

Finishing That Book

By Linda Rohrbough

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For me, writing a book is a lot like the prison break in *The Shawshank Redemption*. I'm crawling in a pitch-black tunnel, on my hands and knees, through the mire, for mile upon endless mile. So how do you keep going when the going gets tough? (Because it will get tough. Believe me.) Here are methods I use to get through the tunnel.

Like any difficult task, you'll need a plan. I set small goals I can manage, like a sentence a day, if necessary, but writing every day. Others set aside a week starting on a Friday night, preparing meals in advance, telling everyone they're unavailable, and turning off the phone when they're not doing other things they must do (like working the day job). Some people write every weekend. The point is, it doesn't matter how you work, but it's helpful to think of this as a mountain climb. You need to prepare and be ready to push yourself. Realistic expectations and a plan for how to keep going is critical for completion.

I also notice when I work my plan, I feel better. So when I'm reluctant, I remind myself of the positive experience I have after I write and that helps.

Another thing that helps me is to ignore my head chatter. I was talking to a professional who said he thought writing a book would be fun. But after fifty pages, the book took up residence in a desk drawer. That's pretty typical. What seemed so compelling at first now seems dreary and pathetic. In fact, I get so I don't even like the book anymore. Two years ago, I listened to New York Times best-selling author Joan Johnston talk at the PPW conference about the dialog in her head when she writes. "This is stupid. This is boring. This is too much like the last book. No one will want to read this." And so on. I found myself uplifted by knowing someone of her stature struggled with the same negative voice. So remind yourself every writer has the same head chatter, and keep going.

If ignoring my head chatter doesn't work, what I often do is give myself permission to write badly. "This is crap," my head says and I just nod. If it's bad, I remind myself, I'll fix it on the second pass. I tell myself there's nothing to improve if the page is blank and to just get the first draft down. I don't worry about editing, unless it helps me to go back a little bit to get flowing into the new material for this session. I work on moving forward.

And don't get worried if the book changes. Often, a book is an iterative process, back and forth, writing and then revising the plan. For me, that happens for about half the book, whether it's non-fiction or fiction. And that's OK. When I wrote my first non-fiction book, I thought I had to write exactly to the outline I submitted to the publisher. So I did, even though I thought it would be better another way once I got into it. Imagine my editor's surprise when he said, "We think it would be better this way," and I heartily agreed. I got lucky as I've discovered you don't usually get second chances like that. However, if you're making major changes, and you're accountable to an editor for the book, go ahead and say so and why. They'll usually agree and thank you for it.

Another helpful thing for me is I make an icon on my desktop using Notepad and give it the title of the book. When I am writing, if something comes up I feel I need to

include or research, I pop open that icon and jot it down. Then I keep writing. I go through this list a couple of times during the project and again at the end of the book. This keeps me from being up at night. What's interesting to me is I rarely end up doing very much of what's on this list. I either don't care anymore, covered whatever it was in another place, or can't even remember why I thought it was important. But, when I write it down, I can let go and focus on what's at hand.

I find it motivating to read books by other authors about the craft. My recent favorite is *Writing from the Inside Out: Transforming Your Psychological Blocks to Release the Writer Within* by Dennis Palumbo. He's a Hollywood scriptwriter turned therapist who's a wonder when it comes to motivating writers and the difficulties in this fickle and demanding business.

Now, the question that comes to my mind when I describe to someone my Shawshank experience writing a book is, "Why would do I do this to myself?" No one asks me this question. But I feel a need to answer it, even though I suspect if you're reading this, you already know. For me, it's because I can't not do it. There's something rumbling around inside that will only let loose when the words are on the page. With that in mind, let me close with this quote from *The Talmud*. "It is not your obligation to complete your work, but you are not at liberty to quit."

Sidebar-- Methods To Get Through The Tunnel:

- Have realistic expectations and a plan.
- Remind yourself how good you feel after you write.
- Ignore your head chatter.
- Give yourself permission to write badly.
- Keep a notepad handy to jot down distracting "to-do" items.
- Read books by other authors about writing.

BIO

Linda Rohrbough has been writing about the computer industry since 1989 with 5,000 articles and five books to her credit. She's received three national awards and is currently finishing a techno-thriller novel. E-mail her at Linda@PCbios.com or visit her website www.PCbios.com.