

sharon page

Baby Steps - Finding Time to Write with a Toddler

By Sharon Page

Two years ago I was the least likely person qualified to give tips on finding time for writing. With a file cabinet bursting with abandoned ideas, I despaired of completing a project. While working longer hours and renovating our house, I found no time for writing. My saving came with having a child. I began working part time from home (30 hours a week) and found time for writing in the evenings and in snippets during the day. To my surprise, I realized I didn't really have more time. Instead, I'd learned ways to make my writing time more effective.

My motivation came from a large dose of 'reality-check'. The schedules of published authors forced me to confront a terrifying fact. Once published, an author usually writes two books in approx. one year. At least. On top of having a family and while often still employed at a 'day' job. And with deadlines. So how could I, an inefficient writer, suddenly develop techniques to turn me into a book-in-six-months working author?

I tried to match that schedule and persevered. In one year, I completed two long historicals. The 50,000 word book I sold to Ellora's Cave was written in five weeks. Currently, I am writing two 95,000 erotic romances a year, and I'm hoping to fit in more!

For me the secret included not only finding time to write, but becoming more productive when I did sit down at the keyboard. And I helped accomplish these seemingly impossible goals with various tricks:

1. I found a portable writing device. Stealing every few moments you can find to write is crucial because every one sentence brings a book toward completion. Writing in various locations (kitchen, living room, or backyard) is a lifesaver for me with a toddler. I've edited work while waiting in an obstetrician's office. Any device that suits your style and budget can work, whether you use a laptop computer, the Alphasmart (a portable lightweight keyboard with small screen), or pen and paper.

2. The thought of writing 100,000 words or 400 pages was so daunting, I was too frightened to start. Once I found a format that broke the psychological barrier, I was able to tackle a book. I write in single-spaced pages. A twenty-page chapter works out to 8 pages single-spaced in Times New Roman 12 pt. I can write a chapter in a day, or a half chapter in an evening (especially when writing sex). Writing four pages is a manageable goal whereas the thought of pounding out 10 double-spaced pages is agony. Other writers may find working in the double space format gives a greater feeling of accomplishment.

3. Explore to find your own plotting style. I would inevitably find an exciting idea and launch into the book without mining for the deep internal conflicts that would motivate my characters. And I would always come to a screeching stop. Then I learned that knowing those conflicts allows emotional, touching, and powerful words to flow more easily onto the page.

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Every author has a different style of plotting so try a few different methods before you commit to a technique. Entering contests forced me to write a synopsis. Now I also write a synopsis just for myself. Since it is only for me I don't have to worry about length or even coherence. A one or two page synopsis that focuses on the internal conflicts of hero and heroine and the escalating misery provides a quick shape for the story. Writing a short back cover style 'blurb' also gives me the opportunity to become comfortable with my characters' voices and motivations before I start the book.

I prefer to develop the story 'shape' as opposed to preparing a detailed outline. After studying several published long historicals, I recognized a story shape I could relate to. This included a first kiss by chapter 3, a lovemaking scene at the halfway point (really increases the conflict) and the revelation of the internal conflicts at the third turning point, about page 300, leading up to the Black Moment. The first turning point at page 100 would be the conclusion of the set up and put hero and heroine in the 'locked room', forcing them to interact. For my first sale to Ellora's Cave, I moved the elements ahead to suit the shorter length and went hotter with much more than a first kiss by chapter 3. But the shape was easy to visualize. Once I know the shape of the story, my writing becomes confident as opposed to tentative.

4. Stick to it. If you just hate the scene you are working on, allow yourself five minutes of writing fun. When I am stuck, I enjoy writing dialogue between hero and heroine for a future scene. It may end up deleted, but the exercise always brings me back into the characters' heads. And there are two big bonuses to finishing the book. The faster you write, the faster you can get to new ideas. Plus you can't sell a book you won't finish.

5. Download jobs on other people willing to do them. It helps that my husband thinks it would be cool if I could make a living as a writer. I also like to think of my writing projects as goals with a finite conclusion. Yes, I know I will start a new book when the current one is finished, but telling myself I can take a month off and clean up the house helps me meet a self-imposed deadline. Dimmer light bulbs and selective blindness also help!

Try not to beat yourself up if you don't write everyday. Or worse, give up. After all, no one works at a day job every single day of the year (I hope). I just try to make the time I do have more effective and don't let myself feel guilty about going out to the park!