

The Twenty Minute Writer  
By Cindi Myers

When people ask me about my writing habits, I often joke that I have the attention span of a toddler with a sugar rush. It's not that I'm incapable of sitting at my computer for long stretches of times, it's just that life affords so few of those long stretches. Thus, much of my work is accomplished in twenty and thirty minute spurts between loads of laundry, telephone calls, errands, and yes, my email addiction.

Yet I've managed to be amazingly prolific in this patchwork fashion. I have six books coming out in 2007, some 500,000 words that somehow made it onto paper whenever I had a few minutes here and there.

You have a few minutes here and there, don't you? I hope the tips that follow will help you find a way to put your thoughts and ideas on paper during those minutes, increasing your productivity and putting you a little closer to your dream of publishing.

First of all, erase from your mind the idea that writing takes long, uninterrupted stretches of time. I'm not denying that having hours to sit at the keyboard and agonize over each word typed wouldn't be ideal, but we're talking real life here. (Check the dictionary under reality. I promise you won't find anything about perfect or ideal there.) We work with what we have, and those minutes of time here and there are it.

If you're having trouble with this first step, find a notepad or a note card and write on it *I am a productive, prolific writer, even in the limited amount of time available for me to work*. Post it where you'll see it often: on the bathroom mirror, the car dashboard or by your keyboard. Read it. Believe it.

Step two: Portable is productive. Whether you scribble notes on a stack of index cards you carry in your back pocket, write on yellow legal pads, spiral notebooks, or on a portable keyboard such as an Alpha Smart, find a portable writing medium that feels good to you and carry it with you everywhere. Make picking up that notebook or Alpha Smart as natural as grabbing up your purse and car keys on your way out the door. Then when ballet class lets out late, or the doctor is running an hour behind you can work on your masterpiece instead of zoning out to talk radio or reading all about Brittany or Justin or J-Lo's latest doings in a nine-month old issue of *People*.

Step three: Like great sex, great writing begins in the brain. About now you're probably thinking 'duh!' How great a brain does she have to have come up with this one? Bear with me, please. I'm talking about using that brain to think about your writing even when you can't actually commit words to paper. Instead of humming commercial jingles or worrying over what to fix for supper while you scrub the bathroom, force yourself to focus on your story. Turn off the car radio during your commute and commune with your characters. Most specifically, think about *what happens next*. What will the next chapter, the next scene, or the next paragraph of your work in progress be? If you come up with some plausible – or even brilliant – ideas and you're afraid you'll forget them before you get to your keyboard, make a few notes. If you're driving, walking the dogs, at the gym, or in another situation where writing something down isn't practical, consider investing in a mini tape-recorder to record your notes.

Note: Living with your story this way will help you stay focused on your writing, but may give you a reputation as being somewhat absent-minded, or even flaky. Embrace the image as the kind of thing that will make good fodder for tabloid articles once you're rich and famous.

Step four: Learn to sprint on the page. When it's time to write, write. No warming up, stretching, sharpening pencils or filing your fingernails while the computer screen remains blank. You only have twenty or thirty or fifteen minutes here. You can't afford to waste any of them. And you shouldn't have to. If you've followed the steps outlined above, you've put hours of thought into this next scene or paragraph, and you probably have a few notes to guide you.

While this approach may feel awkward at first, like any other exercise it will become easier with practice. Before you know it, you'll be looking up at the clock when it's time to pick up junior from band practice and you'll be amazed at how much you've written. (In fact, it would be a good idea to invest in a timer and set it whenever you absolutely have to stop writing at a certain time. Otherwise, you might get a reputation as the parent who always forgets to pick up the children on time, or the chronically late employee, or worse, *former* employee.)

Step five: Bait the trap. Don't risk staring at that empty page again. Give yourself something to come back to. At the end of each of these quickie writing sessions, jot down a few notes about what comes next, where you're headed, etc. I promise you'll be looking for any excuse to get back to the page now and finish that thought.

Step six: Plan for down time. That old saying about all work and no play making Jack a dull boy didn't go far enough, in my opinion. Focusing on work – even work you may love, like writing – all the time will make you a stressed-out, neurotic wreck. So don't try to fill every single minute of every day with writing and thoughts of your book. Find a schedule that works for you. I like to take weekends and holidays off, and a couple of weeks after each completed book, not to mention evening hours. Have some fun, cultivate your relationships with family and friends, get some exercise. The book will still be there when you report for work again, I promise.

That's it. Success in six easy (or crazy, or awkward – fill in your own adjective) steps. If they don't feel natural or easy to you at first, I urge you to give them a try. Commit yourself to a couple of weeks of this, or better yet, a month. See if you're writing more, and better. If nothing else, you'll no longer be able to whine that you don't have any time to write. You've got twenty minutes, haven't you?