



WANT TO BE PRODUCTIVE? Start a ‘treadmill’ journal

It'll guide your daily writing habits, your revisions and your ambition

By Gregory Martin

I ONCE MET a writer in Seattle who believed he could only write productively in small-town hotels. He wrote best in a hotel east of the Cascades, 100 miles away, in the town of Cle Elum, Wash. I said this seemed expensive. He shrugged, resigned. I suggested that he work at Microsoft to support his writing habit. That would never do, he said. He wouldn't have any time to write.

Jane Smiley has a wonderful phrase for the eccentric writing preferences we all have, to one degree or another. She calls them “evasion strategies.”

In the writing workshops I teach, I regularly encounter these strategies. The most common is employed by students after workshop. They feel the story now needs to “rest” or “breathe.” Then, after a month, it doesn't have that zip of inspiration, and they abandon it. These students, believing writing should be “fun” and “spontaneous,” become highly accomplished at writing unpublishable first drafts.

Most often in workshop, craft considerations (plot, characterization, imagery, etc.) receive primary emphasis. This may lead apprentice writers to

think their most important problems are craft problems. They aren't. Craft knowledge has nothing to do with tenacity. Students can learn plot, but they can't learn hunger. Desire, like discipline, must be cultivated.

The “treadmill” journal cultivates both. I call my daily writing journal a “treadmill” journal because I like the analogy to exercise. It's hard to romanticize a treadmill. But you can't get in shape if you jog two miles every few weeks, and trying to write a meaningful piece of literature is like training for a marathon.

Each day you make five entries:

1 The date and time. Simple. Except many apprentice writers can't do it. They're “intuitive,” not record-keepers. Record-keeping matters. I can tell when I'm writing well simply by glancing at all the consecutive dates in my journal. Good writing depends on habit. Poet Mary Oliver says, “Attentiveness cannot be kept casually, or visited only in season, like Venice. ... The patterns of our lives reveal us. Our habits measure us.”

2 How long you will work. This entry organizes your writing day and helps you resist the urge to

quit early. If you started at 9, intending to work until noon, and your friend calls and offers to take you to breakfast, you say, “No. I'm writing.” If your friend is also a writer, this doubles as an admonishment, for which you can feel smug. But better not to answer the phone at all.

How long should you write each day? I require my graduate students to write 18 hours a week. That's three hours a day, six days a week. My editor at *The Writer* has cautioned me against advising this generally. It's too daunting and unrealistic. He's right. But I must. This is how much I write. I have a full-time job and two little boys, ages 3 and 6. I coach soccer. I grocery-shop. I'm sleep-deprived. I drink too much coffee. But I put in the hours.

Most writers I admire work as much as I do, or more. They have full lives. I wish I could say that talent wins out, and if you have some you'll eventually publish and win awards. But I've met too many talented writers with no discipline and no readers.

If 18 hours a week seems like a lot, start with 10 and work your way up.

3 What you plan to work on. Intending to “make the story better” is like intending to explore the

meaning of life. The desperation of vague intentions keeps many people from writing regularly. Step 3 minimizes despair. In this step, be as craft-specific as possible. Choose a craft element that clearly needs work. Plot. Characterization. Imagery. Dialogue. Point of view. You're not trying to be profound. *Work on turning point*, which I jotted down while working on my memoir *Mountain City*, simply meant revising the part of my plot that dealt with my grandfather and his macular degeneration and the change in our relationship. (See the Before and After sidebar.) If after five minutes on the turning point you get an idea for the characterization of Gramps, fine. Do that. You don't have to be inflexible; you just have to be purposeful and aware.

4 How it went. When you're finished, take inventory. This is the place for mild pride or shame or simple relief. In Step 4, I write things like "Good work." Or, "Too tired, get to bed earlier." My journal helps me choose between conflicting short-term wants—between watching college basketball past midnight and writing productively in the morning.

5 When you will work tomorrow and for how long. If you wake up not knowing when you'll write, there's a good chance you won't write at all. If you wake up knowing that at 6 a.m. you're going to work on "turning point" for three hours, chances are it will happen.

Try not to take any days off. Try. Keep your momentum, even if this means writing for only half an hour. Thinking you can't be productive without a big chunk of time is an evasion strategy.

Sample entry

Sept. 15, 1998 8:30 a.m.

Work until noon.

Work on turning point in macular degeneration.

4. Sluggish until coffee kicked in.

Worked most on characterization of Gramps, especially physical description.

5. Tomorrow: Six to nine. Work on turning point.

Would you train for a marathon without meticulously tracking your progress? Do you want to limp across the line or sprint? The Treadmill Journal is a barometer of your ambition.

Most of my students hate the Treadmill Journal, at first. Months later, after they publish their first essay or story, they're treadmill evangelists. They've experienced the kind of momentum that makes sitting down each day almost easy. I can't take credit for their finished products, but I do take satisfaction in

making them surrender to a regimen rather than a romance.

Gregory Martin

Gregory Martin's memoir *Mountain City* was named a *New York Times* Notable Book and received a Washington State Book Award. He teaches at the University of New Mexico.

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BEFORE AND AFTER

Clarifying a 'turning point'

Problem

In part of my memoir *Mountain City*, my grandfather, who suffers from macular degeneration, shoots a neighbor's dog that he mistakes for a coyote. My uncle Mel and I discover this and decide not to tell him. In the first draft, I simply wrote down what happened. But the sequence of events—the plot—wasn't enough.

"The hell with right and wrong,"

Mel said. "What if Gramps hears them laughing? How's he going to take that? He'll just hold it all in."

"That's not what he'd want," I said.

"What he'll never know won't hurt him," Mel said.

"What about Lee?" I said. "He'll keep looking. He won't know whether it's dead or missing."

"Maybe that's something we'll have to live with," Mel said.

We stared at each other for a long time. Then I left Mel standing there and walked down the store's center aisle and on out the front door.

At the edge of the meadow beside the river, I found Fritz's body and dragged it down the five-foot bank and dumped it in the river.

Solution

In revision, there were many entries in my Treadmill Journal where I wrote, "Work on turning point." In the published draft, I explicitly speculate on what this decision meant to me. Now,

the turning point is clear because I don't rely on vague implication to communicate how this event changed me.

At the edge of the meadow beside the river, I found Fritz's body. It was neither warm nor cold. There was little blood; the bullet had passed through its spine. The dry yellow rye grass was matted flat where it had fallen.

For the first time in my life, I pitied my grandfather, though I couldn't have named the feeling then, for it was the one feeling I thought I'd never have for him. Never pity. He could not see the terms that old age had given him, terms that I, barely a man by comparison in years and things seen, could see clearly. I resented this blindness, and I resented the dog at my feet, which I should have pitied but couldn't, not until much later. I resented Gramps for killing a thing that meant so much to one man and so little to me, so that my choice then could not be balanced or fair or just, which was all I wanted. The same things Gramps wanted. I knew those things. And I knew what Gramps would have done, had he been me.

In the sky above the meadow, streaks of copper were fading into coal and iron, and dark was coming on. I dragged Fritz's body down the five-foot bank and dumped it in the river.

—G.M.