What Effective Writers Know about “The Power of Habit”

Habits are powerful things. Whether good or bad, habits are so persistent that we obey them without noticing, almost unconsciously. As such, habits become “hard wired” in the depths of our neural circuitry.

In The Power of Habit, Charles Duhigg begins with the illustrative story of Eugene Pauly, a now famous test subject in the bio-neurological study of habit. After suffering severe brain damage, Eugene lost a 30-year swath of his memory as well as the ability to retain new information or form short-term memories of any kind. However, Eugene did keep his earliest memories, and new cues could still trigger “all the habits he had formed in his youth.” Perhaps most surprisingly, the scientists studying Eugene’s condition discovered that he was also capable of forming new habits, like taking daily walks around his neighborhood, even though he had no conscious memory of performing the habitual actions themselves. Without being able to recall what his house looked like or ever having done so before, Eugene went for a walk by himself every day and routinely found his way home. How is that possible?

The short answer is that habit-related information is stored in a different part of the brain than memory-related information and our habits operate independently from conscious, cognitive processes. Habits are etched into the deepest core of our central nervous system. We can’t reason our way into them or break them with logic alone. Habits, then, are more physiological than intellectual—they rely on a consistent pattern of repeated behavior that begins with an external cue, causing us to run through a set routine en route to a predictable outcome or reward.

A habit is essentially a program that runs in the background of the mind, a series of semi-unconscious behaviors that free the brain to take on other activities (like when your daily commute becomes so routine that you use that time to plan dinner or think about an email you have to write). It’s an energy saving evolutionary mechanism that can be a detriment or a benefit, depending on the behaviors involved. In the model Duhigg describes, it’s easy to see the relationship between habit and addiction, for habitual actions form a predictable loop that begins when a cue or trigger (a feeling of stress) is followed by a routine behavior (drinking alcohol) that brings about an accustomed result/reward (a mental dissociation from stress-inducing circumstances).

However, not all habits are so obvious or so clearly problematic. Let’s say, for instance, you’re someone who is in the habit of turning on your smartphone before getting out of bed in the morning. Such a routine likely includes browsing through notifications, checking and responding to email or text messages, and scrolling through social media feeds…all before putting one foot on the floor. The loop here may be triggered by something as simple as keeping the phone on the night-stand, and moving the phone to the dresser or even the coffee maker. This simple modification doesn’t change the habit altogether, but it allows an existing motivation (the urge to check your phone) to work for rather than against you. When you have to get out of bed to reach your phone, switching it on now becomes your reward for getting an early start, and a new routine is born.

Effective writers understand the power of habit and use it not only to help them become more prolific, but also to maintain motivation and focus on complex writing projects. So what are the writing habits that are most effective, and how can you develop those habits for yourself?
Three Tips for Picking up the Writing Habit

1. Write Regularly to Set Your Routine

Scholars who study the habits of productive writers agree that consistency is the key to efficient output, and the most productive writers are those who hit the keyboard for a scheduled amount of time each day. While it may seem daunting to write EVERY DAY, keep in mind that habit building is nothing more than initiating a pattern of behavior with a recognizable trigger and sufficient reward. The quantity or quality of what you write is irrelevant to the habit-forming process.

Here’s what does matter for building effective habits:

- **Write at the same time each day.** Choose a time that you can save for writing even when your schedule gets hectic.

- **Write in the same place each day.** Pick a quiet environment where you won’t be disturbed. The familiar cues of place and time will help you settle in to work each day.

- **Set a timer for 15-30 minutes and work without disruption for the entire time.** Don’t stop to read more or find a book in the library catalog. JUST WRITE. At first, you’ll have to be disciplined about warding off distractions and keeping your fingers on the keyboard the whole time. Eventually, the cadence of these short blocks of solid writing time will form the “automatic routine” part of the habit cycle.

Now, you may be saying to yourself, “How am I going to get anything done in just 15 minutes? It takes me that long just to warm up.” While that may be true at first, once you get in the habit of coming back day after day it will be much easier to start because you haven’t been away long enough to get “cold.”

Here are some other helpful practices for building your routine:

- **Take a tip from Ernest Hemingway and never end the day on a period.** Start a new section, or paragraph, or sentence before calling it quits and it will be easier to get back in the flow tomorrow.

- **Make a writing playlist.** Listening to the same songs in the same order while you write can help to reinforce the routine.

- **If you get into a groove and find yourself writing for more than 30 minutes from time to time, go with it.** We won’t tell anyone.

2. Build in Rewards to Enhance Motivation

While setting a predictable schedule is helpful for building a writing routine, a system of regular self-reward can help sustain motivation. The most obvious reward of writing is found in the finished product, but what about all the time between blank page and completed manuscript? Well, part of making writing a habit is learning to see every session of dedicated writing time as a small victory, an intermediary accomplishment on the road to a larger goal. So go ahead, reward yourself after each session. It could be with a latte, a piece of chocolate or a walk in the woods. Whatever you choose, make it a reasonable reward that you can guarantee yourself each time.

There are even ways of using rewards to track your progress. You might start a writing journal and give yourself a sticker for every writing session done. If your reward is chocolate, you could make a collage out of the wrappers from all the treats of a single project. Those with more pragmatic minds might simply put an ‘X’ on the calendar for every day they complete the 15-30 minute obligation. Eventually, the NEED to make that mark or entry in your log will be the thing that drives you to fire up the word processor on those days when you’d rather not.

3. Join (or Start) a Writing Group for Accountability

Writing groups that meet regularly (weekly or bi-weekly is best) can provide external supports for both tracking progress and sticking to your schedule. Such groups tend to ask members to report on the work they’ve been doing and declare goals for the next meeting. Some may even share their work with each other and provide feedback. Whatever the format, writing groups are an excellent way to achieve low-stakes accountability and peer-support networks.

Conclusion

Building effective writing habits takes time and effort, but the upfront investment will pay off down the road. To learn more about how you can put the power of habit to use, see the resources below or contact ITLAL to make an appointment.

References and Resources


