

On establishing boundaries



Author Jami Attenberg discusses only sharing parts of yourself, remaining curious to the world, and not answering every email.

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As told to Scarlett Harris, 2174 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Focus](#), [Time management](#), [Income](#).

I read your [newsletter](#) and I know this year has been full-on with the publication of two books [*1000 Words* and *A Reason to See You Again*]. How do you manage to take time for yourself and your work during busy periods like this?

I find it a lot easier when I'm traveling to work on newsletter-related stuff than to work on my new novel. So I just kind of lean into whatever is calling to me or is available to me. When I'm traveling and doing readings and Q&As, and also teaching workshops, so much of the conversation is about process and creativity, either my process or process in general. I end up getting really inspired and taking notes and getting ideas for newsletters from that, more than I'm going to get ideas for my novel, because I'm talking about a different novel. I'm still living in that world, in that universe. That said, I am still looking at my [new] novel every day and thinking about it every day, and I usually get one or two ideas when I go on walks. I try to take walks every day if I can when I'm on tour, just to clear my head.

Why do you think it's important to share with your newsletter readers—presumably many, if not most, of whom are writers themselves—your weekly practice?

I'm only sharing parts of myself. I have really specific boundaries and things that I'm willing to talk about, so I'm kind of hitting the same notes. I don't think it's boring, and I don't think it's repetitive, but there are specific themes and parts of my life that I'm discussing. I'm not going to presume that everybody reading the newsletter is necessarily interested in [being a published author nor] what the life of a published author is like, but it is the life that I have and the one that I'm able to share. And hopefully it's a little bit interesting.

What do you say to people who enjoy writing for the craft of it and don't have any aspirations to make it their work?

I think it's the same concern. Everybody has the same concerns if they're trying to write a book, which are, "How do I stay focused? How do I get rid of distractions? How do I stay inspired? How do I gather and sustain momentum to get me to the end?" I could go on and on. But the challenges are the same for everybody in order to get across that finish line. My newsletter isn't a newsletter about getting published, it's just a newsletter about writing.

How do you decide what to keep private?

I come from a place of experience of oversharing. We called it online journals then, in 1998, and I was definitely an over-sharer. Also, nobody was reading me. Nobody was reading the internet, and it was just the wild west. But at some point, you learn that people are reading it. So once I started publishing books and started getting interviewed, I probably started to straighten up my act a little bit.

I started writing a memoir, so I started looking at all the things that I had shared, all these [events] from my past that I had carved into stories. I had a giant Word document that had every essay I'd ever written, ever published. I had to decide which things I wanted to bring to the forefront and which things I didn't. I was becoming more thoughtful about it. I had a moment where I started to think, "I've got to figure out what my boundaries are. I really have to stick to them." I give that advice all the time because sometimes people don't ever have that conversation with themselves. Often we're just like, "It's instinctual. It's fun. It's organic. It's playful. It's wild. It's free. Who's paying attention? How can I get attention?"

You recently posted about "working smarter." What does that mean to you?

For me, [working smarter means] figuring out what I need to do and figuring out the least amount of time it takes to do it. I don't have to answer every email that's sent to me. I appreciate that people send me emails, but I don't have to respond to them. Not sitting at a desk any longer than I need to sit at the desk just because I feel like I should sit at the desk. Really trusting myself to know when I've done a good day's work. And I think a really important thing about working smarter is always leaving something for yourself in the morning so there's always momentum.

Are you ever worried about actually losing that momentum? Like, "Oh, yeah, I've got this great idea, I'm going to leave that for tomorrow," and then you pull up to the desk and you've forgotten.

No, I'll write down just enough that I'm like, "Okay, this is what I meant." A sentence or two. I feel like I know what I'm doing. This is not going to sound good, but I just have been [writing] for so long, so I know my patterns and I know my rhythms, and I trust myself. I leave myself with an idea that I'm really excited to tackle in the morning, and then I often am thinking about it anyway. It's sort of still in my brain and I'm sleeping on it, and when I wake up, it feels very full and rich and a little bit more developed because I've let it simmer.

No, it doesn't sound bad. If you can't trust yourself, who can you trust?

It's part of my skill set that I'm a productive person. There are people out there who just are not productive, or they're going to take 10 years to write their book and that's one part of their skillset, but they don't have that other part of it. But they hopefully know how valuable the skills that they have are. I know that this is one of my valuable skills: that I can be productive and hopefully inspire other people to be productive, too.

Part of how you're inspiring others is through your 1000 Words newsletter that is now a book. How did it eventuate and when did you decide to turn it into a book?

I had been using 1,000 words as a marker of a good day since I wrote my first book. I was working on *All This Could Be Yours*, my seventh novel, in 2018, and I kind of needed to get to the end of it. I was talking with a friend of mine who was trying to put together a book proposal, and she was a high school teacher so her most productive times were in the summer. It was just about her summer vacation, we were sitting having a drink, and we just decided, "Let's do 1,000 words a day for two weeks straight, like a little mini boot camp." I tweeted that I was going to write 1,000 words a day for two weeks and maybe 200 people replied, "Oh, I want to do it, too." I created a newsletter—not Substack, something else—but it maxed out at 5,000 people. It was just a place I could send people emails from. I asked writer friends to write little notes within the emails. There was no big plan. There was no, "Seven years from now, this is going to be a book that I'll go on tour for."

By the end of the first year, we had 2,000 people signed up. The following year, 5,000. Every year, it just kept growing. And 2020 was when so many people were at home and it blew up in a different kind of way. Now about 47,000 people are signed up for the mailing list. I would say between 32,000 and 35,000 people will read each letter, something like that. It's a pretty good readership. The actual 1,000 Words of Summer, it's impossible to say how many people do it. There are people who do it who aren't signed up for the newsletter, who literally have just heard of a thing called 1,000 Words of Summer, and they just do that. There's also people who do 1,000 Words of Summer all the time, who'll restart it and get the letters.

What if someone can't write 1000 words a day? Because there are other elements to writing other than sitting down

and actually putting pen to paper or fingers to keyboard.

1,000 words is really a metaphor. 1,000 words is what works for me. I make my living as a writer. I have deadlines to meet. I have schedules. I need a really specific structure, and that number makes me feel comfortable. It doesn't make sense if you're a poet or a screenwriter or a science writer. 1,000 words is a good day's work. That said, there are plenty of people who have full-time jobs or who are caregivers or just have things in their life. And to them, I would say, "Can you find an hour to write? Can you write 200 words and do that every day? Or do that five days a week, or make a commitment to show up for yourself regularly? Whatever you're capable of, however fast you write, however much time you have, can you carve out a spot in your life that is specifically for your creative practice, whatever that means?" It's not just about being a writer. There are people from other creative practices who are reading 1,000 Words and getting something out of it. It can be about being really specific about the numbers and the word count and creating deadlines and systems for yourself, but it can also just be about showing up for yourself every day.

How did you manage to make writing your main job?

I just was really passionate about it. I worked in advertising. I worked in copywriting. I did some freelance writing for magazines and newspapers and things like that when it sort of still made sense to do that, where you were making money off of it. Sometimes there were smaller book projects. I wrote a pop-up book once, and I would do city guides. I would go and do copywriting, and I would save up a little bit so that I could take a couple months off to just sit and write. Or I would sublet my apartment in New York, and then I would go house sit for somebody somewhere and have a couple of months. That was after I'd published three books. I just kind of kept scraping along, but there was no hidden source of income. In fact, I was very badly in credit card debt. I really don't recommend this career to anyone, to be honest with you. Unless you can't shake it. Unless you're just like, "I'm so hooked on writing and I have so much I have to say, and I'll just do whatever it takes to make it happen." It requires so much work, indulgence, and focus.

Where do you get your ideas?

Everywhere. I always remain curious. Listening to people, paying attention, being out in the world, knowing what I need to fill the well, recognizing those moments—that's how I access those ideas. I write a lot about where I live, or have lived.

You live in New Orleans now. What's it like living in a place that's so vulnerable to climate change? Does that come up for you in your work?

I'm just starting to write about it now in my new novel. Not specifically about [climate change], but [New Orleans] is a crumbling city. It is a beautiful, magical, flawed, crumbling city that I love deeply. It's a city that's like nowhere else, but it's also an American city. You can use crumbling as an apt descriptor for many things about America, and also many things about being a person and getting older and being in the literary world or being in the media world, and all those things feel to me like they're shifting rapidly. So it's just a question of how I'm going to connect those dots in fiction.

Do you ever get burnt out?

When I said earlier, "I created these boundaries," it was part of a bigger plan and putting bigger systems into place. Knowing that the vision wasn't going to necessarily hold steady forever, but putting a plan into place. I just try to be really responsible. Everything feels really small to me. The form of writing a letter feels very small and intimate to me. I like it that way, and I feel really comfortable about that.

Jami Attenberg recommends:

Good Girl by Aria Aber

Two-Step Devil by Jamie Quatro

Mother Doll by Katya Apekina

Let Us Descend by Jesmyn Ward

Janet Planet

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