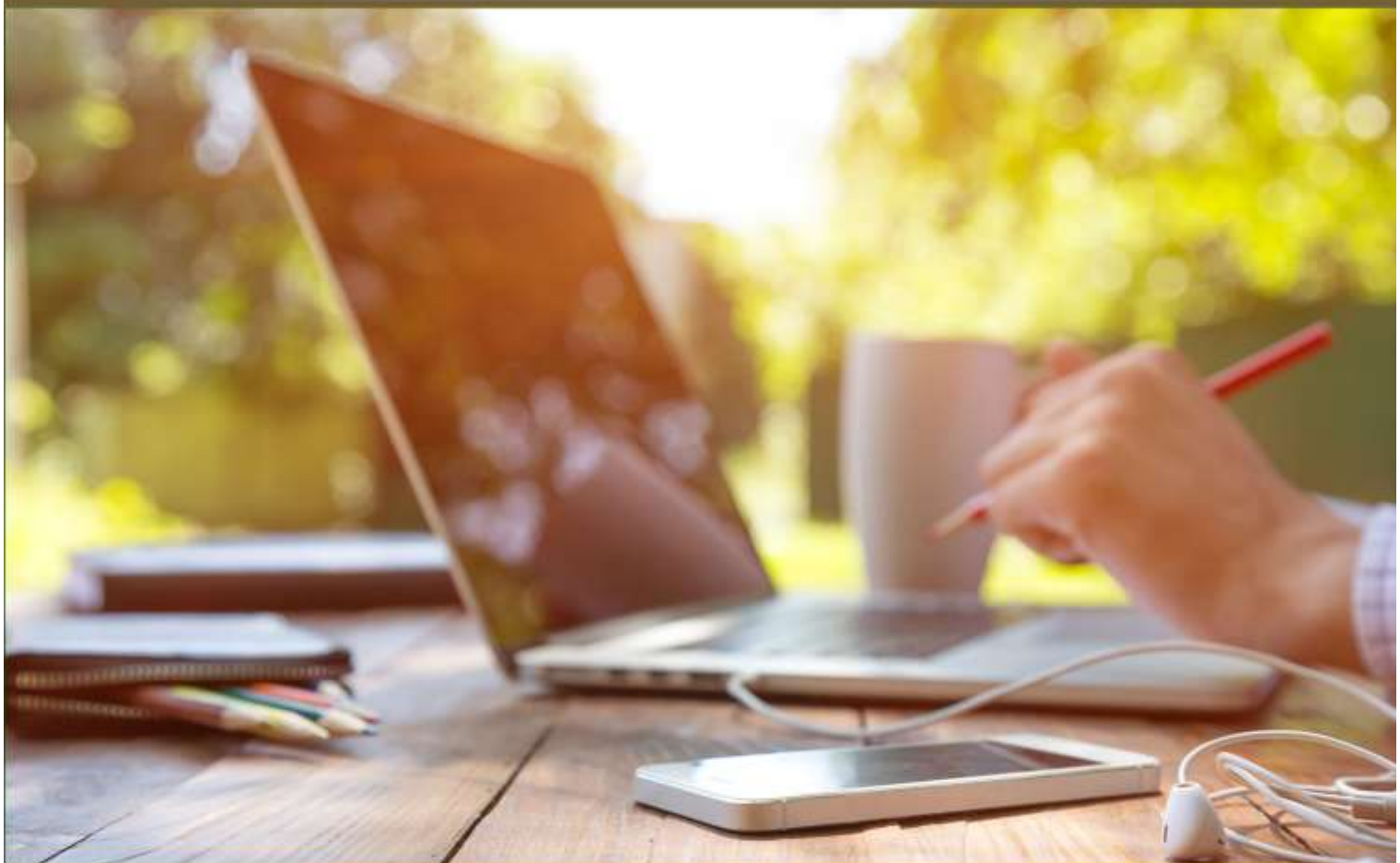


TIME TO WRITE

HOW TO FIT MORE WRITING INTO
YOUR LIFE, RIGHT NOW



ALI LUKE

It's close to five years since I wrote the original version of this ebook, *How to Find Time for Your Writing*. Since then, I've had two small children, my husband has started a full-time PhD, and we've moved from Oxford to Leeds with a toddler and a six month old baby. I've also had the privilege of coaching and supporting a number of writers facing a range of different time-related challenges.

I've now completely rewritten this ebook to add in some new material and to reshape what was here before. I hope that, whatever season of life you're currently in, this little guide will help you take your writing seriously and carve out some quality time for it.

Before we go further, let's look at getting you some writing time straight away:

Make Time to Write ... Today

Find 15 minutes *today* to write.

(If you're reading this late in the evening, you can go with tomorrow instead.)

Here are some possible fifteen minute slots:

- During your lunch break at work.
- In a coffee shop on your way home from work.
- After you've dropped the kids off at school, *before* you tackle the laundry.
- While the baby's napping.
- While dinner's in the oven (or while your takeaway is en route).
- After you've watched an hour of TV.
- Just before bed.

Write about anything you like – but if you're feeling stuck or reluctant or uninspired, write about what's holding you back. If you're like me and most writers, the act of writing helps you think things through and come up with solutions.

Make Time to Write ... This Week

Find one hour *this week* to write.

(This doesn't need to be all at once. Try 4 x 15 minute sessions or 3 x 20 minute sessions.)

Use some of the ideas above to help.

The following week, see if you can add in some extra writing sessions. You may well find that once you get going, it's much easier to see where you can squeeze in some writing.

Chapter 1: Your Writing is Important

How many times have you set your writing aside because you felt that it wasn't important enough?

Some things have to take priority. You need to go to your day job to pay the bills. You need to feed your baby. You need to play with your kids. You need to take care of your elderly dad. You need to get enough sleep.

But writing shouldn't come last on your list.

If you want a reminder of why it's so important:

- Writing is deeply fulfilling, in a way that perhaps nothing else is for you. (Of course, it has its frustrating moments too.)
- Every word you write is getting you closer to your goals. Nothing is wasted: even if you shelve a project, you've learned a lot in the process of working on it.
- Your writing – whether it's fiction, memoir, or non-fiction – could be your legacy. It might survive long beyond your own lifetime.
- And ... if you're anything like me, you're probably a much nicer person to be around when you have time to write. ;-)

Don't tell yourself that writing is unimportant or insignificant. It's not. And if you treat your writing as something worthwhile, the people around you – friends, family, colleagues – are more likely to respect your writing time too.

Try this:

Write down at least three reasons why writing is important to you. Put these somewhere prominent (your desk, the front of your writing notebook, on your computer desktop).

Chapter 2: Make Time to Write ... Whenever You Can

I used to think I needed to write in the mornings, because I wrote more easily then. I used to think I needed to write for at least an hour at a time, because short sessions weren't so satisfying or productive.

Today, most of my (fiction) writing happens in sessions of 30 minutes, max, between 5.15pm and 5.45pm ... because that's when Paul is consistently available to look after the kids.

Sometimes, your life is not conducive to “perfect” writing sessions.

This doesn't mean you should give up on writing entirely. I absolutely understand how tempting it can be to do so ... but at least give a different writing pattern a try.

Target Outcome vs Target Time

To keep you focused during a writing session, you should have a target. That could be:

- Write for 30 minutes
- Write 500 words
- Edit one scene
- Write an outline for the next chapter

I find word count targets great for drafting, and time targets great for editing, but you may find something different works for you.

Being Prepared to Write

If you have to squeeze your writing into short sessions, it really helps if you're prepared ahead of time. Otherwise, spending ten minutes finding your laptop / notebook / pen / character notes can eat up most of your session ... or put you off even trying to begin.

This is something I'm still working on, but for me, being prepared means:

- My laptop is at my desk, charged, with my novel document open.
- My novel-related notebook is at hand, so I can easily refer back to notes.
- I have a pen that actually works (Kitty's crayons will do in a pinch...)
- I've got my headphones, so I can drown out the sound of the children!

It's also worth carrying a small notebook and pen everywhere – not just to jot down flashes of inspiration but also to use spare pockets of time for a bit of planning or brainstorming.

Try this:

Block out time during at least three days per week when you can write. (It doesn't need to be the same time each day, or the same days every week.) Mark your writing sessions on your calendar, and stick to them for at least three weeks.

Chapter 3: Turning Writing into a Regular Habit

There are all sorts of areas in life – writing’s just one of them – where we blame a lack of self-discipline for preventing us from reaching our goals.

I didn’t write anything today. Or this week. I’m just not self-disciplined enough.

I couldn’t resist giving into those cookies. I just have no will-power.

But, chances are, you’re berating yourself unfairly. Writing in *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard*, Chip and Dan Heath say:

“When people exhaust their self-control, what they’re exhausting are the mental muscles needed to think creatively, to focus, to inhibit their impulses, and to persist in the face of frustration or failure. ... What looks like laziness is often exhaustion.”
(p12)

What works is the force of habit. Like me, you might find you rarely have the experience of feeling inspired to rush to your desk and write.

Try setting aside regular time for your writing – not necessarily daily, but at least a couple of times per week – and you might realise that you *can* create at set times, rather than waiting for the muse to descend.

Where do you find that time?

Try this:

Write down (roughly) what you do from getting up to going to bed. You don’t need to break this down into teeny tiny bits – just get an overview of your day down on paper.

(If you work part-time, work shifts, care for kids some of the time, you might want to do this for the three or four “typical” daily patterns that you have.)

Here's roughly how Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays currently looks for me:

- 5.45am – get up, shower, dressed, breakfast
- 6.30am – get kids up, changed, dressed, breakfasted, ready to go out. Drop Kitty at pre-school and pop to the shops with Nick. Play with Nick for a bit.
- 10am – Kids' nanny arrives and I head upstairs to work. Brief lunch break around noon.
- 1.25pm – head down to take over from the nanny. Play with kids, normally take them out somewhere, then come home to prepare tea around 4.15pm.
- 4.45pm – teatime
- **5.15pm – Paul takes over on the kids and I have fiction writing time! :D**
- 5.45pm – run kids' bath, pop away any laundry
- 6pm – bathtime, stories, bedtime
- 7pm – cook dinner, eat dinner, and watch a bit of TV or chat to Paul
- 8.30pm – housework and mindless web surfing
- 9.30pm / 10pm – bed

This is considerably more structured than my life was pre-kids. I'm pretty busy, but I do get a regular 30 minute slot to work on my fiction.

One area I'm working on is using evenings a bit more effectively, and fitting in another 15 – 30 minutes of writing post-dinner.

Pre-kids, my routine looked something like this:

- 7.30am – get up, breakfast, mindless web surfing
- 9am – work, with maybe a trip out to get groceries mid-morning
- 1pm – lunch break with Paul, maybe watching TV
- 2pm – work
- 6pm ish – Dinner (Paul cooked) 😊
- 7pm – shower, washing up, TV, board games
- 10pm – mindless web surfing
- 11pm – bed

“Work” slots were a mix of my non-fiction work and my fiction, and I usually broke them up with a few short exercise sessions.

(I love my kids dearly, but I do miss my old life sometimes!)

What does your daily routine look like? I know it's probably different day by day, but is there a consistent slot of the day where you could write – at least most days?

Here are some regular slots you could try ... all of which I've used over the past decade.

- First thing in the morning, before anyone else is up. (*Only really works if you don't have a super-early-rising baby...*)
- While both the kids are napping. (*Brilliant for six weeks or so after having Nick, then Kitty dropped her nap.*)
- During lunch break. (*This worked well while I was doing data entry one summer as a student.*)
- Straight after coming home from work. (*I needed a mug of tea to get me going in this slot. It worked well because my then-boyfriend – now husband – started and finished work later than me, so I had an empty flat to write in.*)
- After dinner. (*I've never managed to do this consistently, because this is my worst time of day for motivation, but I've used this slot as a catch-up.*)

These don't work for me, but might well be perfect for you:

- Late at night. (*Assuming you're more of a night owl than me.*)
- Arriving early at work to write. (*Depends a bit on your job, colleagues, etc.*)

You don't need to write every day, or at the same times each day – especially if your schedule varies a lot.

If you're a freelancer, retired, or unemployed, you might realise you're not actually sure where your time goes. Write down what happens in a typical day as best as you can, then track your *actual* time across a week to see where you could make a bit of extra room in your calendar for writing.

Try this:

Find two hours per week to write. That could be anything from a single session on a Saturday afternoon to six 15 minute sessions. (I find that less than 15 minutes makes it hard to get enough momentum going.)

Two hours might seem hardly worth bothering with – but if you put in 2 hours per week for 50 weeks of the year, and you can write 800 words in an hour, that's an 80,000 word novel.

Chapter 4: Finding a Good Place to Write

Like finding the right time, you might not be able to find the *perfect* place. Sure, you might feel inspired by a roomy office with a coastal view ... but if you currently live in a high-rise flat in the middle of a city hundreds of miles from the ocean, then you need something that'll do for now.

A *good* location will make it far easier for you to feel inspired – and stay focused. Try to find somewhere that:

- **Isn't distractingly noisy** (you might enjoy a low background hum, though, like in a coffee shop). If you're stuck with a fair amount of noise, try noise-cancelling/reducing headphones and play music that you enjoy.
- **Gives you some privacy.** Most people find it hard to write – particularly to write fiction – if they feel overlooked. Writing may feel like a private, even an intimate, act. If you can, write in a room free of family members / roommates. If that's not possible, position your laptop or monitor in such a way that other people can't see it.
- **Is comfortable.** Don't put up with an uncomfy chair or dim lighting. If it's physically uncomfortable to write, you're hardly going to be encouraged to stick with it. If a fancy chair is way beyond your writing budget, try an exercise ball. I started sitting on one to deal with backache during my first pregnancy and it's been brilliant.
- **Gets you in a "work" mindset.** For many writers, the sofa or their bed is *not* a great place to try to write. If you find yourself getting easily distracted, or if you start falling asleep, then find somewhere different.

Try this:

Tweak *something* about your writing location. Get a better light bulb, or get a new chair, or even write somewhere else entirely – try a local coffee shop or library.

Chapter 5: During Your Writing Session

Have you ever sat down with the firm intention of writing ... only to find that, an hour later, you've caught up with everyone's posts on Facebook, made yourself a coffee and some toast, and linked together an entire box of paperclips?

While everyone has an unproductive, unsatisfying writing session once in a while, you definitely don't want this to become a habit. You also don't want to train yourself to think that you *need* 15 minutes of desk-tidying, paperclip-fiddling, email-checking time before you start to write ... or that you have to break off every few minutes to see what's happening on Twitter.

Getting Started

If you don't already know what you're planning to achieve during your session, take a couple of minutes to figure it out. Write it down. For instance:

- Write the next 500 words of Chapter Three
- Come up with an idea and an outline for a story for this month's competition in Writing Magazine
- Edit the blog post from yesterday
- Write an email newsletter
- Practice writing dialogue, using some exercises

What's important is that you have a clear task (or, if you want, two or three tasks). If your goal is simply to "write something", you'll probably end up staring at the keyboard or at your notebook for far longer than you need to.

Important: Even if you're working on a long project, like a novel or a non-fiction book, give yourself a clear task. "Write next chapter" isn't enough – you need to know roughly what'll happen during that chapter.

Keeping Going

Stay on task. This can be hard: I can't tell you how many times I find myself gazing zombie-like at Facebook, only to snap out of it and pull myself back to writing.

If you've got an open-ended writing session (no kids, day job, parties, etc waiting at the end of it), then try setting a timer for 15 or 20 minutes. Tell yourself you will write and *only* write until the time's up. Once you get into flow, it'll be easier to resist distractions.

If you run out of steam and you're not sure where to go next, take a mental step back. With fiction, you might like to close your eyes and really visualise the characters and the scene – what are they doing? How do they stand, talk, interact?

With non-fiction, imagine the reader: what questions might they have? Is there anything you haven't covered?

Of course, if you're stuck, it's fine to leave a note to yourself along the lines of "come back and add this in" ... just move on and keep writing.

Similarly, try not to get too distracted by looking up missing information. It's all too easy to let a quick Google search turn into a half-hour of surfing. If I'm missing a fact or some important piece of information, I'll usually just pop a note to myself so that I know to add it in when I'm redrafting.

Ending Your Writing Session

You might find it helpful to spend the last few minutes of your session reflecting on what you've accomplished.

If you're working in short sessions (15 – 20 minutes), you could do this once a week, or you could record something really brief each time – like a single word about how you're feeling, or a smiley (or frowny) face.

If you have a bit longer, you could:

- Reflect on how you felt during the writing process (especially if it was a longish session) – try keeping a writing journal
- Pick one or more tasks to tackle during your next session
- Mark your achievement in some way – e.g. put an X on the calendar for achieving your word target, or record your day's word-count in a spreadsheet
- Put away any materials that need to be stored. It's really frustrating to be ready to write and then realise that you've no idea where your notebook is.

The end of your session is also a great time to back up your work. Save it to a USB pen, email it to yourself, or use an online service like Dropbox to ensure that you've got a copy somewhere other than your hard drive.

Try this:

Get a notebook (or create a spreadsheet or Word document) that you can use as a writing journal. Record each writing session, and – if you want – add a few notes about how the session went.

Chapter 6: Three Common Problems ... Solved

There are a few problems that crop up again and again when it comes to finding time to write. I've been lucky enough to avoid many of these myself – but I've heard a lot of writers getting really frustrated about them.

Here are some typical ones ... and some ways to start solving them.

“My spouse (or other family member) isn't supportive.”

This (hopefully!) isn't intentional. Non-writers can be quite clueless about what's helpful and what's really not, when it comes to getting peaceful writing time.

You could try:

- **Negotiating a very clear agreement.** In our house, that looks like this: *Paul looks after the kids from 5.15 – 5.45pm so Ali can write.*
- **Finding *one* issue to fix.** If your spouse is being unhelpful in a bunch of ways, it's going to be tricky to tackle everything at once. Choose just one thing to work on. If they tend to start conversations while you're writing, can you wear headphones and explain you focus best that way?

“I don't feel motivated to write.”

This can be a big issue when you've got a reasonable amount of time available ... but you never seem to be able to sit down and write.

Assuming you do *want* to write, then give it some time. Try to get a new writing habit in place for at least a month (ideally two or three months) before abandoning it.

You might find it helps to:

- **Commit publically to your target** – e.g. “I'm going to write for 45 minutes, three days per week” or “I'm going to post on my blog every week”. Let all your Facebook friends know, or find a writing buddy who can keep you accountable.
- **Take a class or course** – being surrounded by writers and writing talk always gets me back in the mood to work on my novel or blog ... hopefully it'll do the same for you. If you're struggling with a particular aspect of writing, a focused class or course could help you move on.

- **Reward yourself** – my go-to rewards are chocolate and books (and I think those work well for a lot of writers). I also like to mark my progress on a chart or calendar – watching the word count go up, or creating an unbroken chain of “days I wrote on”, can be really motivating.

If you're really struggling, though, take some time away from writing. You don't *have* to write! All writers need a break now and then.

If you're ill, pregnant, looking after small children or elderly relatives, or otherwise having a difficult time, don't force yourself to write *if you don't want to*. You've got enough to cope with.

“I have all my sessions planned out, but inevitably, something comes up and interrupts me.”

Let's face it, you can't always just shut the door and ignore the world while you write – even for 15 minutes. Perhaps your kids are fighting or dinner is burning or a package arrives.

You've probably done what you can to minimise interruptions, but of course you'll never be able to eliminate them altogether. **If your writing sessions are regularly getting interrupted or cut short, the simplest solution is to plan *extra* sessions that you can use if needed.**

So, you might aim to write between 5pm and 5.30pm each day, but if you get interrupted for some reason, you'll write from 9pm to 9.30pm instead. This might not be ideal for you (or perhaps for your family!) but it does mean you'll still be able to get some writing time.

Final Words

I've spent much of the past two and a half years reading time management advice and wanting to shout at the author, "But your life is totally different from mine!"

When it comes to making time to write, please don't compare yourself to other writers, or let well-meaning advice be a source of frustration or stress. Your job is to do the best you can, with what you have.

Maybe, like me, you've got small children. Maybe you've got a demanding day job. Maybe you're settling into a new city or even a new country. Maybe you have priorities that come before writing. (My husband is pretty darn high on my list, for instance.)

You don't have to write 1,000 words per day – even if some writing guru recommends it.

You don't have to write every day – even if your writer friends swear by it.

You don't have to get up at the crack of dawn to write – even if that big-name blogger you read does.

But ...

You are absolutely entitled to have time to write. (And time to watch TV, read webcomics, or do whatever you do to relax.)

If you want more time to write, start taking steps to make it happen. You're the author of your life: begin a new chapter.

I'd love to hear where you're making time to write, and how your writing sessions are going. Drop me a tweet any time (@aliventures).

Happy writing!

Where Next?

Aliventures

My blog Aliventures will help you master the art, craft and business of writing, with a new post about one aspect of writing every week. You can choose to get blog posts straight to your email inbox – just sign up in the blog sidebar.



As a member of the Aliventures newsletter, you get a little library of short ebooks about writing:

Your free ebooks: www.aliventures.com/secret-newsletter

Password: **alinewsletter**

I add new ebooks every few months, so do keep an eye on the newsletter for news about these. The weekly newsletter email will always include a quick writing tip, plus a few links to useful resources.

(If there's anything you'd like to see in the newsletter emails, or on the blog, just let me know. I use the newsletter for quick tips and fairly ephemeral updates, and the blog for more in-depth content.)

Writers' Huddle



I used to offer one-to-one writing coaching, but I found it frustrating to only be able to work with a few writers – and only with those who could afford my hourly rate.

So, for the past three years, I've been running Writers' Huddle, a warm and welcoming online community for all writers. We have a monthly seminar (recorded, so you can listen to it or read the transcript at your own convenience), friendly forums, and regular writing challenges to help you reach your goals. We have novelists, bloggers, freelancers, memoirists and more!

I only open Writers' Huddle two – three times per year for new members, so I can set aside time to help everyone settle in. If you'd like to be on the waiting list, or if you just want to find out a bit more, pop on over to www.writershuddle.com.

About Ali

I've been a writer since my teens, when I started work on my first novel – and I've been a professional writer since 2008, when I quit my day job in IT to be a freelancer.

I write regularly for many big websites – including writing/blogging sites like The Write Life, Copyblogger, ProBlogger, Daily Blog Tips and Write to Done.

I have a BA (Hons) in English from Cambridge University and an MA in Creative and Life Writing from Goldsmiths College, University of London.

I live in Leeds in the UK with my husband Paul, my daughter Kitty and my son Nick.

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