

On finding new ways to manage your time



Writer Delia Cai discusses treating your creative time as billable, allowing yourself to be humbled, and embracing deadlines.

March 3, 2023 -

As told to Kristen Felicetti, 3191 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Time management](#), [Collaboration](#), [Process](#).

You have a day job as a senior correspondent at *Vanity Fair*, you wrote your debut novel *Central Places*, you're doing promotion for that novel, you have a social life and go out to literary and media events in New York, and you also watch shows/films/read books while probably having to write about that same media for work too. So my first question is: How do you balance your time to do all this? Do you just never sleep or do you have a secret app to manage your time?

Oh my god. I don't feel like I'm balancing it. I feel like I am constantly behind on everything. But this is what everyone's answer is, right? I will say one hack is that I didn't write the book at all when I had my writing job at *Vanity Fair*. I wrote it all before I got this job. And that, I think, made a huge difference. I can't really imagine writing during the day and then also writing on the side. Who has that many words in their head? Nobody.

But it's a great question and it's one I ask myself every day, honestly. I do feel like I'm never doing enough of any one thing. I put everything on my Google Calendar, even doing laundry. I've realized that any task, if I let it, will take me all day, unless I set a little box on my Google Calendar, or even set a timer. Sometimes when I have to buckle down and write something for work, I'll set a timer for two hours and be like, "Okay, this way you know you can get in the zone and concentrate and the minute that this is over, then you can check your phone or watch TV or go for a walk or whatever."

And I think that helps. In some ways it makes me feel a little bit psycho that I program things so much in that way, but otherwise it would take me forever to do anything. I think being ruthlessly compartmental about things is helpful.

You referenced that process in your five recommended things below—pretending to bill your own time for writing your novel. I can see how that would work for writing sprints or setting a goal of X amount of words a day. But what about revision? I was curious about your revision process for this book.

In terms of revisions, I scheduled out these almost, like, semesters. Can you tell that I really enjoyed the structure of a school semester? It was usually two months on, one month off. And so for each two month semester, I would make a bullet point list of things I wanted to fix, or things I wanted to look at, or even questions I wanted to answer.

I did a round of edits on my own, a round of edits with my agents before we sent it out, and then there's obviously the round of edits with my editor. Each time I was focused on structural things first. I think the structural stuff was almost more straightforward because it would literally be something like, "There's not a lot of background on this character." And so then I'd go in and see, "Oh, maybe it's just this one chapter that needs

to be looked at over the course of two months." And then I would make a to-do list of other things. And then at the end of fixing all these almost different parts of the car, we'd go in and do this total body scan. We'd read through the whole thing and have another little to-do checklist. So, it's sort of constantly looking at the list, reading a few pages, looking at the list, and trying to do a more comprehensive edit that way.

But throughout all of it, I was still thinking, "Okay, so if we're doing a round of edits for the next two months, the goal is going to be roughly 10 hours a week, so that's 80 hours." And I was looking at the number of tasks that I had and breaking that down by, "I'm going to spend this many hours on this task." And so I think that helps me not be too precious or too perfectionist, because I'd be like, "Well, I told myself I'd spend 10 hours making this character more likable and that's done, and so I can cross that off."

Because it's so weird, it's hard to quantify an edit to yourself. Otherwise I feel like I noodled around on it for a while, but is it good enough? Does it work? And then in that case, having agents or an editor to bounce it off with is really useful because sometimes they'll be like, "Oh, no, can you do a little bit more?" So I guess I think of everything in terms of hours spent. Then that way I can sleep at night and be like, "Well, I did what I could. I fulfilled that contract with myself."

Otherwise it feels like it can just go on forever.

Right? You would never stop editing.

Central Places is a novel, but I think it's safe to say it's written from a personal place. The book's dedication is even, "For my mother and father, of course." Was there any point that you felt anxious writing it or anxious about anybody in particular reading it?

Oh yeah. I started writing this novel after I went home for Thanksgiving one year. It was the last normal Thanksgiving before the pandemic. And on that trip, I spent time with friends and I had a series of encounters that made me rethink a lot of the stories I was telling myself/my friends in New York about the place that I was from. Or about the fact that I'm not super close with anyone from my hometown anymore. At the time I had lived in New York for five years and so I was kind of like, "Okay, you have this script that you have when you're living your life here. You also have a script when you go home and you run into people (about your life in New York)." And I think in some ways the spark for the novel is: isn't it interesting that you have these scripts and not that they're not true, but they're not telling the whole story.

So I would say that there are people, especially from my hometown, who provided a lot of inspiration for the novel and for its characters. And they don't know anything about it. I haven't spoken to them, so that should be interesting. But also I think writing about family stuff, it can be really tricky. I used to always go to author's readings and loved the question whenever they were asked, "How much of this is real?" And it always made me laugh when people would act like, "How could you say this? It's totally made up." There's an investment in kind of pretending that this is totally made up and just a figment of the imagination. I think as a reader figuring out what you think is probably true and what is made up is half of the fun sometimes.

And so I had a chat with my parents, I think when this book was probably halfway through, where I was sort of, "I wrote a novel about a fictional character and a fictional family, but of course so many of my feelings and my experiences are informing it." And that was, I think, a good conversation to have because it helped me also figure out this responsibility of—you don't ever want to tell someone else's story. But I think the really beautiful thing about fiction is that you have creative license to work out your own understanding of things. How public you want to be about them is up to you and maybe part of the fun.

Have they read the book now?

Yeah. So they both read it. I sent them an early draft I think around this time last year. We actually haven't talked about it that much, but my dad was really sweet and he asked me, "Well, how do you know to foreshadow things like that?" And I was like, "Oh, no, you go backwards and you just put it in later." And he's like, "Oh, okay." A great question to have. He's an engineer. I mean, both my parents are engineers, so it was funny to me

that that structural question was interesting to him.

That's an engineer's question for sure. Well, we're going to move to the social media section of this interview. You've had multiple viral tweets. What has that experience been like?

Oh my god, it's so useless, honestly. In some ways it's nice, because when something sort of hits whatever magic combination of internet points, whenever that happens, and then it pops up in random places, I'll hear from friends I haven't talked to since college or whatever. I think once I was getting my hair done and my hairdresser was like, "I think I saw one of your tweets this weekend." And so that's just really funny.

But I always tell people, when something like that happens, you get some new followers, but not that many. Nothing really happens other than you feel a little bit buzzy about it for maybe an hour and then you're sort of like, "Oh, that's it." Yeah, it's kind of an anti-climactic thing.

I also tell people that sometimes I'm bummed out because the tweets that I think are actually funny go nowhere. It's like you have your commercial hits and then you have your indie passion project and it's always the commercial hits that everyone really likes and you're like, "Wait, but I have this other genius one that no one cares about!" That's sort of a weird mismatch, but it doesn't change your life at all.

Well, speaking of Twitter, its future is kind of unknown for obvious reasons. How are you feeling about it as someone who has spent a lot of time on there and it has probably been a place where you've grown your audience a little bit?

Oh yeah. I get oh so much of everything in my professional life from Twitter. Just in terms of making connections, meeting people both online and in real life, or almost looking at it as this *Mean Girls* cafeteria seating chart of, okay, this person's here, these people don't like this person. I didn't have a liberal arts education, I went to journalism school, and so it helped me figure out how to even evaluate, is this article or is this interview good? Or this book or whatever. So I think I'm kind of in denial. Half the time I spend way too much time on Twitter and it has come at an expense, I think, of real world connection for sure.

I still remember once, I was talking to a good friend where I was like, "I'm having a really hard time dating." I was complaining and she just said, unthinkingly, with no malice in her heart, "But you have so many followers." And I was like, whoa. It's crazy to realize, but that has no bearing on how connected I actually feel in my real life. And I think a lot of people assume it's equal—if you have this, you have that. And it's like, oh, no, definitely not. But overall, I'm in denial. If Twitter really disappeared tonight, I don't know what I would do.

I'm curious about one thing you said, about Twitter helping you evaluate whether a certain article was good or not. Do you mean something that you wrote or something that was out there in the world?

Oh, yeah, the latter. I think the best parts of Twitter, especially when you're starting out, is figuring out how different parts of the internet, but especially the media industry, evaluate things. What quotes get people really excited? What anecdotes or bits make something memorable? What makes a Caity Weaver profile a Caity Weaver profile versus a Taffy Brodesser-Akner profile? They don't teach you that in J school, and that's so specific, but it helps you understand what is valued and what stands out. And it helps you figure out, okay, what kind of work do I want to do? Who do I look up to?

You've interviewed a lot of people, from your friends for your newsletter to very famous people for *Vanity Fair*. Do you have any advice on how to do a good interview?

Ooh, good question. I'm trying to think of an answer that isn't boring. Like, just trying to learn everything you can about them. Okay, here's maybe a good answer: whether you're a movie star or someone on the internet making things, I think at this point in social media, everyone knows that there's this public self and a public perception of who they are, and this gap between that and how they probably feel about themselves. And I'm so interested in that gap. So, many of my opening/favorite questions are, "How do you feel about people thinking

this?" Or, "What is your relationship like to this poem or this song or this book that came out maybe a while ago and it's a big hit and it's brought you all this fame?" I love asking people in general how they feel about whatever degree of fame they may have or their reputation.

And it's interesting because so often it's something they're so clearly working out for themselves, but without fail they talk about this gap. Nobody's like, "Oh, the way you see me online or on *SNL* or on a podcast, that is exactly who I am." And so it's interesting that we have all this media, all these ways to present ourselves, and nothing is as close to just sitting across a table from someone and being like, "Yeah, it's really cold. How long you been living in New York?" That's still a totally different way of perceiving them. It's kind of an interesting problem or dilemma that none of us are ever fully perceiving each other.

Anything else you want to add or talk about?

It's funny, I'm thinking of your first question compared to this last question, where you're asking me, "How do you do all this stuff? Because from the outside it looks like you're doing so much stuff." And I'm just like, "Dude, from the inside it doesn't feel like anything." Or not that it doesn't feel like anything, but from the inside it feels like I am barely keeping up in this race and I don't feel like I'm out there killing it, going to all these fun things. I feel like I'm an animal kind of scuttling around being like, "Okay, today we have to find this nut, or today we have to build this den, or whatever." I'm mixing so many metaphors, but it is amazing even just on a level like this to sort of be like, "Oh god, is that really what it looks like?" Because deep down inside I'm like, "I'm spending too much time on my phone. I'm not doing enough of this or reading enough of this." So it's really lovely of you to say that, that it looks like everything's under control.

Delia Cai Recommends:

Pretending to bill your time: When it comes to big, amorphous tasks (like writing a book!), I find that I'm most motivated if I think of myself as a contractor with billable hours. I'll decide how many hours I can dedicate each week or month to a "job," log those hours as an event on my calendar, and then I literally set a timer—usually for 2 hour increments—and only let myself work up until the alarm goes off. Then I track these hours on a spreadsheet and decide how to adjust things for next month or whatever. It all might sound counterintuitive, but this lets me be a lot more flexible with my schedule, because I know if I'm on a roll this week and hit a few extra hours, I can take it easy next week without feeling guilty. A strict "Write every day for X amount of time" sounds like such a slog to me in comparison! Sometimes I'll schedule a "sprint" and try to hit my hours early so I can chill for a while, and you know what, it's not not like giving yourself spring break.

Journaling and conducting a monthly review: Outside of writing for a book/work, however, I do try to check in with myself via journalling on a daily basis. Usually it's a few bullet points about what I dreamed about plus the activities of the day, and on weekends I like to have a nice long talk with myself on the page about how we feel about life. Then at the end of every month, I reread the entries from that month and make a list called "Best Parts of January 2023," for example, and make a super-bullet point list of all the highlights. Whenever I do this, I usually end up with a list of 20-30 highlights of the month, which basically means that something great happened (happens?) almost every day. That always makes me change my perspective a little.

Looking at pictures of yourself as a kid: I am deep into pseudo-psychology TikTok, and you can make fun of me all you want, but one of the tips that I have found to be really lovely is to tape a photo of your younger self to a mirror and have conversations with her. Sometimes when I'm walking around doing errands or lying on the floor in yoga class, I picture her next to me. Without fail, it evokes a surge of emotion. Sometimes it's hilarity, sometimes it's compassion. Like okay. She's trying her best.

Practicing vigorously for karaoke: I only end up at karaoke maybe a few times a year, but I like to be prepared. So I have a Notes app list of highly manageable numbers (Elvis's "Burning Love" for example), and I practice in the shower. You never know when you're going to be called into service.

Trying pottery (and letting yourself get frustrated by it): I've been taking wheel-throwing classes at my neighborhood pottery studio for about a year and a half. That first year was humbling. I left so many classes feeling totally humiliated, but there is truly no better feeling than realizing however many months in that you're starting to suck less. I originally started pottery thinking I needed a hobby where I could meet people (boys); it turns out that Brooklyn pottery studios are 99% populated by other high-strung creative types who are

also having quarter life crises, too. It's always nice to find your people.

Name

Delia Cai

Vocation

writer

□

June Kim