



Productivity Principles

What is productivity, and why do we care about it?
Why is it such a big thing?
Why are there so many blog posts, and books, and why am I even doing this course?

Basically, we want to get more done in less time. But the question is, get more of *what* done? This is a question we're going to keep coming back to, and probably the lesson that is most hard-won for me.

I'm someone who likes to be doing. I'm a doer. My husband is much more of a strategist. He's quite happy not to 'do.' Whereas I feel lazy if I'm not doing. But the problem with that attitude is you can spend your time doing the wrong things or things that you later decide wasn't worth doing in the first place.

“Productivity is the amount of useful output created for every hour of work we do. Did I spend my day producing enough benefit for all the time invested?”

Seth Godin, [blog post on busyness](#)

I want you to keep these ideas in the forefront of your mind as we go through this course, because maybe you're doing this course because you want to get more books written or write faster or make more of your writing time.

But the bigger issue is that finding time to write is often more to do with what else we're spending our time on.

Why is productivity so important for writers?

Let's get into the nitty-gritty of why we're here. First of all, writers write and you become a better writer by writing. Be the verb, as they say. If you have more time to write, you will become a better writer. You will write more books.



You need to fit the writing around the rest of your life, so, optimizing the time you have for writing is critical. And when I say optimizing, I'm not talking about hacking.

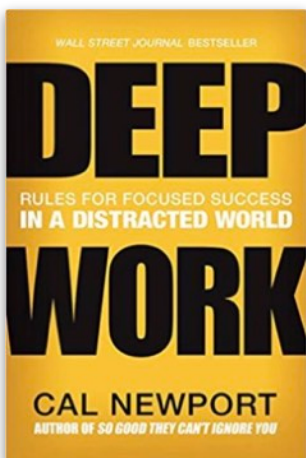
None of this mini-course will be about hacking things. It will be stuff that's sustainable and optimization in the sense of doing the best you can. Finished products in the world, i.e. books, audiobooks, print books, eBooks, things that writers produce, only happen through writing. So, **you need to be productive in order to be a successful writer**, whether that means success for you is making money, winning awards, or whatever your definition of success is, it will only happen by having books in the world.

If you want to make a living with your writing, you need a lot of books. Most writers who are making \$5K to 10K a month, will have multiple books. Many writers think that they'll write one book and make millions. I certainly thought that when I started out and now, I have 28 books and I make around six figures USD from my book sales alone. But I have certainly never had one book that has enabled me to make a living. It's a combination of all of them together. It all adds up.

The other thing is the idea of lots of little bets because many authors who are prolific end up with a couple of books that people remember, the standout books in what may be a massive backlist. For example, Isaac Asimov, multi-award winning science fiction author and also might be considered a 'pulp' writer because he wrote over 500 books. You probably could only name a couple of Asimov's books, because of the movies like *I, Robot*, for example. No one ever knows the book that's going to be successful, so you're more likely to break out or have an unexpected hit and make more money or win an award if you have more than one book.

Productivity is therefore useful whether you want to make money, or win an award, or if you want to become a better writer, which I presume you do.

There are lots of different books that talk about focusing down on what you really are interested in. [The ONE Thing: The Surprisingly Simple Truth Behind Extraordinary Results](#) by Gary Keller and Jay Papasan is really useful, or [Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less](#) by Greg McKeown.



But Cal Newport's, [Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World](#) is one that I have read a number of times. I've read the ebook, I've listened to the audiobook twice. I come back to it again and again because it has really helped me focus a lot more.

“If you don't produce, you won't thrive no matter how skilled or talented you are.”

Cal Newport, Deep Work

This will come up over and over again. It doesn't matter about 'talent' in inverted commas because I believe we can learn the skill of being a writer. But if you don't produce, you won't thrive. Creatively, but also financially and in your career. If you're not producing, you're not taken seriously as a writer.

Be self-aware.

We're not in creative brain mode in this mini-course. We are in the critical brain and we're going to be self-critical in a positive way. You need to think, 'Okay, what is really stopping me from doing some of these things that we're talking about?'

So, what is stopping you from being more productive and why? For example, 'I don't have the time to write' is probably the biggest thing I hear. 'I don't know what to do when I do have the time, so what is the best use of the time I have. I know what I have to do, but I end up procrastinating and wasting time on things that don't really matter.' Or, 'I spend too much time on things I need to do, like marketing, but never seem to have enough time to get everything done.' A lot of this is about time and, of course, I've got videos coming up on finding time and making the most of your time.



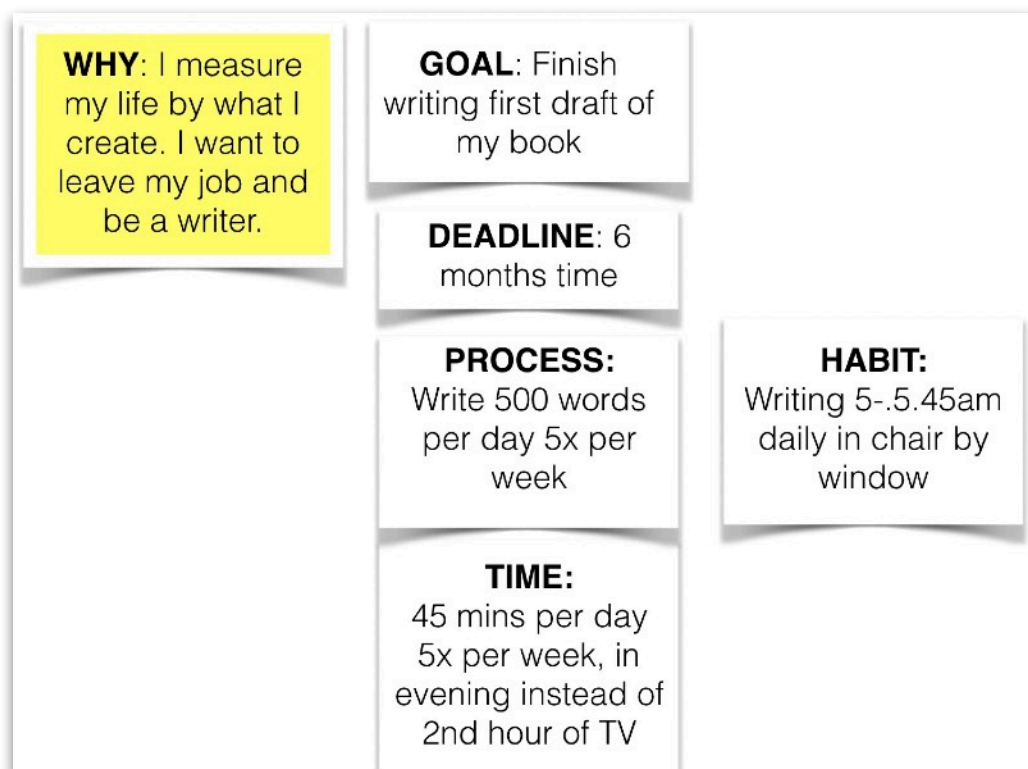
Be very honest right now. What is stopping you from being productive?

You can write these answers into the workbook which is in the download area or write it in your journal.

I almost feel like when I had a day job I was able to be more productive because I only had a small amount of time. Whereas now I'm running a business, which is a day job, basically. I often feel like, 'Why don't I have more time for the creativity side?' which is why I'm taking shifts in my behaviour seriously in order to be more productive.

How do the various aspects of productivity fit together?

There are lots of books on goal-setting, time management, habits and deadlines and process and your overarching why, so this is more of an overview. There's a



downloadable PDF of this diagram in the download area which you can work through for yourself. Your example will be different to mine.

What is your why?

I spent 13 years as a business consultant, working for a really good wage, but I didn't have anything to show for my time. Everything I ever did as an IT consultant disappeared because it was overwritten by the new version of the system or someone changed the business decisions and got rid of everything. I used to feel really miserable that I had nothing to show for my time. Now, I have tons of books to show for my time which makes me happy!

My big why is that **I measure my life by what I create**. Back then, I wanted to leave my job and be a writer, so I want something tangible for my life and secondly, I want to make a living. Your why will be different, but that was mine a few years ago. And I still measure my life by what I create. It's very important to me that I have creative outputs.

Why are you doing this? Why are you writing a book? Why do you want to be a writer?

Perhaps there is an inner sense that you're meant to be writing. It certainly is for most people whose chosen medium is writing. But you need to be more specific.

A lot of people talk about the discipline needed to create. For me, the word discipline is negative. It has connotations of boot camps and drill instructors and that to me, is not part of my creativity. I find that you don't need discipline so much if you have a why. So, if you have a reason that drives you to the page, you don't need discipline because you want to be there. You actively want to do this.

It needs to be big enough to drive you through the hard times. I wanted to leave my job, so, I was very driven to make this a success. Now, I'm driven to *continue* making a living because my husband also left his job and this is business is how we pay the bills. So, I'm driven by creativity but also by money, and you possibly are, too. There are lots of reasons why you might do this, but you need to identify your 'why.'

Your self-definition will help you create.

Ten years ago, I wrote down an affirmation, 'I am creative. I am an author.' I wrote that down way before I ever was creative or an author. It was an affirmation for the future, but then my brain had to become that because I was repeating it and eventually believing it.

When you say 'I am,' that is claiming the word for you. I did the same thing with professional speaking. I said, 'I am a speaker' and then worked towards that in practical terms. When you just start claiming these things, it focuses your mind.



Can you say, 'I am a writer' out loud? Can you say, 'I am creative. I am an author.? Or 'I am a six-figure author.' Whatever you need to say in order to help drive your reason why. Once you say even something as simple as, 'I am a writer,' then you must write. You must behave as a writer or you're *not* a writer.

So, who are you? What do you do with your time, with your life? When you say I am a writer, is it reflected in how you live your life? What do writers do?

“Who you are, what you think, feel and do, what you love is the sum of what you focus on.”

Cal Newport, Deep Work

Goal setting

Your goal is the specific result that you are aiming for, and you need to pick something to go through this exercise with. For example, when I was writing my first novel, I wrote down, 'I want to write the first draft of my novel *Pentecost*, which later became *Stone Of Fire*, by my birthday, March 2011.' I wrote that down around 15 months before that date.

Writing down a specific result, a specific endpoint helps you to have a direction and helps to keep you accountable because it actually has a date on and something that is measurable. You will know whether or not you have achieved that goal. Write it down. We're writers, after all, but you do need to write down your goals.

I'm not saying that you will never change your goals. I change my goals regularly. But the point is that they set you off in a direction. Inevitably, life happens. So, and you might change direction, or you might consider that goal actually not relevant anymore.

But, if you're standing at the crossroads, the goal will take you in one direction or another. Let's say you only have an hour a day and you have two goals, one to write the first draft of your book in eight weeks, and the other one is run a marathon in eight weeks. Now, I would say you're going to struggle to achieve both of those goals at the same time because both of those will take up a lot of your time.

You're going to have to decide which one of those you want to do and then you can do the other one later.

You can achieve a lot, but you can't do it all at once. Choose your direction with your goal.

Different goals for different stages

There are different stages of being an author, so, there are different goals at the different stages and also different types of productivity.

[See my article, [The Arc of the Indie Author](#) for more detail.]



If you're a brand new writer, perhaps you've never written a book before, then you are going to be aiming to write that first draft. That is your job. That is it. You'll be writing it, and you'll want more words per hour, more hours at the screen, and then you'll be looking into publishing later in the process.



If you are an established author, you understand the process of writing and publishing, so then it becomes task juggling. It's about, 'How do I become more effective? How do I make more money in the time I have? How do I run a more effective business? How do I work with freelancers in a more productive way? How do I outsource things so I have more time to write,' which is where I am. See the video on outsourcing for more.

Consider what stage you're at. What specific goals do you have? What is productivity at that stage?

For example, it's very easy to measure words per day. I'm not saying it's easy to write, I'm just saying it's easy to measure. If you're writing a first draft, by the end of a writing session, you will have some words. It's measurable.

But in the starting phase, when you're delving into ideas and research, you might have nothing to show for that time except a few pages of notes. Everything else might be in your head. In the editing phase, it could be 20 pages edited or maybe if you're doing rewrites, you've got minus words for the day because you've edited them out.

Your definition of what is productive needs to change at different stages of the process, and your goals are also going to be different per stage.

Deadlines

Should you set deadlines? Should you not?

I personally think they are critical. There are way too many authors who spend years on the same book because they have not held themselves accountable to some kind of deadline. And as we said at the beginning, if you're not producing, you're not developing yourself as a writer.

If you block up the creative pipe, the flow stops. In my experience, the more you produce, the more ideas you get, the more creativity comes down the pipe. And

that's when things get exciting. I do remember when I didn't have any ideas, so don't worry if you're at that phase. But once you get into it, ideas are not the problem. The problem is finding enough time to write everything you want to write.

Let's talk about timelines and deadlines. Work out how long your book is going to take. If you're traditionally publishing, then you will have a contract with dates on it. You're going to have to work back from that to make sure you've got enough time to do everything.



If you're an indie, you have to make your own deadline, and this can be an issue, especially if you're new to this game. You will need to get your book to editors and that can often be the date you want to aim for because good editors get booked up in advance. Or, a good deadline, if you're just starting out, is to make it memorable, which is why I chose my birthday for that first novel. Then you write it down.

Deadlines help you prioritize.

Remember the example: 'I want to run a marathon and I want to write my first book in the next couple of months.' Well, as I said, you can't do both. If you have a deadline and you've said, 'I have to do it by then,' that will help you in the morning to go and sit down and write instead of doing the hour's worth of run that you would be doing if you were training for a marathon.



I am not saying you can't do both – it's just unlikely you can do both at the same time. The biggest problem we have is stretching everything out and trying to fit everything in. **You can do everything, just not at the same time.**

Here's a picture of me with *Pentecost*. I later [re-edited and rebranded as Stone of Fire](#), and also [started writing fiction as J.F.Penn](#). Things change, for sure, and I've written a lot more novels since then.

[This is not a craft course. I have [other courses on How to Write a Novel and How to Write Non-Fiction](#) if you want to get into those.]

Once you have a deadline date, you can work backwards to figure out a timeline that will keep you accountable.

Accountability can help you stick to your writing goal

If you surround yourself with people who are also writing, then it can help you write.

You can find a writing group, either in real life or a Facebook group, even something like on Twitter where there's #5amwritersclub as well as #writingcommunity. There are lots of places that you can find writers these days at different stages of the journey.



If you want to write a novel, you could join www.NaNoWriMo.org which is how I got started. There are other Writing Sprints you can find online in groups as well. You can also do a course in person. This is what I did after I did NaNoWriMo. I joined Year of the Novel at the Queensland Writers Centre in Brisbane. There were weekends when we attended classes, but it also gave me deadlines for chapters.

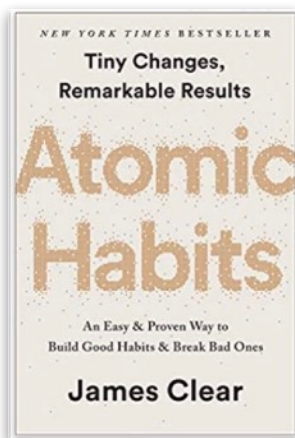
[I documented the whole process, which you can see at www.TheCreativePenn.com/firstnovel]

You could also start a blog and document your journey. I think half of my success comes from the fact that I have been accountable on TheCreativePenn.com for 10 years now. I write because I want to, but I also have a reputation. If I'm not writing, how can I talk/blog about writing? So, for me, it's great to have the accountability of my audience. Of course, when I started, I didn't have an audience, but by putting your goal out there on the internet, you will feel more accountable.

What process (or series of steps) will get you to your goal?

Once you know where you're heading, you need a process and a habit to get it done. The process is a series of steps that will get you to a goal. So, if your goal is to write your book, what series of steps will get you to that goal?

To write my book, I have to write a certain number of words per day or per week. I need to allocate 30 minutes per day for 6 months, and I will make an appointment with myself to go to the cafe, which is where I write my first draft, or maybe it's a particular place in your house and I will write five times a week. That series of steps, writing as a habit, will help me get to my goal of finishing my book.



“Success is the product of daily habits, not once-in-a-lifetime transformations.”

James Clear, Atomic Habits

James Clear focuses on process in his book, [Atomic Habits: An Easy and Proven Way to Build Good Habits and Break Bad Ones](#).

He dismisses goals and says you should focus on process. Personally, I think you need a direction, otherwise, you will end up having a good process for something you didn't want to achieve.

I also think transformation can play a part. The moment I wrote down the affirmation, 'I am creative, I am an author,' it started my transformation into who I am today. But, of course, my daily habits since then have been writing.

James Clear also says, “Habits often appear to make no difference until you cross a critical threshold and unlock a new level of performance. **We often expect progress to be linear.** At the very least, we hope it will come quickly. **In reality, the results of our efforts are often delayed.**”

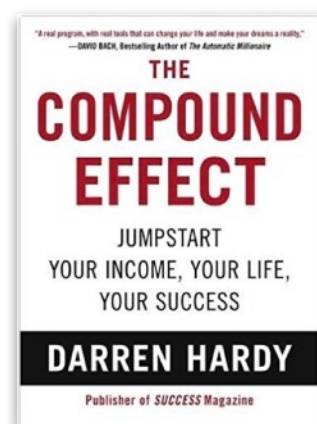
When I said to myself, 'I am creative, I am an author,' and then started writing stuff in my journal, which is what I was doing at the time, I didn't suddenly become an author overnight. There was a lot of time and effort in between making that affirmation and goal to actually achieving what I wanted.

If you write 500 words a day, you will feel like your progress is really slow. That's the reality of being a writer. It's slow going until suddenly it's not. If you keep going with that process, eventually, you will have a first draft. So, success is the product of daily habits.

“**Small smart choices, plus consistency, plus time equals radical difference.**”

Darren Hardy, [The Compound Effect: Jumpstart Your Income, Your Life, Your Success](#)

This book what convinced me to go ahead with blogging, podcasting, and to be consistent with my writing. Success doesn't happen overnight. You don't go from wanting to be a writer to having a best-selling book. There's a process, as well as consistency over time.



Questions:

- What is your why? What is driving you towards your goal? What will keep you going when things get tough?
- What is stopping you from being productive right now? What do you need to address in order to move forward?
- What is your specific goal and the date by which you want to achieve it? [Write it down!]
- What can you put in place to stay accountable?