

On writing as work



GQ staff writer Zach Baron discusses embracing deadlines, discovering what time of day you're most productive, fake work, and why doing an interview is not about making a new friend.

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3256 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Time management](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Day jobs](#).

You write long features on famous people—sports heroes, celebrities. It's writing that often takes several meetings with the subject, and not something you can really rush. Do you find it stressful to always be under deadline?

I find the opposite. I have existential crises when I'm not on deadline. I find deadlines reassuring, and I think part of that is because I have a process that I'm pretty familiar with, and that's pretty reliable. I know that if I do X, Y, and Z, it's going to get done. And I know exactly how long X, Y, and Z takes. So, I basically line that up against the deadline. And, I'm not a person to brag about my writing, but I don't think I've ever missed a deadline, in however many years of professional writing.

GQ is based in NYC, but you work from your home in L.A. What's a day like for you? Do you have rituals that you need to do? You said you knew exactly how long things take to do and you haven't missed a deadline—did you have to get things in some specific order to reach that point? Do you ever find yourself falling out of that rhythm?

If I don't have a deadline, yeah, it can be kind of existential crisis-y, because I do just work in my house. If I'm between things, or waiting for something to happen, it can get real quiet, and the hours can get really long. But, because of my routine, I know that, for instance, I write in the morning. This is a blessing and a curse. If I just wake up, somewhere between 5AM and 7AM, I am entirely capable, pretty much any day, of writing 600 to 1,200 words.

If I just get up and get to a desk, that will happen. And that's a blessing, because I know if I show up, that will happen. The downside: A lot of people can multitask and work throughout the day, but there is only one time of day I can write, and it's the morning. So, if for whatever reason I have to do something else, or if I have a lot of writing to do, I'm still just going to write the 600 to 1,200 words, and then it's over for the day. That happens around 11AM or 12PM, and then it's just a wrap on writing.

Now, there are plenty of other things that writers do. I research subjects, I can do reporting, I can call people, I can read up on stuff. I can respond to emails. I just can't write. So, if I keep the routine, everything goes well. If I don't, then I have no prayer of getting anything done.

Why do you think that is? Is it just a thing where your mind has to be perfectly fresh, or something about the lighting in the room, or that's just the time that it works?

I write within probably a half hour of waking up, and I think it's because my mind isn't really there yet. Like many people, I'm intensely self-critical, with a lot of anxiety and self-consciousness. I find that in the morning my brain hasn't really powered that bad energy up yet, so I can just work without judging myself and without second-guessing myself. It's almost like this reptile brain takes over, and what happens a few hours in is that all of a sudden, I can feel this kind of self-hatred and self-doubt set in. Then, all the sentences start getting really bad, and that's kind of when I know I'm done.

During the time in the morning when you're writing, do you block out social media? Does it feel like a race against time before all the anxiety sets in?

Yeah, yeah, very much so. Especially being on the West Coast, where so much gets going before you wake up, I've really had to learn to maybe look at email once, and then shut it out, and ditto for social media. I think that in some ways I've learned to look blankly at Twitter, between paragraphs or something, because I think all of us do. I'm not super precious about work, and I find some of those apps, where you shut down everything, to be kind of ridiculous. Writing is work; it's like any other day job, and so I don't need a shrine or a temple or a sensory deprivation tank. But it is true that I can't allow myself to get sucked into reading Twitter for 45 minutes, or even really responding to emails before I do the writing stuff.

The creative work you do is a job—you can't sit around looking at the sky waiting for inspiration; you have to sit down and grind it out. Do you have plans to write a book, or write something outside of your usual schedule? If so, does your approach shift when you're less under deadline? Is there a different psychological attachment to the words?

I think it's really all the same. I have some more creative projects going, which are limited by what I said, which is like, [laughs] I can only write at one time during the day, and I tend to be pretty busy with my day job, so those mornings are at a premium, and I don't always have a ton of them. But I get really impatient with writers who act like tortured artists. I just don't see it, you know? [laughs] I feel that in professional ways, too, where folks are filing stories two weeks late, and part of it's in an email, and part of it's on a napkin. I've just never related to any of that at all.

Creatively, too, it's funny—I was just reading the new J.K. Rowling mystery, the Robert Galbraith series. The book is like 800 pages long. It's not actually 800 pages long—but it's long. It's very clear that the way that book was written was she showed up and wrote 2,000 words every day. Everybody has whatever their word count is, but I think even really creative people, novel writers, screenwriters, whatever, they just go to work every day. I have a friend who has published a bunch of books, and has been pretty successful at it. And I remember he once said to me that the difference between him and everybody in coffee shops who are trying to be him, is he just finishes what he starts.

In office environments, you have programs like Slack, these things that are supposedly making work more efficient; but Slack becomes this form of social media for procrastination. If you just sit down and actually do the thing, you don't need to talk so much about what you're doing.

Right. Slack is like this, and social media's like this—there can be tangible benefits that accrue through doing it and being good at it, whether it's respect in your workplace in the case of Slack, or the advancement of your "personal brand" in the case of Twitter or social media. These things are, by the way, not valueless—they're real things, that at some point can actually translate into opportunities or dollars.

But all that said, I'm generally of the opinion that it's like fake work, and it's about building a brand, rather than actually putting new things out in the world. I just tend to be more interested in folks who put new things out in the world, rather than people who are constantly refining, for lack of a better word, a brand. Which is what Twitter looks a lot like to me.

You're not someone who tweets a lot. And, you write what you write for GQ, but I don't see a lot of other things of yours popping up at different places. Is this all part of keeping your prioritized work moving along? Is it almost a necessity, where if you do start getting into all these other different areas, you're wasting the moment where you can actually make something?

Yeah, I just try to line up work, you know? And I'm on staff at GQ, so a lot of that is just figuring out what story I'm writing next, and then ideally figuring out the story I'm writing after that. When it's going really well, I'm sort of doing edits on one story while reporting the next one, and it's like I'm constantly advancing through stories that I have lined up. And then, I have these creative projects that, in the gaps, I tend to work on, and they go slowly, because they only get worked on in the gaps.

But, I generally am at a desk writing something, or preparing to write something. If you're gonna go interview somebody or whatever, there's a form of prep to that, too. But you know,

five, six days a week, and often seven, which is not like a brag, it's just more like, I agree with you. The goal is to eliminate distractions, and just be engaged in projects that are slightly more substantial, and slightly more long-term than a tweet.

When you're writing, do you have any tendencies or formulas you need to work against?

A huge part of my work is writing profiles of creative people, and that work can get really formulaic. It's that sort of classic structure, where the second section of the piece is always the person's biography, and what their childhood was like. There's absolutely a form with profiles that is sort of universal, and it's always changing a bit, but yeah, that's the thing you're always pushing against. Especially if you've written five in a row.

Earlier on at GQ, I really tried to subvert that every way I could. I wrote a profile of 50 Cent where I basically just asked him to be my life coach, and a lot of the piece was about me and my then girlfriend, and my interactions with 50 Cent, and it was basically just like, "I want to find a way to write about this person that isn't a straight profile."

I still try to play with the form when I can, but I also think that maybe as I've gotten older, I've gotten more respect for people's stories, and people's narratives, and their right to get as fair and thorough a hearing as they can. So I don't want to be the kind of person who's like, "I have a really good idea to break the mold here, and I'm just gonna riff and play jokes and pranks and run circles around you." That's not always super fair to the person you're writing about. I'm always trying to balance my respect for the subject with my the desire to break the form, and try to find new ways of telling people's stories.

How do you edit your own work? Do you edit as you're going along, or do you get a draft done and then hand it over to your editor to see where it goes from there?

In the same way that I'm rigid about my routine, I'm very rigid about how editing works. I like to start at the top. I can't write the fourth section before I write the first. I basically have to write it in order, and I can't really do rough drafts. I have to like the first section, and the shape it's in before I move to the second one. So basically, everyday I just start at the top, and go down, and hopefully I get further and further down every day. But I generally can't start in the middle, or be like, "Eh, that section's a little wonky, but I'll get back to it." I kind of need to shore it up, and edit it, and polish it as I go along. And then you give it to an editor, and you start all over again.

If you're assigned a feature, or you're asked to do a feature, and it's someone whose work you're not that interested in, are you able to still do it? Is it one of those things where you can always find something interesting about them?

Yeah. I really have a straight-up day job, and it's a great day job. But I'm the staff writer of the magazine, and there are times where they're just like, "Hey, can you go write about this person?"

In general, it would be my failure, not theirs, if I couldn't find something interesting about a person. I think that's true about everyone. I think it's, in particular, true about people that GQ would write about, where they're notable in some way. I don't really care about Post Malone, for example, but a lot of people do, and it would be my fault, not his or theirs, if I couldn't figure that out.

What are some of your favorite words? Or words you find yourself using a lot?

The word "weird" probably shows up in everything I write, because it's just a quality I like most in people, and in art. So, I tend to see it everywhere, and use it accordingly.

You interview people in Hollywood and people who exist in the entertainment industry. Has #metoo changed the way you think about writing a piece? More and more, it's like, "Wow, everyone is potentially a creep," and you may very well be writing about one of them without knowing it.

Reporting on the celebrity industrial complex is really hard, because it's a very privileged space, it's a very restricted space, it's a very protected space, and even when you're allowed access to people, you're allowed access to people for a fixed amount of time, and you're often not allowed access at all to their peers, or their coworkers. And so, you're often really working in the dark, and trying to do your own detective work.

If there's some smoke, I think maybe five years ago, or even two years ago, you might just go do that story anyway. Now I think, if you have a sense that something's off, then don't do it. For all these awful people who have been exposed, there's probably a fucking fawning profile of every single one of them published in a major magazine or newspaper, and I don't ever want to be that person.

I remember you telling me at one point someone you'd interviewed wasn't happy with your line of questioning and they pushed back. Do you find that a lot of the people you interview are used to puff pieces, and if you do try to dig a little bit deeper, it ends up becoming a stressful or complicated scenario?

Yeah, very often. That's what happens. Again, that's because they're shielded, and they're protected, and also because frankly, a lot of people that show up in front of them as interviewers are fans, basically. And so this notion of a deeper inquiry strikes some people, in particular celebrities, as strange or invasive. But, I've always thought that friction and tension is useful. Like on reality shows, you're not really there to make friends. You're there to create something that hopefully says something true about them, and that also works as something that people who are interested in them want to read.

But that doesn't really mean coddling them, or being their friend, or even being particularly nice. It's really: How do you get someone to tell the truth about themselves? Some people will just sit there in front of you and bare their soul, but then other people will reveal themselves in their angry responses to your questions. Either way is fine. I don't really have a preference. It's just technique. Some people need this, and some people need that, and I'm not there to forge a bond exactly; I'm there to find out stuff about a person that wasn't previously known.

I think a big currency on the internet has always been enthusiasm. And good vibes, right? So that's actually influenced the work. A lot of criticism has become advocacy and not criticism. In profiles, it's kind of the same way. It's like, "Tilda Swinton is perfect." Although, to be fair, Tilda Swinton is perfect. But she's kind of the only one. [laughs]

Nuanced writing doesn't really tend to translate into page views, likes, or general interest as much as over-the-top enthusiasm or, occasionally, a total evisceration does. Those are the two things that tend to get people's reaction. There's a reason BuzzFeed got built on the cute animals that'll fix your Tuesday. There's a part of the reptile brain that the internet is targeting. I think a lot of writers and critics have internalized that, and that's the language they speak.

If someone were to write a profile of you, who would you want to write it?

A writer I really respect, who writes sometimes for GQ and has a book out now, Jeanne Marie Laskas. She does this amazing thing that I could never do, which is that she basically—and, Jeanne Marie, forgive me if I have some of these details wrong—but she basically doesn't research the subject before she shows up, and just kind of writes about people as if she's encountering them for the first time. She does this for coal miners, and she does it for Tom Cruise.

The famous Jeanne Marie story—it may be in a Tom Cruise profile that she wrote around *Days of Thunder*—is that she goes to a racetrack, where she's supposed to meet Tom Cruise, and there's this short handsome guy at the track, and she's like, "Hey, I'm looking for Tom Cruise, is he here yet?" And of course, she's talking to Tom Cruise. She didn't even know what he looked like.

I think that I would be most interested in that kind of interview, with someone just coming up to me and being like, "You're basically an extraterrestrial, let's describe you front to back," because I would learn the most about myself that way. And inevitably, I could avoid the many profilers who I respect, who ask a million difficult questions that I would just be squirming trying to answer.

Five (Extremely Arbitrary, Subjective) Rules for Interviewing People by Zach Baron:

Ask follow-ups: Nobody gets it right the first time. Most people are deliberately trying not to get it right the first time. Listen and ask again.

Read/listen/watch everything: That's the basic starting point if you're going to ever try to say anything meaningful about someone.

Interviews are not conversations: We learn early on to avoid friction and awkwardness and to pretend to understand, even when we don't, in our interactions with strangers. As we should! But friction and awkwardness tend to be pretty revealing. You don't need a lifelong friend at the end of an interview. You just need good answers.

Never go off the record: Are you solving the assassination of JFK? No? Then there is no reason to ever do this. 99% of the time they'll just go on to tell you whatever it is on the record anyway.

Respect your subject and listen: If you already know what you're going to write before talking to a person, then you're just wasting their time.

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