

How to Harness A Hobgoblin

The #1 Strategy to Unleash Your Creative Productivity



by Catherine Cantieri, productivity coach & owner of **SORTED**

“Consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds”

—Ralph Waldo... Emerson?

Wait a minute.

Ah.

“A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Don't worry. We won't talk about the foolish kind.

How to Harness a Hobgoblin

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Left-facing pages contain descriptions of daily routines of famous creators from Daily Routines (<http://dailyroutines.typepad.com>). Catherine Cantieri is not affiliated with Daily Routines, but is obviously a huge admirer.

This e-book contains no affiliate links.

That's right, the #1 strategy to supercharge your creative productivity is... consistency. Now, consistency is not remotely sexy. I mean, it's a hobgoblin. Look at it. But consistency is *powerful*. Life-changing powerful. Creativity-maximizing powerful. That's better than sexy, right?

In this eBook, we'll talk about that little hobgoblin in depth, in the hope that after a while, it might start to become more like an exceptionally useful pet.

How To Use This Book

Part 1 discusses why consistency is such a powerful force and basically pleads the case for adopting consistency. Part 2 delves into the various flavors of resistance to consistency that often come up. And Part 3 will suggest specific habits that can boost your productivity.

All that content will be on the right-hand pages. The left-facing pages contain the daily routines of various artists, writers, architects and designers, to show that creative people really can put that hobgoblin to work. The information on these pages was taken directly from the fantastic blog Daily Routines (<http://dailyroutines.typepad.com/>). It's a great site that I highly recommend.

Simone de Beauvoir

Writer

People say that you have great self-discipline and that you never let a day go by without working. At what time do you start?

I'm always in a hurry to get going, though in general I dislike starting the day. I first have tea and then, at about ten o'clock, I get under way and work until one. Then I see my friends and after that, at five o'clock, I go back to work and continue until nine. I have no difficulty in picking up the thread in the afternoon. When you leave, I'll read the paper or perhaps go shopping. Most often it's a pleasure to work.

The Paris Review, Spring-Summer 1965

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Stephen King

Writer

There are certain things I do if I sit down to write. I have a glass of water or a cup of tea. There's a certain time I sit down, from 8:00 to 8:30, somewhere within that half hour every morning. I have my vitamin pill and my music, sit in the same seat, and the papers are all arranged in the same places. The cumulative purpose of doing these things the same way every day seems to be a way of saying to the mind, you're going to be dreaming soon.

Lisa Rogak, *Haunted Heart: The Life and Times of Stephen King*

Part 1: *W*hy Be Consistent?

Yeah, why be consistent? Why mess with that little hobgoblin in the first place? Many folks flat-out refuse to deal with it; there's a lot of collective contempt out there for consistency, especially among creative types. Aldous Huxley had a real thing about it, writing, "Consistency is contrary to nature, contrary to life. The only completely consistent people are dead." But reading that, I wonder if Huxley was using Emerson's standard of "a foolish consistency."

After all, nature is full of consistency: for starters, all organisms have to perform some basic form of energy conversion on at least a semi-regular basis to remain alive. The form can certainly adapt over time, but the energy conversion itself definitely needs to occur. When the form doesn't adapt, then you have the Emersonian "foolish consistency"—and, usually, a defunct species.

The power of consistency can be seen elsewhere in nature, in the form of erosion. Water dripping onto a rock every once in a while won't have much of an impact, except maybe to get the rock wet. But water dripping onto a rock in a steady stream can radically change the shape and size of that rock over time—and change the composition of the water, as the rock's minerals are added to the water that carries them away.

Stefan Sagmeister

Graphic Designer

[During his one-year sabbatical in Bali, Indonesia.]

As I am very aware how boring it is to hear about other people being happy, I say only this: I get up every morning at 5 a.m. simply because it's more exciting to start working than to turn around and sleep some more. I do seem to have a lot of energy. After enjoying a giant pot of coffee and a medium-sized cigar for breakfast, I start my daily schedule of little experiments. This is coming along very well.

Print, February 2009

To bring this analogy back into your workspace, consistency can not only keep your creativity going on a regular basis (that daily energy conversion—meaning where you convert your energy into creation), it can also have a profound impact on your creative output in the long run. Another word for “consistency applied over time” is *momentum*, and that momentum can also help you get through the occasional dry patch.

One of the most commonly cited pro-consistency quotes is Aristotle’s “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.” And that’s certainly true, but it does sound a bit dry. I prefer Mother Teresa’s take—“To keep a lamp burning, we have to keep putting oil in it”—because that’s a lot closer to the experience of creativity: the production of light and heat, that glorious energy conversion. But without regular infusions of oil, that lamp will burn out... and produce nothing.

Of course, the most concrete reason to embrace consistency is because, ultimately, it’s the only thing that really works. Training for a sport doesn’t happen in long, erratic bursts every few weeks or so; it happens several times a week with an eye toward gradual improvement. Then when it comes time for a multi-hour game, you’re ready to push yourself.

But you can’t do your best at the multi-hour game without the regular practice beforehand. As much as the all-nighter, the 48-hour makeover, the burst of

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Gerhard Richter

Artist

He sticks to a strict routine, waking at 6:15 every morning. He makes breakfast for his family, takes Ella to school at 7:20 and is in the studio by 8. At 1 o'clock, he crosses the garden from the studio back to the house. The grass in the garden is uncut. Richter proudly points this out, to show that even it is a matter of his choosing, not by chance. At 1 o'clock, he eats lunch in the dining room, alone. A housekeeper lays out the same meal for him each day: yogurt, tomatoes, bread, olive oil and chamomile tea. After lunch, Richter returns to his studio to work into the evening. "I have always been structured," he explains.

The New York Times Magazine, January 27, 2002

inspiration are idolized, they aren't anything you can count on. In fact, they're mostly done for appearance's sake, and their genuine quality is pretty negligible.

As an organizer, I could come into your workspace and help you create a space and a system that completely supports you and your creativity. But that system will soon fall apart unless it's used consistently. There's no magic bullet, no Ultimate Way of Setting Things Up that will do all the organizing by itself. There's a System That Works, but you have to work it, too. Consistently.

How to Harness a Hobgoblin

Maa Al Aswany

Writer

I have a very firm schedule. I must wake up at six a.m. or I feel very guilty. I write from 6:30 to 10:30 six days a week, like a soldier—no interruptions. Then I read the newspapers and have a shower. I go to my clinic just beside my house from noon to three, then I have a nap because it's very hot during the afternoon here. From six to nine in the evening, I return to my clinic to work, and from nine to midnight, I read. For five or six days a week, I don't go out. My life is confined to my work, my family, my books, my writing.

National Geographic, September 2006

Part 2: *H*ow To Become Consistent

Ideally, you won't just mess with the hobgoblin, you'll discover how useful the little critter can be. But to do that, you've got to get acquainted with the hobgoblin, and that usually means taking deliberate steps to become more consistent. One useful first step might be identifying any obstacles you have to embracing consistency.

“I don't have time to develop a new habit.”

There are two possible responses to this, and those responses vary based on how you answer this question—asked gently, and with respect: Are you genuinely busy, or might you be making yourself busy?

If you truly have a lot of demands on your time, developing consistent habits will help you get more done in less time, eventually. While you're developing those habits, it might help to delegate one or more tasks to someone else to allow you the additional time you need to learn.

It might be hard to give up control over everything you feel responsible for, but I'm willing to bet there is at least one task in your life that doesn't have to be done perfectly. Find the task with the most “room for

Chris Ofili

Artist

He arrives in his studio at 9 or 10 in the morning, he explained. He sets aside a corner for watercolors and drawings “away from center stage,” meaning where he paints his big, collaged oil paintings. “I consider that corner of the studio to be my comfort zone,” he said. First, he tears a large sheet of paper, always the same size, into eight pieces, all about 6 by 9 inches. Then he loosens up with some pencil marks, “nothing statements, which have no function.”

“They’re not a guide,” he went on, they’re just a way to say something and nothing with a physical mark that is nothing except a start.”

The New York Times, May 8, 2005

imperfection” and ask someone close to you to perform that task for the next several weeks. It might encourage them to say yes if you explain why you’re asking them, and you can ask them for encouragement and support if you believe that will help you.

Additionally, when you’re inventorying your life tasks to see which one(s) could be delegated, you might discover that there are a few tasks that don’t actually need to get done, or that can languish for a few weeks while you harness your hobgoblin. Sometimes, “delegating it to the trash” can be a viable solution.

If, when you think about the nature of your busy schedule, you must admit that you’re making yourself busier than you need to, consider what it is that you’re getting out of that busy-ness. If being busy helps you feel important, I’ll let you in on a secret: *you are important*, even if you do nothing all day. You’re important because you’re a human being and because you’re completely unique in the universe.

Being extra busy might also serve as a distraction from other issues in your life. If the issues feel too big for you to handle on your own, I urge you to find someone (friend, family member, therapist) who can help you tackle these things. When something is faced head-on, you can often find that it’s nowhere near as big as you thought it was when it was only in your peripheral vision.

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Jonathan Safran Foer

Writer

What is your writing process like? Do you write every day? Do you have a kind of totemic place or object? Or do you need to read before you write?

I try to write every morning, from about nine until twelve. It's really rare that I would ever write more than that. I know it's a good idea to listen to music on the way to writing, but I often just can't quite get it together, for some reason, to do that. I try not to speak to my extended family before I write, because that just clouds everything up.

Slate V, "Open Book: Jonathan Safran Foer"

Basically, if you're deliberately building an excessively busy life, one of the best things you can do for yourself is to learn to clear space for yourself and your creativity. Not only will it help you harness the hobgoblin of consistency, you'll be in a better position to listen to the voice of your muse and develop your own voice as a creator.

“My life is too chaotic.”

As with the issue of being too busy, ask yourself if your life is genuinely chaotic or if you might be creating the chaos. Some lives are genuinely random, especially if you have small children or are on call for emergencies, but sometimes people—especially creative types—can, consciously or unconsciously, seek out chaos.

If you suspect that that might be the case, I repeat my advice to think about what you might be getting out of that chaotic state: a lack of responsibility for the direction of your life, the heightened sensations that accompany chaos, the image of a creative genius subject to the whims of a fickle muse, etc. Note that none of these things involve actually doing creative work, and that means they don't yield the rewards that doing that work does. You're settling for second best, here.

If your life is truly chaotic, though, you can get around that by finding one thing you do at just about the same time every day—arrive at work, have lunch, watch Access

Gio Ponti

Architect

His daily routine began between 5 a.m. and 6 a.m. when he wrote thirty letters mostly to friends and collaborators telling them that he had decided to change this or that detail of a project. Ponti then left his family home for his nearby studio, a converted garage so big that, in the early days, his draftsmen rode their scooters right up to their desks, where he worked from 7 a.m. to 8pm. He sketched and wrote so frenziedly that his daughter recalled his hands being stained “black with graphite and ink” by the middle of the afternoon. Ponti then carried on working after returning home for dinner: often drawing silently after the lights had gone out, his sketches illuminated by the lights in other houses.

Design Museum

Hollywood—and anchor your new habits to that. Since you’re reading this book electronically, might I suggest anchoring your habits to starting up your computer. You’ve got a couple minutes to spare while the machine warms up; what better time to set yourself up for a more productive day?

“I’ll get bored after a while.”

One of the drawbacks to being creative is that you can get bored easily, and the more boring people perceive something to be, the less likely they are to do it. (And who can blame them?) There are two possible ways of overcoming this obstacle, and they depend on how your style of motivation works.

The simplest way is to spend the time it takes performing your new consistent habits focusing on how cool it is that you’re trying something new, something that might be totally unlike you, and something that can yield some major rewards.

But your internal monologue might regard that suggestion with cynicism, figuring that’s like telling a child that broccoli really tastes good. (And it does, with the right cheese sauce.) If you know you can’t be motivated by the eventual benefits of consistent habits, it’s time to break out the big gun: your consciousness.

Isaac Asimov

Writer

His usual routine was to awake at 6 a.m., sit down at the typewriter by 7:30 and work until 10 P.M.

In “In Memory Yet Green,” the first volume of his autobiography, published in 1979, he explained how he became a compulsive writer. His Russian-born father owned a succession of candy stores in Brooklyn that were open from 6 a.m. to 1 a.m. seven days a week. Young Isaac got up at 6 o’clock every morning to deliver papers and rushed home from school to help out in the store every afternoon. If he was even a few minutes late, his father yelled at him for being a folyack, Yiddish for sluggard. Even more than 50 years later, he wrote: “It is a point of pride with me that though I have an alarm clock, I never set it, but get up at 6 a.m. anyway. I am still showing my father I’m not a folyack.”

The New York Times, April 7, 1992

One tactic to keep something new and fresh is to practice a sort of deliberately heightened consciousness while doing it. Don't absent-mindedly sort your mail or plan your day; be hyper-aware of it. You aren't just "showing up" to do your appointed task, you're showing *all the way up*. You're paying attention to what you're doing, what you're thinking, what you're feeling. You're completely present—and that's not always easy. But I know how cynical folks love a challenge.

"I won't stick with it."

If your history is full of great beginnings that peter out, you might want to look back and see how many of those efforts you did on your own. Many times, we quit doing something when we don't see immediate results because we know that nobody else will care or even possibly notice if we do quit.

The obvious solution to that? Get an accountability partner. Find someone in your life who you'll report to about your consistent habits and who'll encourage you to keep it up. They could be joining you on this endeavor, or just on the sidelines helping you out.

While your partner or a very close family member might seem like an obvious choice for this role, I'd recommend someone a little more distant. If, for some reason, you don't do your habits, it will be much easier to tell that to

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Roger Ebert

Film Critic

Morning routine: I usually get up around 7. I make oatmeal in my rice cooker. Then I take an hourlong walk: outside if the weather's good; on my treadmill if it's cold. Then I shower, shave and go to the first of three movies I see on many weekdays.

The New York Times Magazine, February 13, 2005

a relatively neutral party than to someone whose opinion dearly matters to you.

Because your accountability partner will need to maintain some objectivity, never condemning you for not doing something but always encouraging you for accomplishing your goals, I highly recommend some kind of coach. Later in 2009, I'll be offering a productivity coaching program, so check the Sorted site for more details if you're interested.

“I just don't want to.”

My response to this objection, as with so many others, is: why? If none of the previous reasons for resisting the concept of consistency apply to you, but you're still completely put off by the idea, I urge you to ask yourself what your reasons might be, because there's a good chance those reasons could be standing in your way in other areas of your life.

The resistance could be caused by a fear: of trying something new, of the possibility of failure, of the possibility of success. I can't tell you what you're feeling or what its sources might be, but I hope you'll talk to someone whose opinion you value if you do discover one of these fears. The good news is that they tend to be pretty universal, so there are many sources of advice for getting past them.

Bernard Tschumi

Architect

Morning routine: Because of the travel, I always have a week when I am really waking up early. I get up and start to work very quietly. I make the coffee. Then have breakfast. I get to the office before 9 a.m.

Evening routine: My wife and I will watch political shows. We are political junkies. We will eat while watching Keith Olbermann on MSNBC and end with Stephen Colbert's program on Comedy Central. Then to bed.

The New York Times Magazine, June 8, 2008

The resistance could also be caused by the persistent image of creative people as inconsistent, as random, as too full of life to be contained by something so petty as habits. But I hope the daily routines of some famous folks, as shown in the left-facing pages of this book, have provided some evidence that consistency can help creativity truly take shape.

Ultimately, you're a grown-up, and if you don't want to be consistent in your creative work or adopt some minor habits that can boost your productivity, nobody is going to make you do that. While I believe consistency is the key to creating your best work, it is, and always has been, just one option for working.

If you're ready to adopt some of those productivity-juicing habits, though, let's look at a few, shall we?

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William Wegman

Photographer

Morning routine: In Maine, I get up around 7:30 or so. First you have to feed four dogs four different things. They all have their diets, their own pills that they're taking. Batty's on all kinds of medication, Rimadyl for arthritis and Pepcid AC and Benadryl.

Workout: Every morning the dogs and I take a bike ride, about five miles uphill. In the afternoon I usually take them on a 20-mile ride. That's why I'm so fit [Laughs].

The New York Times Magazine, September 14, 2003

Part 3: *H*obgoblin Strategies

This section is divided into a few specific categories that are pretty universal to all businesses, even creative ones. I'll suggest some quick habits to get into that can really make a difference in your productivity. A lot of this stuff will seem incredibly simple. But doing it consistently makes it also incredibly powerful.

The mail

Everybody gets it. You've probably got a stack of some nearby right now. On the plus side, the mail comes right to your office every day! On the minus side, it's always coming right to your office, every flippin' day, and it tends to pile up. Fortunately, a couple of habits can reduce the tidal wave of mail.

First, if you're not already (I know a couple of people who don't), **go through your mail every day**. Don't set it aside on top of a file cabinet or throw it in a drawer; that's asking for trouble. Whenever the mail arrives, or at a set time if that works better for you, go through it every day. Seriously. There are much better things to procrastinate over than the mail.

Second, **go through your mail standing near a trash can, recycle bin and/or shredder**. Most of what you get, you probably don't want or need, and the sooner you can get this stuff out of your way, the better.

John Grisham

Writer

When he first started writing, Grisham says, he had “these little rituals that were silly and brutal but very important.”

“The alarm clock would go off at 5, and I’d jump in the shower. My office was 5 minutes away. And I had to be at my desk, at my office, with the first cup of coffee, a legal pad and write the first word at 5:30, five days a week.”

His goal: to write a page every day. Sometimes that would take 10 minutes, sometimes an hour; oftentimes he would write for two hours before he had to turn to his job as a lawyer, which he never especially enjoyed. In the Mississippi Legislature, there were “enormous amounts of wasted time” that would give him the opportunity to write.

San Francisco Chronicle, Feb. 5, 2008

Here are the questions to ask to determine what mail items to keep, and what you can throw out.

- Do I need this? Am I required to do some action with this item? Does it have legal, financial or tax implications? If you answered "no" to all of these, keep going.
- Can I identify a use for this? A specific use, not "I might need it someday." I might need a steel heart valve someday, but there's no point in keeping one on hand. If you answered "no," keep going.
- Is it difficult to find this information again? Thanks to the intertubes, most information can be tracked down online. However, it might not be a bad idea to keep a paper reminder that you want that information in the first place.

I'd like to stress that it is totally okay to answer "yes" to any of these questions. You can keep everything you want... as long as you're willing to pony up the space, time, energy and/or money to maintain it. But if you're quite sure you don't want to keep that piece of mail, then shred, recycle or toss it, as you see fit.

Here are a few guidelines as to whether to use the shredder, recycle bin or the good ol' trash can.

- Does this contain personal or sensitive information? Is it a credit card application that has been thoughtfully pre-filled-out for you? Does it

P.G. Wodehouse

Writer

On most days, he would get up at half past seven, go out onto the porch at the back door, and do the “daily dozen” sequence of calisthenic exercises he had performed every day since 1920. While Ethel, always a late riser, was still upstairs in bed, Wodehouse would prepare his regular breakfast—toast and honey or marmalade, a slice of coffee cake and a mug of tea—and, as part of the early morning routine, he would read a “breakfast book,” for example a Rex Stout or Ngaio Marsh mystery. Then he would light the first pipe of the day, crumbling the cigars Peter Schwed sent him into the bowl in preference to pipe tobacco. At nine o’clock, after a short walk with some of the dogs, he would retire to his study, a spacious, pine-clad room overlooking the garden, for the morning’s work.

Robert McCrum, *Wodehouse: A Life*

include military, trade-specific, medical or insurance information? Is anybody's Social Security Number on it? Better to shred.

- Some businesses use shredding companies, and compile all their to-shred stuff in covered collection bins. Smaller offices can use individual shredders, but I'll add a caution: however many sheets your shredder says it can handle, divide that number by 2.
- Can this be recycled? A lot of stuff can: catalogs, non-sensitive documents, newspapers, magazines, scratch paper. If you don't have the option of office recycling pick-up and would like to find where to take your recyclables, check out Earth911.com for recycling options in your area.
- And then there's trash. Some things just can't be recycled (such as envelopes with little windows on them). So don't be ashamed to trash stuff that you don't want or need.

This may look like a lot of questions to ask, but after you've been doing it a few days, the questions become second nature, and you can separate the wheat mail from the chaff mail in seconds.

But then, what do you do with that wheat mail? (The mail you didn't throw out, that there's some use for.) You have two options: you can file it or act on it.

Elmore Leonard

Writer

What is your routine and how do you go about it?

I write every day when I'm writing, some Saturdays and Sundays, a few hours each day. Because I want to stay with it. If a day goes by and you haven't done anything, or a couple of days, it's difficult to get back into the rhythm of it. I usually start working around 9:30 and I work until 6. I'm lucky to get what I consider four clean pages. They're clean until the next day, the next morning. The time flies by. I can't believe it. When I look at the clock and it's 3 o'clock and I think, "Good, I've got three more hours." And then I think, "I must have the best job in the world." I don't look at this as work. I don't look at it as any kind of test, any kind of proof of what I can do. I have a good time.

Martin Amis Interviews Elmore Leonard

If acting on the piece of mail will take 2 minutes or less, do that right now. That might mean noting info in your calendar or contact management system, giving someone a call or writing a check. But if you can do it now, by all means, *do it now*.

If it will take more than 2 minutes to act on the mail, but you do need to act on it, **schedule a date and time to act on it**, put that in your calendar, then put the piece of mail in your SwiftFile (or tickler file). We'll talk about SwiftFiles/tickler files in the next section.

And, of course, if all you need to do is file something, you can either file it immediately (which I recommend) or put it in a specific location marked "To File." Then, once a week or more often, do your filing.

Deadlines and due dates

Most businesses run on deadlines, whether it's your deadlines for finishing a project or a utility company's deadline for receiving your payment for the electric bill. Missing a deadline is pretty much never a good thing, but there are so many deadlines and due dates involved in every business, how can you keep track of all of them?

With **43 folders in some kind of desktop box**. That kind of setup is known as a tickler file (which is kind of a weird name, but hey, I didn't pick it). I use—and very

Le Corbusier

Architect

His schedule was rigidly organized. I remember how touched I was by his Boy Scout earnestness: at 6 a.m., gymnastics and . . . painting, a kind of fine-arts calisthenics; at 8 a.m., breakfast. Then Le Corbusier entered into probably the most creative part of his day. He worked on the architectural and urbanistic sketches to be transmitted to us in the afternoon. Outlines of his written work would also be formulated then, along with some larger parts of the writings. Spiritually nourished by the preceding hours of physical and visual gymnastics, the hours of painting, he would use the main morning time for his most inspired conceptualization. A marvelous phenomenon indeed, this creative routine, implemented with his native Swiss regularity, harnessing and channeling what is most elusive.

ArchSociety: “Working with Corbusier”

enthusiastically endorse—a version of tickler file called a SwiftFile, and I use the terms interchangeably.

The 43 folders are numbered 1-31 for days of the month and marked January-December for the months of the year. Therefore, every month, each day gets its own folder, into which you can put invoices to be paid, papers you need for a meeting, notes to yourself to do something you do on a regular basis (like "back up your data").

Will the client be reviewing the sketches you just finished on the 14th? Put them in the folder marked "14." Is the insurance bill due on the 26th? Put it in the folder marked "16." (Allow 10 days for mail and processing on any bill.) Is the item in question not due until next month, or a few months out? Put it in the folder for that month—unless the due date is less than 30 days away, in which case, put it in the folder with the correct number.

All that stuff is kind of obvious, but SwiftFiles are also great at recurring tasks. Do you update your accounting every Friday? Put a piece of paper marked "Update accounting" into the folder of the date of the next Friday, then after you've updated the accounting, move it to the folder of the following Friday.

Tickler files are also very handy for cumulative reporting of stuff you've done. At an old job of mine, we had to report each month what we'd done on a particular

Immanuel Kant

Philosopher

His daily schedule then looked something like this. He got up at 5:00 a.m. After getting up, Kant would drink one or two cups of tea—weak tea. With that, he smoked a pipe of tobacco. The time he needed for smoking it “was devoted to meditation.” He then prepared his lectures and worked on his books until 7:00. His lectures began at 7:00, and they would last until 11:00. With the lectures finished, he worked again on his writings until lunch. Go out to lunch, take a walk, and spend the rest of the afternoon with his friend Green. After going home, he would do some more light work and read.

Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography*

project, and I always had to rack my brain to remember exactly what I had done. If I'd had a SwiftFile back then, I could have circled the relevant items on each day's to-do list, then filed the lists into the "1" folder and had a ready-made set of accomplishments for reporting.

The tickler file is incredibly powerful, but it has to be used consistently. I recommend **putting the next day's folder on the center of your desk before you leave for the night**. The folder will have everything you've set aside for that day, so you'll start the day with most—maybe all—of the papers you need.

Once you've gotten in the habit of doing that, you can try taking five minutes before you leave and **making a to-do list for the next day**. Put the list on top of the folder or inside it on top of the papers, and that way you can hit the ground running the next day.

Managing time

There are two aspects to this one: keeping track of when you're supposed to be doing something and keeping track of how long it takes to do that thing. Each one informs the other one; if I schedule 30 minutes to drive somewhere but it actually takes 40 minutes, I need to, one, be aware of that, and two, take that into account the next time I schedule that activity and block off the proper 40 minutes.

Charles Darwin

Scientist, Writer

Rising early: A walk in the garden before breakfast.

After breakfast: Work in his study.

9:30 a.m.: Retiring to the drawing room to listen to letters being read to him. Note the importance of starting on his own work first, rather than being distracted by others' demands in the form of letters.

10:30 a.m.: More work in his study.

Midday: Another walk in the garden, "rain or shine."

Afternoon: Reading and maintaining his vast correspondence.

Evening: Relaxing with a game of billiards, which "drove the horrid species out of my head."

Lateral Action, "How Darwin Devised His Theory of Evolution"

First off, **you need a calendar**. I'm saying that in the hopes that it will sound ludicrously obvious, but you need a calendar. It can be paper or electronic, handheld or on the Web, but it needs to be easily accessible, and it needs to be the kind of thing you like to use. Because you'll be using it every day.

I recommend **having your calendar open on your desk** because that makes it a lot more likely to be used. You won't have to guess about your availability when setting an appointment over the phone, and if you need to add something to your calendar when going through the mail, it will be right there.

There are two times each day when **your calendar needs special attention**: at the end of the day, when you're planning the next day and putting its to-do list together, and first thing in the morning, because you've slept since the last time you looked at your calendar and probably need to refresh your memory.

But managing time isn't just about knowing "when," it's also about knowing "how long." And to get a good idea of how long it takes to do things, you'll need to time them. Yes, with a timer. **Get a good, medium-priced digital timer** with an alarm that you can hear, but that isn't too obnoxious. (Hell, get several; these things are incredibly handy in the kitchen, too.)

Paul Auster

Writer

*What were you doing today before I
appeared in your house?*

The usual. I got up in the morning. I read the paper. I drank a pot of tea. And then I went over to the little apartment I have in the neighborhood and worked for about six hours. ... I've found that writing novels is an all-absorbing experience—both physical and mental—and I have to do it every day in order to keep the rhythm, to keep myself focused on what I'm doing. Even Sunday, if possible. If there's no family thing happening that day, I'll at least work in the morning. Whenever I travel, I get thrown off completely. If I'm gone for two weeks, it takes me a good week to get back into the rhythm of what I was doing before.

The Believer, February 2005

Then, the next time you've scheduled a block of time to do something (like, say, an hour to write a blog post), **set your timer and place it somewhere nearby but out of your immediate line of sight**. Once it goes off, you'll have a good idea how close your estimated time was: if you're almost done with the task, your estimate was pretty good and you might just want to adjust it a little bit. If you're nowhere near done, the timer provides a neutral reality check for how long it's likely to take you to complete the task.

The key word in that sentence above is “neutral.” There's a tendency to assume that the goal of timing tasks is to beat the timer, and that if the timer goes off while you're still doing something, it's a kind of reproach from the universe for not being fast enough. (Well, I have this tendency, anyway.) But the timer isn't there to give you ammo against yourself; it's there as a tool to help you gauge how long tasks actually take so you can schedule your time realistically and not get overwhelmed and overworked.

Strengthening your focus

Timers aren't just useful for figuring out time limits; they can also help you increase your focus, little by little. Many creative types are also ADD types—and I don't mean that as any type of insult. For some, the volume of ideas can be distracting; for others, the ability to think

Robert Caro

Writer

In his New York City office, where everything has its particular place, he works long hours, seven days a week, poring through interview transcripts and primary source notes, working slowly and deliberately on books he publishes, on average, once every 10 years. His meticulous routine is sometimes painful, he says, but necessary. Only by gathering as many facts as possible, cataloging them, cross-checking them and sitting with them at great length, can he choose the right words to re-create the past inside his readers' heads.

“I trained myself to be organized,” he explains, pointing almost apologetically at his massive writer's map. “If you're fumbling around trying to remember what notebook has what quote, you can't be in the room with the people you're writing about.”

Jonathan Darman, “The Marathon Man,” *Newsweek*, February 16, 2009

laterally can come on at just the wrong time; and still others actually have an attention deficit disorder.

For the folks who have a diagnosed disorder, I'm not sure a timer can do that much. But for those of us who are just out of practice at forming and holding focus, a timer can be a kind of movable milestone as we develop that skill.

Start by doing “generic” focus strengthening: find an object in the room that you don't often think of (like the wheels under your chair). **Set your timer for 3 minutes, and for those 3 minutes think of nothing but those wheels:** what they look like, how they function, their precise shape, etc. The next day, pick another item (it doesn't have to be in the room) and set the timer for 3 and a half minutes. Keep going until you're up to 5 minutes of focusing on just random stuff.

Then shift to your work. Here, the times will be longer because there's an inherent interest in your work that presumably isn't there for the wheels on your chair. Set the timer for 15 minutes and just devote yourself completely to a task. If the timer goes off and you're thinking, “Where did the time go?!” then keep on working and double the time for the next day.

If, on the other hand, your focus seriously wanders before the timer goes off, try for 10 minutes the next day. Regardless, **keep upping your time every day** you use

Will Self

Writer

How do you write (do you have a daily routine?)

First drafts as early in the morning as possible, then second, then third (retyping, I work on a manual). Once the first draft is 80% completed I start on the second, so that there's a conveyor belt of drafts in progress: this helps me to grasp the totality of the book. I accelerate towards the end, usually because I'm on or past my deadline.

In your line of work, you spend much of your time alone. How do you survive?

Rituals. Smoking—pipes, cigars, special brands, accessories, the whole bollocks. Coffee, tea, strange infusions—I have a stove on my desk. Fetishising typewriters, pens, etc. Overall, though, I have a healthy appetite for solitude. If you don't, you have no business being a writer.

The Guardian, May 9, 2007

this technique (even if it's only in 10-second intervals) and your ability to focus will expand dramatically.

Being ready for the muse

You can't really schedule inspiration, but you can be prepared in case it shows up. There are two main categories to this hobgoblin maneuver: in the office and out of the office.

Keep the office muse-ready by **always having your creative tools on hand and ready for action**. That could mean paper and pencil (sharpened), or your laptop (charged), or whatever it is you use to do what you do. Before you leave the office every day, make sure all your tools are in their best possible condition in case something awesome occurs to you on the way in the next day.

Another crucial tool that needs to be present? **Space**. Ideas need room to grow, and you'll need room to spread out while you try to capture them. A crowded desk doesn't invite inspiration, it invites avoidance. Take a couple of minutes every day before you leave to clear off a little space on your desk. Put stuff back, throw stuff out, set stuff on fire, but have some space waiting for you the next day.

You might notice that the phrase "take a couple of minutes every day before you leave" comes up a lot in

Anthony Trollope

Writer

Every day for years, Trollope reported in his “Autobiography,” he woke in darkness and wrote from 5:30 a.m. to 8:30 a.m., with his watch in front of him. He required of himself two hundred and fifty words every quarter of an hour. If he finished one novel before eight-thirty, he took out a fresh piece of paper and started the next. The writing session was followed, for a long stretch of time, by a day job with the postal service. Plus, he said, he always hunted at least twice a week. Under this regimen, he produced forty-nine novels in thirty-five years. Having prospered so well, he urged his method on all writers: “Let their work be to them as is his common work to the common laborer. No gigantic efforts will then be necessary. He need tie no wet towels round his brow, nor sit for thirty hours at his desk without moving,—as men have sat, or said that they have sat.”

The New Yorker, June 14, 2004

this eBook. “Damn,” you’re saying, “at that rate, I’ll need to stop working on a project 15 minutes before I leave!” Yeah, that’s actually a really good idea. Stop working, clear your desk off, get your tools ready for tomorrow, review your calendar and get your to-do list in order. Instead of ruminating over the day that’s just passed, get in gear for the day that’s on the way.

Outside the office, you might not want to carry your complete tool set around, but you might want to have the ability to capture any inspiration that might occur. The simplest way to do this is to attach a pen to a small notebook with a rubber band, and **keep that notebook with you**. Think of it as a companion to your wallet; wherever the wallet goes, the notebook goes.

If you want to go a little swankier, I recommend the Pocket Briefcase by Levenger, available on their website. The type of idea capture system you use doesn’t matter; what matters is that you use it—say it with me—consistently.

So, that’s the general plan for harnessing the hobgoblin known as consistency and putting it to work to increase your creative productivity. I welcome your input on the book at the Sorted blog, and I hope I’ve offered you some useful information in these electronic pages. Thanks for reading.