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# How to write a book with a full-time job

*Tips for making time to develop and complete your first book project while holding down a 9-5 hustle, by Jean Hannah Edelstein.*

My first grown-up job was as the assistant to a literary agent. I didn't write a book while I worked there, but I did learn the important lesson that most authors, even well-known authors, don't actually make enough money writing their books for it to be their full-time job.

Some writers have more success than others at making books their central source of income, and some piece together a living with additional freelance work, the support of a partner, or a trust fund. But many have a full-time job doing something other than writing—often, a full-time job that they don't talk about. Why? Is it because people think that you're more of a "real" writer if you only write to make your living? I think this can be damaging, or at least dispiriting, to aspiring authors who are 9-5ing it with the assumption that their published peers are focused only on writing, and therefore are more serious, or more accomplished than they are.

I'd love to see more authors be radically honest about how they earn a living, and how they write while earning that living. I'll go first. My name is Jean Hannah Edelstein, I'm an author, and I also work as a marketer for tech companies. Let me tell you about how you can do it, too.

— JHE



## Step 1: Find an achievable day job

By “achievable” I mean a job that you can complete well within official working hours. A job that is interesting enough and that you can be good at, but not a job that you need to be too good at—because that’s when it may start eating away at the time and energy you need to write. The ideal job to have while writing a book is one in which you’re a little bit underemployed. I say “a little bit” for a reason—being bored out of your mind for 40+ hours a week is pretty depressing, and being pretty depressed is not a great state of mind to be in when you’re trying to be creative (or at least, it isn’t for me). But you also don’t want to be working your very hardest in your 9-5, because that will drain the creative energy you could otherwise spend writing.

I decided that I wanted to focus on writing and selling my book to a publisher around the time that I got laid off from a high-pressure job that I didn’t like, but which nevertheless took up all my time. At that job, there was an expectation (demand, even) that I should be putting in time on the weekends, and I just didn’t care enough about the end goal to do that. My real goal was to write a book, after all, but getting home at 8 to sit on the sofa and eat takeout soup while crying was not getting me closer to that.

Getting laid off gave me an opportunity for a reset, and I started to look for a role where I wouldn’t be stretched to my absolute limit. Instead, I hoped to find something that would permit me to have some brain power left to play with in my free time. After setting this intention for myself, I was really lucky to find an achievable job as quickly as I did. Sometimes you may have to look around for a while. And, sometimes you may want to consider doing a job that’s similar to one you did a few years ago—something you know how to do well and efficiently. Also, if you can afford it, landing an achievable job may require that you take a pay cut (mine did).

## Step 2: Learn not to raise your hand

If you’re a hardworking, ambitious person—and you are, you’re writing a book while having a full-time job—it can be hard to recalibrate your behavior so that you’re not putting yourself forward for more work, more challenges, and more advancement in your 9-5. Our current work culture tells us that we should always be working harder, faster, and stronger, but this is a great route to burnout.

It’s not possible in every job or for every person, but if you can set boundaries in terms of how much you want to develop at your day job while you’re writing your book, you’ll find that you have a lot more headspace to write. Does this mean that you may fall behind in terms of your career advancement during the time when you’re working on your book? Yes, it does. But that’s OK. That person who got that promotion you would have been qualified for is now working more hours than you are. And they’re not writing your book.

## Step 3: Set yourself up with a realistic writing project

The book that I wrote while having a full-time job was a memoir, and so when people ask me how I did it I say, "It's about me, so I didn't have to do any research!" This usually draws a laugh, but let's be honest -it's also true. I'm not saying that you have to write a memoir, but it's worth considering how you can design the book you want to write to be something that you can succeed at without having to put a ton of time into research, field work, and that sort of thing. I'm not a huge subscriber to the ol' "write what you know" chestnut in every case, but when it comes to writing a book without a whole lot of time to do it, writing something that you know about is a pretty handy approach. Then, if your book succeeds, maybe you can spend less time working a 9-5, and more time researching and planning for your next book project.

...But on that note, don't write a book because you think you'll be able to quit your day job when you publish it.

Not that many people can do it! That's OK. But if you see your book primarily as your ticket out of your 9-5, you may be setting yourself up for disappointment. Instead, try to focus on other measures of success: finishing the book, finding a publisher, getting your book into the hands of people who will really love and appreciate it. If you achieve some financial success, too, that's a fantastic bonus.

#### Step 4: Think and write everywhere, and whenever you can

Lots of writers endorse rigid writing regimes that involve writing every morning for two hours and so forth, and if that's your jam, go for it. It's not my jam. Because I had an achievable job, I did a lot of thinking about my book when I was knocking out marketing emails in the office, and I wrote a lot of it in the Notes app on my phone when I was going to and from work. I also wrote a lot in the evenings when I got home from work, maybe an hour or so every night, which was possible to do because my brain still felt pretty sparky after a day at the office.

And, look, I'm not going to tell you to work on your book when you're on the clock at your achievable job, but I'm not going to tell you not to do that, either. It's your life! It's really very convenient how Google Docs means that you can have your creative work available whenever you're at a laptop, or even on your phone, with a bit of downtime. Any time you find yourself thinking about your book, take that as a sign that your brain feels invested in writing and leverage it: pull that phone or laptop out and write.

#### Step 5: Find friends at your achievable job who are interested in your book project

This is a tricky one, because you may work in an environment where it's Not Cool to have interests outside of the company. It won't always happen, but if you can figure out who the other creative people are at your company who you can chat with about what you're working on, you'll feel a little less isolated when you're sitting through meetings wishing that you could be working on your book. While I was writing my book I was lucky to have a manager who asked me about it every time we had a 1:1 meeting. He was very kind, and this is not standard. But being able to share your progress on the work you care about most with someone at your achievable job can definitely make the workday feel lighter.

#### Step 6: Find a writing group

Working on a book-length project can be lonely, and the loneliness can be compounded if you're spending your work weeks surrounded by people who aren't writers. Forming a writing group with three other writers who lived near me was crucial-not just because I got feedback from them on chapters as I went along, but because it served as a regular reminder that though I was a security-pass-carrying member of the corporate world, I was a member of the writing world as well.

You don't have to be friends with other writers to find a group—in fact, I think it's often good to not be friends with the people you workshop with. I met the founding member of my writing group on Twitter because we were enjoying each other's work, and it grew from there as we started getting together, and a couple more women joined. We're all close pals now, but in the beginning writing was the only thing that we had in common, which meant that we were really focused on the work and not afraid to give honest feedback.

## Step 7: Set short-term goals

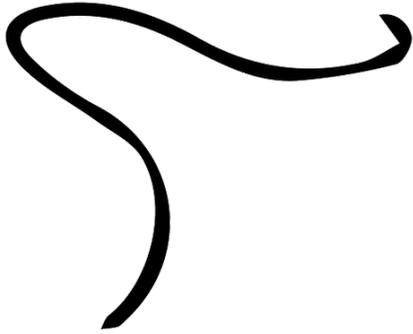
Or as I like to say: write in chunks. Sitting down to write a whole book is frankly terrifying; nothing makes me want to watch television and eat toast so much as facing down a goal of that size. But sitting down to write, say, 1000 words—you can do that. The writing group is helpful here, too. My group meets once a month and that meant that every month I set myself a goal of what I wanted to have ready to share—usually a chapter, sometimes just a few pages. These short bursts of momentum kept me going through to the end. A book is a marathon, but if you're busy (and you are, you have a full-time job) it can be far easier to write if you turn it into a series of short sprints.

## Step 8: Go on a DIY writing retreat

If you're lucky enough to get some paid vacation days with your full-time job, and you don't have other obligations, try to use them for your writing. My full-time job meant that I could not apply to the vast majority of writing fellowships because they had residency duration requirements that were longer than the amount of time I was able to be out of the office at once. But it did mean that I could afford to take a week out of town to do some focused writing in a very small rental that I think used to be someone's garden shed. Anyway, it was a productive time and I got as much pleasure from that as I would have going on an actual vacation.

And finally...

Back up your drafts somewhere other than your work computer. Juuuust in case.



Name

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Vocation

Writer

Fact

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