

The Sacred Seven Productivity Principles

How to Write a Book You Can Be Proud of Without Going Crazy

by
Wally Bock

Michael was one of my first clients when I started coaching people in how to write a business book while they worked full-time.

Michael was a senior executive at a major manufacturing company, and he had a schedule that would make normal people gasp. He travelled more than 100,000 miles every year. He spent time with his teenage children, volunteered at church, and got away from time to time to go fly fishing in different parts of the world.

With that kind of schedule, Michael had to be productive. In fact, he was one of the most productive people I've ever known. That's why I was surprised when he asked me for principles to guide him while he wrote a book. He wasn't worried about the writing, he figured I could help him with that. He wanted to write a great book and squeeze the writing into his already demanding schedule. Here's how he put it.

“I know how to be productive at my job and in my life so far. I don't know the special things I need to know to write this book and keep all my balls in the air.”

I drew up my first set of productivity principles for part-time nonfiction authors for Michael. Over the last 20 years, I've refined it. I've added a couple of things. I found that some things weren't as important as I thought, while other things were far more important than I imagined.

Today, I call these principles **The Sacred Seven**. I give them to every new client when they start writing their book.

Every person and every book project is unique. There's no one way to get a book done and there are lots of right answers. These principles should help you be as productive as possible. They should help you avoid going crazy and you maintain important relationships.

Here's a list of the principles.

- Take What Life Gives You and Control What You Can
- When It's Time to Write, Throw All Your Mental Energy into Writing
- Try What Works for Others First
- Become a Productivity Scientist
- Master the Mundane
- Wrap Things Up Before Moving On
- Take Care of Yourself

The Sacred Seven Productivity Principles

How to Write a Book You Can Be Proud of Without Going Crazy

Take What Your Life Gives You and Control What You Can

Go with the grain, it's easier. Before you decided to write your book, you had a life. That life includes people who are important to you. It includes work that you must do. Your life includes things you do for recreation, to restore yourself. Those things are still there when you start writing your book.

You will need to make changes to the way you do things, but don't make it harder than it needs to be. Go with the grain of your life. Keep the important activities and relationships you already have, and work around them. That's what it means to go with the grain. If you go with the grain, changes will be easier. You'll probably have to eliminate some things that you do now and cut down on the times you connect with people you don't see very often. That's okay. Make sure that you maintain relationships that are the most important and continue the activities that make your life rich. Go with the grain.

Get real about workloads and scheduling. I can't see your calendar from where I sit. But if you're like most of the people I've dealt with in the last 20 years, your calendar is too full and your to-do list is too long. Before you add in the extra work it will take to write a book, consider dropping some of the things on your calendar and your to-do list. Then, schedule with reasonableness in mind. That includes time for breaks and recovery.

There will always be tradeoffs. Life doesn't come simple. You will always be facing the tradeoff between things to do and difficult choices about how to spend your time. If you've already discovered this, realize that adding the work of writing a book to your schedule or to your life will make tradeoffs more intense. There's no magic solution to this. Do your best. That's all you can do.

When It's Time to Write, Throw All Your Mental Energy into Writing

Writing a book is what author Cal Newport calls "deep work." To do deep work well, you need to give it your full attention for an extended period.

Once you set a time to write, make it sacred. Align your other activities so that you can start writing and keep writing when it's time to write.

That means doing other work, like research or interviews, between your writing sessions. You can do many of things that are part of writing a book in small segments. But writing requires deep concentration for an extended period.

Do things that make it easy and natural to write. Write in the same place and at the same time every time. That helps establish a writing habit. Use processes, rituals, checklists, and reminders to help you get things done.

The Sacred Seven Productivity Principles

How to Write a Book You Can Be Proud of Without Going Crazy

Try What Works for Others First

A colorful turn-of-the-century character named Damon Runyon has some wisdom for you on this. Runyon was a playwright, but he was also a gambler, especially a horse player. His advice:

“The race may not be to the swift, nor victory to the strong, but that’s the way to bet.”

What works for most people most of the time will probably work for you. It’s the way to bet.

Become a Productivity Scientist

Yes, we’re more alike than we are different. But each of us is unique. You’re unique. That means that some of the things that work for almost everyone else in the known universe will not work for you. I don’t care if it’s eating breakfast or making a sales call or writing a book, and some successful people do things differently from everyone else.

If you try to do things the way everyone else does and it doesn’t seem to be working, try something different. Contact me for ideas you can try.

This stuff is very near and dear to my heart. I’ve kept records of my own productivity for more than half a century. What’s amazing to me, when I go back and look at the records, is how I got to where I am through lots of little changes, not a few big changes.

That’s the spirit behind the following quote from Jason Fried, CEO of Basecamp. He’s talking about products and companies, but you can insert “writers” for “companies.”

“Like product development, progress is achieved through iteration. If you want to make a product better, you must keep tweaking, revising, and iterating. The same is true with a company.”

Little changes in productivity build on each other and move you ahead. It’s like compound interest. You won’t get a big change until you string a lot of little changes together.

To know what little changes to keep, you must keep records of your experiments. Nobel Laureate Richard Feynman said that, “The first principle is that you must not fool yourself – and you are the easiest person to fool.”

Behavioral psychologist Robert Boice studied three groups of writers who had similar experience and challenges. He tracked them for a year.

One group worked the way they always had. A second group committed to daily writing sessions and kept a log of their writing time. The third group also committed to daily writing and to keeping a log, but Boice contacted them regularly to see how they were doing.

The Sacred Seven Productivity Principles

How to Write a Book You Can Be Proud of Without Going Crazy

At the end of the year, Boice measured publishable output. The group that kept records outperformed the group with no change by more than four times. And the group that Boice followed up on produced nine times the publishable output of the first group.

Keep records of what you change and your output. That way, you'll be able to tell what works and what doesn't. That way, you won't fool yourself.

Master the Mundane

Writing a great book is often hard, boring work. You will spend your time every day over a year or more doing things that are not easy or natural. They're just important.

In 1989, Daniel Chambliss wrote a book about "The making of Olympic swimmers." He coined the phrase, "The mundanity of excellence" to describe how the best swimmers get that way. Sure, they have natural talent. Yes, they have a great work ethic. But there's more.

The top medal-winning swimmers master the small routines and details of their sport. The authors who create great business books do the same thing. You may have the greatest ideas in the world, and you may be a compelling writer, but without mastering the mundane, you will not get your book done.

Do the things you need to do every day to make yourself more productive and to write a great book. Don't just do them for one day. Do them for as long as you work on your book. Day after day, every day, every week, every month.

Finish Things Before Moving On

Have you ever tossed and turned most of the night, thinking about that unfinished report on your desk? You've experienced the Zeigarnik Effect. The name comes from the person who discovered it, Lithuanian psychologist Bluma Zeigarnik. Why does it matter to you?

The Zeigarnik Effect says that if you leave something unfinished, you're more likely to remember it. It's more likely to intrude on your consciousness than things that you completed and put away.

You'll have a much more enjoyable writing process if you learn to wrap things up before you move on. Don't leave those little tasks unfinished, they'll come back to haunt you.

Finish that chapter. Then, put away your materials and plan what you need to do before your next writing session.

Work like a firefighter. When firefighters put out a fire, they don't go back to the firehouse and take a nap. Instead, they put away all their equipment and make sure it's ready to use for the next fire. Follow their example.

The Sacred Seven Productivity Principles

How to Write a Book You Can Be Proud of Without Going Crazy

Take Care of Yourself

Writing a book is hard work. It takes time and commitment and some sacrifice. Writing a book should also be a joyful learning experience. The book should only be one result of your efforts. You should finish the project knowing more about your subject and about yourself.

We're not built to go full throttle all the time. Follow periods of heavy work or stress with time for recovery. Take breaks. Plan for time off.

Sleep and time for relationships may seem like they're going to steal time you need to write. But that's not the way it is. Getting enough sleep, and maintaining strong, loving relationships makes you more productive, not less.

Take care. Stop and check your wellbeing frequently. Review how you're doing at the rest of life. How's your health and mental state? How are your important relationships? How's work? If you find that one or more of them is slipping, figure out why. Then fix things.

Plan time to reflect on the book and your life. I suggest a weekly review. Talk to your spouse or other important person. Small course corrections are easier than great big ones.

Celebrate your successes. Enjoy the ride. Almost everyone claims to want to write a book. Only a tiny fraction of those start the process. Even fewer finish and experience the rush of seeing their book in print.

Make a little progress every day. Celebrate every win, no matter how small. And write a great book.

Contact me if I can help.

Wally Bock

bock.wally@gmail.com

<https://writingabookwithwally.com>