



# The Writer's Compass

## Briefing 2: Time management for writers Debbie Taylor

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### About the author

Debbie Taylor is the founder of Mslexia, the magazine for women writers. She is also the author of six books of fiction and non-fiction, and numerous features and reviews. Her travel book, *My Children My Gold*, was shortlisted for the Fawcett Prize. Her latest novel, the disturbing *Hungry Ghosts*, is set on the island of Crete.

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### 1 Introduction

Time Management Theory was developed to help business managers utilise their time more effectively and so free up more time for thinking creatively and developing their businesses. Here I have adapted its principles to the needs of the writer.

Time Management is really very simple. Armed with a few basic principles, a good slug of zeal, and a lot (I mean a lot) of heavy-duty black bin-liners, you really can create time for the important things in your life.

A business friend explained it like this: Imagine your life as an empty bucket, and the important things you would like in it as stones. Visualise putting the stones in the bucket until it's full - family, job, friends, health, home, sleep, money, writing... Now visualise the less important things as gravel; things like hobbies, clothes, acquaintances, holidays, fine food, housework. Can you fit them in too? Of course you can: in the spaces between the stones.

Now take the trivial things - surfing the net, eyebrow tweezing, watching *Big Brother*. These are the sand, and of course they fit in too, in the spaces between the bits of gravel. Now take a new bucket and put the sand in first: right to the brim. How are you going to fit the stones in? Well, time management is about putting the stones in first.

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## 2 Preparation

### Tool up

This is the fun part, where you get to buy stationery. (Is it only writers who get an erotic thrill from new stationery?) Equip yourself with the following:

- » notebook with at least 25 lines per page
- » week-to-view diary with a space for notes with each week (the *Mslexia Writers' Diary* is ideal, obtainable via [www.mslexia.co.uk](http://www.mslexia.co.uk)...)
- » pencil and rubber
- » fat felt-tip pen
- » filing cabinet and files, or equivalent means for organising and storing documents
- » large cardboard box
- » supply of heavy-duty bin-liners

Sophisticates with filofaxes or palm-tops can dispense with the first two items.

### Clear the decks

People who use their desktops as *aides memoires* can spend up to an hour a day just *looking for things*. So set aside some time to go through all your current papers. If you follow the rest of my instructions you will never (ever) have to do this again.

Now open your notebook. This notebook, which will contain your Master List (see below), should be your constant companion from now on. Go systematically through every piece of paper you have accumulated in the past year. Don't read or reminisce; don't fret or sweat. Just sort each item into one of three piles: to keep, to read, to throw away.

Some papers (e.g. unpaid bills, income tax return) will relate to tasks you need to perform. Note what you have to do on your Master List (adding a name and telephone number if appropriate) then file them (or *throw* them) away.

### Set up a filing system

This is for *important papers only*. Start a new file for each new topic as it emerges during the sorting process, but write the labels in pencil so that you can combine or change categories later if necessary.

Be ruthless. Will you need this piece of paper in the next year? Could you find the information it contains somewhere else? If the answers are 'no' and 'yes', bin it. If you can't bear to part with it (wimp!) put it in the cardboard box (remember the cardboard box?). When you've finished, date the box and stack it somewhere dark and dusty for a year. If you haven't opened it once in that time, chuck it (without opening it). There now - doesn't that feel better? Good *feng shui* too.

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## 3 Principles

### (i) Make a list

The Master List is the keystone of the Time Management edifice. It allows you to clear your mind and your desk and start making some rational decisions about allocating your time. Notice how putting worrying items onto your Master List reduces your anxiety about them. Niggling anxieties can interrupt your writing and undermine your creativity. Write them down and forget them until you have to deal with them. The Master List is an organic creature: add to it as things crop up; cross things out when you've dealt with them; learn to love it...

### (ii) Prioritise

Another key principle of Time Management is prioritising. Every item on your Master List can be categorised according to its importance or urgency, as in the table below. Classifying tasks in this way was a revelation to me the first time I did it. I could see at once that the reason my novel was unfinished, my body degenerating, and my social life on the back burner is because they all fell into category B: important but not urgent. Meanwhile my time was being frittered away on category C and, worse still, D tasks - the gravel and sand of my life.

#### THE MANAGEMENT GRID

	important	not important
urgent	A	C
not urgent	B	D

### (iii) Do it once

Another revelation that has transformed my life is the 'do it once' principle. Finish every task you begin. And, to prevent the paper mountains reforming, deal with each piece of paper as it arrives. Pay bills, read papers, process letters the week they arrive. If something's not important enough to file or respond to straight away: throw it away - *straight away*. If you put it off, or leave it half done, you'll have to read it again each time you pick it up. And you'll end up spending far more time on it than it ever deserved.

Apply the 'do it once' rule to as many tasks as possible. Shop once a week (consider investing in a taxi if you haven't a car to lug the stuff home). Cook in bulk and recycle leftovers for lunch the next day. Get dressed in all-purpose clothes, once a day. Wash up once a day - buy more mugs if you need to. With newspapers, scan them quickly and highlight, or tear out, items for a weekly reading session - or just cancel your daily rag and binge on the Sundays instead.

#### **(iv) Double up**

If you're a working mother, you've probably been doing two things at once for years. But now is the time to turn it into a conscious science. Fill the washing machine while the kettle's boiling; call the plumber while the pasta's cooking; buy stamps on your way back from the library.

Scan your Master List before stepping out of the house so that you can do as many errands as possible on each outing - and resolve never to 'just pop out' for anything again.

#### **(v) Delegate**

Delegating takes time, it's true. But once something is properly delegated you might (just imagine it...) never have to do it again.

The key is to delegate effectively. This involves being absolutely clear about what needs to be achieved (supper every weekday, for example) and when it needs to be achieved by (before seven pm). Avoid specifying *how* it needs to be achieved. If your delegatee is allowed to do it Their Way, the task will become Theirs - and stop being yours. Grit your teeth and tolerate any temporary incompetence. Save your high standards for things that really matter, like the quality of your prose.

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## 4 Practice

You're now ready to embark on Time Management proper.

### Make a mission statement

This is business speak for what you want to achieve. Chose something precise and pithy, like: 'My mission is to make more time for my writing' or 'My mission is to finish my novel'. Write it down, pin it on the wall, tell your family and friends.

### Construct a time log

This part is a pain, but bear with it if you can. Starting at the beginning of a typical week, divide each day into 15-minute sections. Now note down, in the appropriate sections, everything you do. Include toilet breaks, extended spot-squeezing and gazing out of the window. If you are awake during the night, note that too. Some writers do their best work in the wee small hours. And try not to skimp. Your Time Log will give you important information about how you are currently spending your time (and ammunition in any campaign you may decide to wage on the housework front).

### Identify your time bandits

At the end of the week, tot up how much time you've spent on each of your main activities. Contemplate the totals. They may surprise you. Did you really spend eight hours doing the *Guardian* crossword? And five hours changing your clothes? And what about those 14 hours cooking?

### TOP 10 TIME BANDITS

	activity	approx. hours / week	a few remedies
1	housework	30	» delegate to other household members » pay a cleaner (well) » lower your standards » apply 'do it once' and 'double up' rules to streamline the work
2	watching TV	15	» buy a weekly guide and plan your viewing » ban it from the room where you write » use the 'off' button...
3	alcohol	15	» start later and stop sooner (you'll need less sleep, wake more clear-headed and so lengthen your productive day)
4	socialising (phonecalls, coffee, drinks, popping round)	10	» use an answer machine and schedule time to make return calls » double up social meetings and errands » phase out draining negative relationships

5	tea-breaks (caffeine, snacking, toilet, etc.)	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» schedule a 10-minute break every 90 minutes to coincide with scientifically-established rhythms in concentration</li> <li>» limit caffeine (it's diuretic!) and reduce distracting toilet breaks</li> <li>» for longer breaks select creative relaxation activities, like walking or dancing, instead of time bandits</li> </ul>
6	'popping out' for something	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» schedule for low-energy periods</li> <li>» buy in bulk ('do it once')</li> <li>» scan your Master List before any outing to maximise what you achieve ('double up')</li> </ul>
7	newspaper, snail-mail, email, internet	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» schedule for low-energy periods</li> <li>» process or list-and-file in a single weekly session ('do it once')</li> </ul>
8	titivation	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» acquire comfortable all-purpose outfits</li> <li>» get dressed and made up once a day</li> <li>» remove mirrors from your work space</li> </ul>
9	worrying	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» put it on your Master List, schedule time to deal with it - then forget it</li> <li>» keep an elastic band on your wrist and flick yourself hard if you catch yourself obsessing (oddly, this really works...)</li> </ul>
10	looking for things	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» dispose of existing clutter</li> <li>» create a filing system - and <i>use</i> it</li> <li>» dispose of new clutter as it arrives</li> <li>» put things away in the right place</li> </ul>

### Set your time targets

Remember your Mission Statement? Here is where you start making it happen. Examine your Time Log in the light of your Mission Statement. Ask yourself for each activity: 'Does this help or hinder my mission?' Now begin setting some targets - six is a good number to aim for - that will bring your Time Log more in step with your Mission Statement.

Make the targets measurable. How much more time do you want to spend writing? Five, 10, 20 hours a week? Which activities can you reduce, and by how much, to make this possible? What else could you do to create more time or otherwise facilitate your Mission? Examples might include organising a childcare rota, hiring a cleaner, turning the spare room into a study. Put all of your solutions on your Master List.

Beware of over-ambitious or punitive targets, like 'finish a chapter every week' or 'give up TV completely'. Make your targets achievable or you won't succeed. You can always increase them later.

One last word about targets: if you opt for *activity* targets rather than *goal* targets you're far less likely to fail. As long as you keep performing the right activity (e.g. writing for two hours every day), the goal (10,000 words a month) should take care of itself.

## **Prioritise your master list**

Go through your Master List and mark all the important A and B tasks with red asterisks. If your list is anything like mine, the asterisked items will be a rather motley bunch ranging from 'get car brakes fixed' to 'revise first three chapters of new novel'.

At each less important C and D item, ask yourself the following questions:

- » Will it help my writing?
- » What will happen if I don't do it?
- » Can I delegate it?
- » Can I spend less time on it?

Cross out or resolve to delegate as many as possible.

## **Devise a schedule**

Returning to your Time Log, think about how you could reshape it into a routine that makes best use of your energy. Don't forget to include rest time and fun. The routine must be enjoyable and sustainable as well as productive, or you'll never stick to it.

If you're most alert in the morning, you might decide to use those hours for writing and reschedule the rest of your day around that decision. Perhaps you could fit in a few quiet hours before breakfast? Perhaps someone else could do the school run?

## **Work through the backlog**

Now, review the red asterisks on your Master List and establish a deadline for each (here's where your diary comes in). Don't try to do everything at once. Break the tasks down into manageable groups in order of urgency and distribute them, as achievable weekly goals, in your diary.

At the start of each day, look at your diary and your Master List and plan how you are going to use your time. Successful business managers say that ten minutes spent orienting themselves to focus on their priorities at the start of each day is a crucial key to their success.

Think of your first month as a transitional phase, during which you will get up to date with things that have been preying on your mind and establish a routine that gives you the writing time you need.

If there are a lot of really urgent, really important, really scary things on your list, you may have to resign yourself to postponing the writing for a few weeks. But don't despair. As long as you stick to your new routine, make sure your writing is prioritised - and scheduled - and refuse to be derailed by C and D tasks, you will return to it eventually. And I guarantee you'll return to it in a far less fractious frame of mind.

You may have noticed that I haven't mentioned scheduling time for your C and D tasks. That's because they are gravel and sand, grit. If you can fit them in too, well and good. If not, at least you know you're concentrating on the things that really matter to you.

Good luck!

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## 5 Resources

### Websites

[www.mindtools.com](http://www.mindtools.com)

Designed mainly for workplace achievement, but none the worse for that; exhaustive and well-organised site with some useful free downloads; special section on time management but also covers stress management, leadership skills, memory improvement, etc.

[www.time-management-guide.com](http://www.time-management-guide.com)

Clear and concise, also aimed at the corporate operator, with some interesting extras, e.g. sections on overcoming your internal barriers and preventing burnout; plus a series of audio guides to purchase

[www.tsuccess.dircon.co.uk/timemanagement](http://www.tsuccess.dircon.co.uk/timemanagement)

Offers courses and training materials, with special focus on time management - including suggestions for eliminating 15 'time stealers' (author claims people with clutter covering more than 20% of their desks are likely to be suffering from 'desk stress')

### Books

*The 25 Best Time Management Tools and Techniques: How to Get More Done Without Driving Yourself Crazy* by Pamela Dodd, Capstone, £12.99

*The Time Trap: The Classical Book on Time Management* by Alec Mackenzie, Amacom, £11.99

*Time Management for Unmanageable People* by Ann McGee-Cooper, Bantam, £9.50

*How to Be Organized in Spite of Yourself: Time and Space Management That Works with Your Personal Style (How to Be)* by Sunny Schlenger, Signet, £6.99

*Your Best Year Yet!: How to Make the Next 12 Months Your Most Successful Ever!* by Jinny Ditzler, Thorsons (out of print but available for £0.01 from Amazon)

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