required to write a minimum of 1000 words/day or 7000 words per week. We had a month of planning, four months to write the first draft. Then we put it aside for two months while we worked on short stories and our second novel. We continued writing a minimum of 500 words/day

on the second novel, once we started the intensive revision process – eight weeks for the first revision, a manuscript swap, and then four weeks for the next revision. Some novels were close to submission-ready by then; others needed more drafts. Each novel is different. But if you don't have a first draft, you have nothing to revise.

The more you plan, the more steadily you show up at the page, the more you accomplish.

Day 17: Unexpected Day Off

Sometimes, life gets in the way so completely – be it bad weather, mass transit, illness, that you're overtired and overwhelmed.

Again, don't be afraid to take a day off.

But make it a conscious choice. Don't say, "I don't have time". Say, "I'd rather deal with the rest of my life today and come back to the page fresh tomorrow."

Your approach will affect your writing, and you want to create as positive an atmosphere as possible.

Day 18: Breaking One's Own Rules

I broke one of my own rules. I went back and added an insert of several pages into a previous chapter. As I worked on the current chapter, I realized that a character I thought was a walk-on in Chapter 10 actually has a much more important part to play in the entire book. So I added a scene. I didn't rewrite what was there – I fleshed out a bit I'd skimmed over before. And that helped the current chapter.

The piece dictates the process, not the other way around.

But I did not EDIT material – I ADDED material. I changed direction a bit. There's a difference.

Had I gone back to EDIT, I would have sabotaged myself, doing second draft work within a first draft, and gotten stuck.

If you go back and edit while you write, certain sections of the book will be overworked to the point of diminishing return while other sections remain raw. Write an entire draft before you go back and edit.

Day 19: Hitting the Personal Goal

In Years 1 and 2 of Nano, I hit 50K on Day 19. I could pull back to a saner pace for the rest of the month.

My completion goal, I estimated to be around 100K in Year 1 and 85K in Year 2, so I still had plenty of work ahead of me, but I set a goal and I met it. And there's no feeling like it.

That's part of finishing a draft – not only are you forced to ask yourself questions and turn your process inside out, you make writing a priority. You make a commitment, not just to the work, but yourself, and you stick to it. You stop treating it as a hobby, and treat it – and yourself – with respect.

When you respect yourself, others respect you.

How did I do it?

--I sat down and wrote every day. If I anticipated a day would be stressful, I worked ahead of my goal the day before. I took off two days consciously, in order to come back refreshed. I didn't just let them go.

--I trusted my characters and tried not to control everything to the nth degree. I let it happen instead of trying to make it happen.

--I did not worry about what "others" would think of the work, or care what a potential editor or reader would say. This is a first draft. This is for me, not for anyone else. Future drafts are shaped with an eye to "other", but unless it's on the page in the first place, it can't be shaped and it certainly can't be sold.

--I wanted it badly enough to do whatever it took to finish. Again, you ask yourself "How badly do I want this?", you answer, and you make your decisions from there. You are the only one who can decide where the writing fits into your life. There never IS time. You MAKE time.

Day 20: Keep Going

Keep writing. Keep working. If you're at a point where you don't want to put words on paper and are terribly far behind, work on something else. The important thing is to keep writing.

Being a writer is not about doing it when you feel like it. It's about doing it.

A writing colleague commented on a blog the other day, "You don't feel like writing? Boo fucking hoo." And that about sums it up.

Some days, it's a bit harder to sit down and do the pages each day. However, once I got past the first half page or so, I fell back into the world of my story, and it gets easier and easier with every paragraph. If I can push through the first 400 words, I can find my rhythm and make it to the 1000 or 1500 or whatever my goal is for that day. So, push through the initial resistance and keep going.

Day 21: Lessons

What have you learned that will help you move forward?

Don't be afraid to change your process. If you usually write in the morning, but are getting stuck or interrupted, try writing late at night, after everyone in the house has gone to bed. If you usually write late at night, but are so tired you can barely sit up straight, get up an hour earlier in the morning instead and write – and let the household know it is NOT an option to disturb you.

Change up where you write. Try a different room or a library or a coffee shop. In the spring, summer, and early fall, I prefer to write my first 1K of the day outside on the deck, and then go back into the house. I love my writing room, but the change of location helps.

Day 22: Blocks

Blocks are ways to get in your own way. Whether it's self-sabotage or something not working in your story, blocks can turn into excuses. Don't let them. If you need to write four pages, you sit down and you write them. If your characters aren't talking to you, write about your character. Or write about a character or situation from a different character's point of view. Or, if you're writing in third person, write a scene in first person through a character's eyes.

Will it stay in your final draft? Probably not. But it will get you thinking and seeing from a different perspective, and that can be helpful when you feel stuck.

The most important thing to do when you're blocked is not to stop. Not to say, "I'm blocked" or "I can't." You bust through it and keep going. It may take you someplace you never expected in your piece and that can be a good thing. It may eventually lead you back, or you may find you have a completely different piece.

If you try to play God too much in the first draft, control too much, you shoot yourself in the Creative Foot. The less you try to force it, the better it will flow. That sounds like the opposite of "sit there and make yourself do it" but it's not. Creative Constipation can be broken if you stop trying to play God and remember to just play.

Day 23: Final Week

We are in the final 7 days of the process.

Look back.

Have you reached your benchmarks?

If you missed one, did you make up for it?

Have you learned something, even if it's that a way you tried working didn't pan out?

Start formatting the manuscript for the upload now. Place it into one RTF file. As you keep working, upload the new material into the file at the end of every work session.

Back it up. Multiple times.

Even if you're behind where you want to be, start this process NOW. Don't wait for the last minute.

And keep writing.

Day 24: Other People/Boundaries

One of the most important gifts to yourself, in Nano and in your writing life beyond Nano, is to set strong boundaries and remove toxic people from your life.

There will always be people who don't wish you well, even if they say it's with your best interest at heart. If they have to say it, it usually isn't; it's usually self-serving.

Learn to discern who genuinely wishes you well and who is trying to sabotage you. Cut the saboteurs out of your life. If you can't, because you're related to them, at least limit your interaction.

If someone puts you down for writing, don't discuss your writing with that person. Period. If they try to pry it out of you say, "I'm sorry, I don't discuss work in progress."

You don't owe them an explanation.

Day 25: Balance

Life gets out of balance when you try to write 50K in 30 days. The writing is the priority.

If you plan on being a professional writer, you have to keep the rest of your life in balance. While you can take a month per year to only focus on writing, there are other areas of your life that deserve attention.

The trick is to keep your own writing time sacred, your own needs balanced with those who are important. You shouldn't be a martyr; nor should you expect anyone in your life to martyr themselves for your writing.

Negotiate.

Know when to compromise.

And when to stand firm.

And remember: Just because someone claims you are ignoring them or being selfish, doesn't mean you are. That person might be making unfair demands.

Step back. Take a breath. Look at the big picture.

Make your decisions, and most importantly, take responsibility.

If you don't write, the only person to blame is yourself. Don't use anyone else as an excuse.

Day 26: Planning the Next Steps

One draft never does it for me. I do as many drafts as the piece needs until I feel it is the best it can be.

So what steps does one take after Nano?

First of all, I'm a big believer in putting it away and letting it "rest" instead of diving right back to edit. In order to edit successfully, you have to be able to approach it as though it was written by someone else, and this is the first time you've ever read it. If you dive back in to edits, especially early in your career, it is less likely to happen.

I prefer leaving it for two months, although when I've been on deadline, sometimes it's been as little as two weeks. If you actually finish your novel by the end of November, the end of January is a good time to start editing (that's why I've always skipped Nanoedmo, because it starts at the beginning of January, and I think it's too early).

Work on another draft. Put it away again. Work on another draft. Maybe this time you'll have something you can show to your "Trusted Readers". Once you've received their feedback, let the comments sink in for awhile before tackling the next round of edits.

Also, remember, that the Nano forums remain open until just a few weeks before the next Nano begins – so you can maintain connections you made during this experience.

I hope you're racing to the finish line, but even if you're not where you feel you want to be, remember that: A) There are still a few more days until the end of the month; and B) you have more words on paper than you did when you started, and you're working along your own commitment to the work. And that's the important part.

Day 27: Finish

Even if you don't finish the novel in the 30 days, keep working on it past those 30 days.

Finish it.

Don't let it sit in a drawer, unfinished, draining creative energy from other projects.

Don't try to pitch it to agents or editors in unfinished first draft form.

Until you have an established track record, if it's not written, it can't be sold, and the words won't appear on the page until and unless you put them there.

I hope Nano's given you the chance to experiment, to make discoveries in your process, to set your own goals and commit to them, and, most of all, to respect your work and be true to it.

Day 28: So Close!

We're getting there! Are you excited? Are you happy? I hope this experience has been all those things for you.

In Year 2, I was so close to the end of the novel I could taste it. I wrote additional chapters outside of my usually scheduled writing time. I had only two more chapters to write.

If you're behind, this is your chance for a final push. Just dig deeper and do it. When I researched a hockey book a few years ago and asked the players how they kept going when the tank was empty, they said, "You just dig deeper."

You have it in you. It's simply a case of pulling it out and placing it on the page.

Day 29: Whom Can You Trust as A Reader?

Trusted Readers are your greatest resource.

I don't use family members or romantic partners as Trusted Readers. I want a more outside eye. My Trusted Readers are comprised of fellow writers I think are particularly suited to the particular project and one or two non-writers who are avid readers. They do not have a personal agenda to my work – they simply want to read something good. They will be honest without being cruel. They provide positive criticism that helps me make the piece better, and they catch my bad habits. They do not try to sabotage me to forward their own agendas.

Once I get their comments, I go back and do another revision, incorporating them, and then do yet another revision with more cuts.

Only then is the piece in shape to start the submission process.

That's my revision process. We each have to find our own. But the most important thing is not to try to submit something that's not the best it can be. And a first draft, especially one written in an atmosphere of "just do it" is not going to be ready to submit.

Day 30: Done!

This is it! Your final day of Nano. The day to make the big push if you need to, or the day to simply pause and celebrate if you've hit the Nano goal.

If you haven't finished your piece, no matter where you are in relation to 50K, please don't stop after today. Please keep going until you have a first draft that's done. If you write only 1000 words/day, as novelist Carolyn See recommends in her wonderful book *MAKING A LITERARY LIFE*, you'll be amazed by how quickly the pages stack up.

Once you're done, let it rest before going back to edit.

In the meantime – write something else, if being a writer is your goal, your path, your passion, and your vocation. Take what you've learned from this experience and apply it to the next piece.

I hope you have learned. I hope Nano's freed up your process and given you a fresh perspective. I hope you've met some good people and had a good month.

In Year 2, I pushed through on the final chapter of *Assumption of Right*, and finished the novel. The feeling of satisfaction of not only hitting the Nano goal, but finishing the piece is enormous, as is the relief.

And tomorrow, I will take what I learned from Nano, write at least 1500 words before I start my day, and move forward.

NOW

CELEBRATE!!!

(LINKS ON FOLLOWING PAGES)

Links and Things:

I write a series called Topic Workbooks, based on courses I've taught. They are available digitally on Smashwords. They contain lectures, exercises, examples, and resource sheets.

Setting Up Your Submission System

<https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/272675>

This Topic Workbook, based on Devon Ellington's popular seminar, takes the writer step-by-step through creating and maintaining an organized submission system. Too many writers miss opportunities because it takes too long to pull together all the parts! Don't be one of them! Learn how to efficiently create submission logs, query letter templates, bio paragraphs, clip files, resumes, portfolios, media kits, and more for a more organized, more productive writing life. Updated to include more information on social media and scripts.

The Series Bible: Creation and Maintenance

<https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/275031>

Keep the details of your created world consistent by creating & maintaining a functional series bible. Fictional worlds, even based on real locations, require consistency. Writing a series involves multiple drafts and changing ideas. A Series Bible will help you keep details straight, allowing you to keep your flow of character quirks and setting details that your readers will always catch. Based on Devon Ellington's popular seminar.

The Graveyard of Abandoned Projects

<https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/628485>

Unfinished projects drain creative energy. This Topic Workbook, based on Devon Ellington's popular workshop, will take you step-by-step through each unfinished project and decide if it's worth reviving, putting in stasis, or laying to rest, once and for all. Complete strong work, solve problems that got you stuck in the first place and turn it into something workable, and let go of projects that have outlived their purpose. Learn how to work revived projects into the schedule, and how to revisit shelved projects in the future to see if they are worth reviving. The workbook contains exercises and resources for writers at every level of their careers, and can be used again and again.

The Complex Antagonist

<https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/303263>

Create an antagonist worthy of your protagonist, sure to excite your readers. This Topic Workbook will help you create exciting antagonists that truly challenge the protagonists in your work, creating interesting, exciting, complex characters. Learn how to create the antagonist's circle and develop the antagonist as a fully-developed individual, not an idea or a cipher. Combination of topics, exercises, and examples that you can re-visit with every story.

Creative Stimulus

<https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/288541>

Kick-start your creativity with short stories, found inspirations, sensory detail, and rituals. Includes updated versions of 5 in 10, Sensory Perceptions, Writing Rituals, the Infamous Tip Sheets, and more.

Some days we feel about as creative as wilted lettuce. When that's the case, turn to Creative Stimulus and work your way through the various exercises. The shorter form of the exercise will help boost your creativity in long work and refresh your creative experience. Learn to go deeper into found inspirations and use the senses to create fuller, more complex, interesting, and detailed words for your readers. Find fresh focus with rituals designed to center and stimulate your creative impulses. Refer to the Tip Sheets for ideas on dialogue, tags, paragraph structure, transitions, how to make internal cuts, and more.

Based on Devon Ellington's popular workshops 5 in 10, Sensory Perceptions, and Writing Rituals, this book combines some of her best in one volume you'll return to for years.

Organize Your Writing Life

<https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/628589>

Create the time in your schedule for your writing projects AND your quality of life.

There's no such thing as "no time to write". Learn how to analyze your blocks of time and manage them wisely to get your writing done while still having a quality of life. Topics, exercises, and resources, based on Devon Ellington's popular workshops.

For more information on Devon Ellington and her work, visit:

Ink in My Coffee: the blog on the ups and downs of this freelance writer's life:

<http://devonellington.wordpress.com>

The main website:

www.devonellingtonwork.com

The Coventina Circle Paranormal Romantic Suspense site:

<http://coventinacircle.devonellingtonwork.com>

The Hexbreaker/Jain Lazarus site (urban fantasy adventure):

<http://hexbreaker.devonellingtonwork.com>

The Nautical Namaste Mysteries (not-quite-cozy under the Ava Dunne name):

<http://nauticalnamaste.devonellingtonwork.com>

For short fiction, visit the Delectable Digital Delights page on the main Devon Ellington website:

<http://www.devonellingtonwork.com/delights.html>

The business writing site, which includes information on private coaching, manuscript critique, and workshops:

www.fearlessink.com

To sign up for “Devon’s Random Newsletter”, a monthly-ish email with tips and news on latest releases, workshops, etc., send an email to devonsrandomnewsletter@gmail.com. Make sure you put “subscribe” in the header so you don’t wind up in the Spam Box.

Devon Ellington is on Facebook, and also on Twitter @DevonEllington.

Happy Writing!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Devon Ellington publishes under a half a dozen names in both fiction and non-fiction. Her work has appeared in publications including *FemmeFan*, *Toasted Cheese*, *Hampton Family Life*, *The Scruffy Dog Review*, *Emerging Women Writers*, *The Rye Sound Shore Review*, and the anthologies *Perfectly Plum*, *Ardeur*, *Simple Pleasures of the Kitchen*, and *Full Circle*. She has six published novels, dozens of short stories, and hundreds of articles under the various names. She is also an internationally-produced playwright and radio writer.