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# THE *Fin*ISHING TOUCH

BOOKS HAPPEN ONE PAGE AT A TIME, WHETHER  
AUTHORS ARE AT A RETREAT OR IN A SQUAD CAR.

By Mridu Khullar Relph





**F**inishing a book is never easy, no matter what stage of your career you're in. A writer's life is always full of distractions calling out your name right when you're looking for an excuse to stop or step away. But unfinished books sitting depressingly in forgotten folders on your desktop are nobody's friend. Which is why this month, we bring you the best tips from some experienced authors on how to get that book finally written.

## READY TO WRITE "THE END"? HERE GOES.

### TECHNIQUE #1

#### Get away from it all.

For many years, 15-time *New York Times* best-selling author Jane Green, who broke into the field by writing about thirtysomething women, says she was able to plod through her books at home, going either to her local library or a small writers' room in town, where she diligently put in two to four hours a day, writing her books in as linear a fashion as it was possible. Then she was diagnosed with Lyme disease and stopped having the energy to write every day, going through mad spurts when she felt up to it before grinding to a halt. To finish her next book, she knew, she'd need a new approach.

"I found a charming small inn, ironically, near Lyme, in Connecticut, called the Bee and Thistle, which was officially closed, but the owners kindly agreed to allow me to stay there to get my book done," she says. "Every morning, someone would come to make me a delicious breakfast, then leave me alone in a large wing chair by a fire, where I sat for around 10 hours a day, losing myself in my words. I had no wi-fi, no family, no distractions whatsoever and the words flowed freely." Green finished the book in five days and since then, every year, she removes herself from her life and goes

to a small B&B or inn to finish a book. Once she went to a lovely old farmhouse that belonged to the late novelist Michael Palmer. "The peace and quiet combined with the stepping out of my real life and into the lives of my characters not only makes the writing quicker, but lends a propulsive quality to my books," she says.

Like Green, many writers find that removing themselves from the familiar and parking themselves in unknown territory can provide a mental boost because the new surroundings provide inspiration and energy. New writers who can't yet afford the time off work or to rent a room will often apply to residencies or plan writing retreats for low costs with other writing friends and colleagues.

### TECHNIQUE #2

#### Get an accountability partner.

Speaking of friends and colleagues, is there a writer friend or two who could hold you accountable to a certain page or word count per week and say lots of bad things to you were you to fail to deliver?

Says Lydia Netzer, author of *Shine Shine Shine*, a *New York Times* Notable Book, and the forthcoming *How to Tell Toledo*

*From the Night Sky*, "When it's time to really push out pages, ignoring distractions and stifling suspicion that more reflection and mediation might actually be needed, I go to the mountains with my friend Joshilyn Jackson. We pack comfort food, whiskey, coffee, chocolate and all our awful cardigans, blankets and pillows," she says. "I also pack a ridiculous number of cold processed soaps and shampoo bars, lip balms, necklaces and fiery pistachios. We take a ridiculous number of books to read. She writes in the morning, and I write mostly at night, but right around supper time we meet for buttery vegetables and roasted meat, and share pages."

Because they've known each other so long, Netzer says she and Jackson critique in shorthand ("You're doing that thing, you know, that thing.") and also recognize problems that aren't really problems ("Just go ahead and write that whole scene backwards if you feel like it. You know you'll switch it later."). Sequestered in a cabin with her friend, she says, preferably one with a fireplace where random dogs drop by and where the writers can stomp around on mountain roads when they get stuck, allows them to draft like wildfire.

"If I can rip my lips off on a chili lime pistachio while sniffing a lemon ginger soap and toying with the sleeves of my biggest cardigan, the words come roaring out," she says.

However, a best writing buddy isn't the only way to find accountability, and many writers prefer to hire coaches to keep them on track. "The book coach not only provides notes and inspiration, but also keeps me going," says Michelle Gamble-Risley, CEO of 3L Publishing and author of several books. "I have someone who is waiting to see what I've written and holds me accountable to deliver. It's a personal way to combine expertise to enhance your book and keep you on track to finish."

### TECHNIQUE #3

#### Write on the day job.

If you're still writing on the side and struggling to get that first novel or non-

fiction project out the door, you may not have the time, the money or the resources to hire a coach or take a trip. But what if you could write in the silent parts of your day job?

"As a rookie police officer and a woman, I had little chance of actually getting to drive the patrol car, so I spent many hours staring out the passenger window. Not every partner was a master of fascinating conversation," says T.K. Thorne, author of *Noah's Wife* and the forthcoming *Angels at the Gate: The Story of Lot's Wife*. "Random moments of adrenalin did occur, but those moments were often scattered between hours of boredom. So I gazed out at the passing buildings, part of my brain watching for broken windows and bad guys, but the other part actively engaged in creating scenes and dialogue, which eventually became my novel."

Decades later, she says, when she needed to focus on difficult last scenes, she'd get in the car and drive or, better still, go on a long trip as the passenger. "The passing scenery is a trigger for my imagination, and I can get some great work done and finish up a project," she says.

Patrick Hoffman, whose debut novel will be published in September, also found inspiration in his day-to-day investigative work. "I was an investigator working for the San Francisco public defenders office while I was working on *The White Van*. It is a thriller set in San Francisco. As an investigator, I was out driving around San Francisco working on all kinds of cases: murders, rapes, kidnappings, arsons, burglaries, DUIs, shoplifting," he says. "At some point during each day, I would pull my van over (incidentally, a white van) and write for one hour in a notebook. I would sometimes park the van in the location where the scene in the story was taking place." The key, he says, was to spend that one hour every day, whether he was feeling like it or not. "It took about three years," he adds. "But I finally finished it and sold it. Now I'm working full time on my second book."

You don't have to have an exciting job to finish your book. In fact, it's more likely that you will if you have a dull, boring one. And even if you can't write, we

## "I WROTE THE ENTIRE LAST SIX CHAPTERS OF MY BOOK ON PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION IN CHICAGO."

—Olivia Cole

have it on good authority that every minute you spend thinking up characters, dialogue and scenes, no matter where you are, takes you that much closer to finishing your novel.

### TECHNIQUE #4

## Use public transport.

"I wrote the entire last six chapters of my book on public transportation in Chicago," admits author Olivia Cole. "The book, *Panther in the Hive*, takes place in Chicago, and I found that it was easiest for me to write while on the bus or train. Sometimes I would get on the Red Line at Chinatown and ride it all the way to Howard. It was a way of trapping myself with the story, but also using my surroundings as inspiration."

It's a fact: Many writers find writing on the bus, train or even airplane to be productive. "When I'm home, I find it hard to focus because there are all sorts of distractions: television, the internet, et cetera," says author Rachel K. Burke, who takes six- or seven-hour bus rides to work. "I've always found driving relaxing, but when I'm the driver, I need to pay attention to the road and can't allow my mind to wander. This past December, I was struggling with the plot development to my latest novel, so I agreed to meet my friend in Northern California, which is about a six-hour drive from Southern California. During that ride, I put in my headphones, enjoyed the scenery and allowed my mind to wander. Slowly, as the hours passed, I came up with the perfect ending to my novel."

### TECHNIQUE #5

## Make a commitment.

Whether they're star authors with several best-sellers to their names or first-time writers just wrapping up their first, whether they write at their day jobs or hire hotel rooms for a month, all writers who finish their books have one thing in common: They make a commitment to finishing it. And if you want to join their leagues, you will have to, too.

To finish the first draft of her middle-grade novel manuscript, author Jody Lamb did not allow herself to go home after work for an entire summer. She went to the library and to the park from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. nearly every weeknight with a notepad and pen. "I found that if I kept my work and personal computers away and made those two environments my writing places, I could focus infinitely better," she says. "Not only did I finish my manuscript that summer, but my nine-to-five work productivity improved, as I started each day feeling accomplished and in the most control of my time."

You must commit to writing a page at least every weekday, more if you can spare the time and energy. Novels are written one page at a time, and most writers who abide by this rule will find that the pages do add up, albeit slowly. At a page a day, you could easily have a first draft finished by the end of the year. "The idea here is to make writing such an ingrained habit in your daily routine that after the first three weeks, you'll find it impossible not to write," says Christina Hamlett Pasadena, who has written 30 books, 154 stage plays, five optioned feature films and "squillions" of articles and interviews. "It's also critical that you not edit yourself as you go. If you do, you'll likely never get past the first paragraph."

A little bit of time, a little bit of space and a whole lot of commitment are the perfect recipe for a finished first novel or non-fiction project. And now that you know the secrets, the only real question is: Are you ready to finish that book yet? ■

Mridu Khullar Relph has written for *The New York Times*, *Time* and *Ms.* magazines.