

Working Backwards Moves Writing Forward

by Valerie Poulin

Like many creative writing hobbyists, too often I have to put personal projects on hold in favour of paid work. For me, paid work means professional writing assignments.

It's always a joy to return to my pet projects after a three or six month contract, but getting back in the swing of creative writing after months of drafting business documents sometimes takes a good deal of effort. And to make sure they don't languish on the side for months, I recently discovered a trick in my professional writing life that transfers nicely to my sideline.

Last month, with a publisher's deadline safely in the distance, I became stymied by a case of irrational copy jitters. For whatever reason, in the final draft stage I began to struggle; I couldn't complete the article. Since much of my writing has moveable deadlines, I panicked. I began looking in all directions for help finding solace in a trusted technique—procrastination.

After hours of Internet surfing, I gathered my senses. Reaching for something else to take my mind off my writing troubles, I turned to an old friend.

When in need of a creative boost, I usually re-read passages from Julia Cameron's books on my bookshelf. I'll grab *The Artist's Way*, *Right to Write*, *Vein of Gold*, or *Walking in this World* for inspiration. And for a giggle, I'll flip through *How to Avoid Making Good Art*—a book filled with 125 illustrated avoidance facts/excuses.

This time around, though, I needed something new, something different, so I hopped back online and ordered her latest book – *Letters to an Artist*. The deadline loomed, but two days later my saving grace arrived by courier.

Or, so I thought.

From the get-go, I had a hard time getting into the book. Usually, the author's engaging writing style and barebones understanding of the artist—be it writer, sculptor, painter, or quilter—buoys me, gets me working again, but not this time. There was a thread of similarity to her previous books that made most of what I read seem rehashed.

My creative slump persisted.

Nevertheless, I continued to read, if only because I didn't want to return to work. I slogged through three quarters of the book, until I found a nugget to push me forward "...all artists are both easily encouraged and easily discouraged."

Within a few pages (at 131/163), my true test of reading value: I reached for my yellow highlighter.

Here's my turning point, I thought, my "light bulb" moment: "If I want something completed in one year, what must then be done by nine months, six months, three months, one month, one week, today?" counselled Cameron.

The concept of working timelines in reverse seemed so uncomplicated it alarmed me. Could I really meet deadlines by counting in terms of daily production?

Professional writers are used to juggling many projects at once while working toward a deadline, but backtracking to daily efforts seemed, well, backwards.

What the heck, I thought, something needs to pull me out of my saggy state and push me towards my deadline, now only a week away.

What have I got to lose?

working backward

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I looked at my to-do list—an overdue class assignment, daily blogs, two half-finished freelance articles, unwritten query letters, résumé updates, and a novella manuscript in various stages of editorial requirement—and calculated daily production.

Broken down to each work's simplest terms, I was no longer overwhelmed, but motivated to return to the keyboard.

With a daily to-do list in front of me, I had enough time for paying gigs as well as my personal creative writing projects. In addition, I'd built in some downtime, something I usually overlook until I feel overworked bringing production to a standstill.

I turned the assignment in on time and returned to my other writing projects.

By paying attention to daily work, I focussed on completion of small tasks, rather than on a looming deadline somewhere in the future.

I turned my to-do list, into a “ta-dah” list building an impressive list of finished work: The articles were published, the query letters mailed; I submitted my class coursework early, wrote and published two additional assigned articles and shipped off my novella to an editor while continuing with daily blogs. I even managed to write content for my new website.

There were other writing activities, but I can't recall them; I'm well into my current daily yield and now I can cross this article off the list!

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This article originally appeared in *Mississippi Crow*, November 2008, in slightly different form.