

WHAT WRITERS NEED (more than structure or deadlines)

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Writers often attend writing classes not to learn anything but because we hope that “deadlines” and “structure” will keep us writing.

I think that what we mean when we say that we need “structure” is actually “human connection.” We need the company of other writers.

Nobody needs a class to have structure or a deadline. You can decide to structure your writing life any time you wish: you can decide that every morning, at 7am, you’ll write for thirty minutes before you go to work. That’s structure. You can decide that you must finish a script by the Sundance lab deadline. But these structures and deadlines hardly ever work, and they certainly don’t work in terms of sustaining your efforts over time. My deadline for posting this tip was Friday. It’s now Tuesday. So what!

This thing we call “structure” when we attend a class is really a euphemism for “friends”. We need people. We need allies. We need other brains who know what we’re writing about, and how it’s going, what we’re trying to figure out, or to just be there with us while we write. The reason I wrote this tip after missing the Friday deadline is not my feeling bad about missing a deadline. I managed to write this tip (by Wednesday) because I know that my friend Ekwa reads my tips every time I write one, and I have her in mind and write *for her* when I write something.

If you had a real ally who honestly cared about your work, who encouraged you, who didn’t criticize you in the guise of giving “useful feedback”, who got excited any time you made progress, who didn’t lose their patience with you – if you had an ally like that who simply sat with you while you wrote, you wouldn’t need any structure. You would take them up on the company any chance you got, scheduled or not, structured or not, deadline or no deadline, and you would make tremendous progress.

We can choose to be that for each other. We can each find a writer or a group of writers, set up some guidelines that will protect us from invalidation and remind us to encourage each other, and we can flourish by being that for one another. (I’ll write about how to set up a healthy writing group at some point.)

What makes writing so damn difficult is the isolation around it. If “structure” is what we need because we’re too embarrassed to say that we need friends, then heck, let’s call it that. (We’re all too embarrassed to say that we need friends.)

In my writing classes, I send people on “writing dates” with each other outside of class. Two writers meet somewhere to work together. This isn’t about collaborating; it’s about having company while you write. It’s amazing how much concentration and impetus you can get just from sitting down across from another person who is writing as well.

It doesn’t always work. You might still doodle and check your emails. But if you keep meeting over time, things will shift. You’ll begin to write again.

THIS WEEK’S ASSIGNMENT:

Call someone up, tell them that you’re working on a writing project (make one up if you aren’t really), and suggest that you set up a writing date. Meet at a Starbucks or a fancy hotel lobby (hotel lobbies are well lit, quiet, have no music playing, have couches, tables, outlets, and you don’t have to buy anything to sit there). Write together, each working on your own project, for an hour. See if you can set up another one. Now that you have some connection, you can introduce some *structure* to it: decide to meet every Monday evening or something like that.

If you have no idea what to write or how to even begin, read my article called “[Writing exercises to help you write badly](#)”. You may also want to read the article titled “How to Give and Receive Useful Feedback”. This article will set you on a good path towards becoming a good ally to someone and training them to be a good ally to you.

Oh yes: and make sure you have no access to the Internet while you write. If you need Internet to “research”, do your research another time, and use your writing date to actually do the writing. Internet distractions are the death of writing dates.

Feel free, in the “comments” section below, to publicize your search for a writing date. See if there are any takers!