



How I Write

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THE 'HOW' OF IT IS NOT a simple matter. There is no formula: to each, her or his own circumstances, along with idiosyncrasies possibly as particular as Rafael Nadal's plucking at various parts of his clothing and body before serving. But it's still a matter that concerns all writers: especially at the outset, it has to do with priorities — ways of making room for the writing and then keeping that time and space available. The time of day, too — are you a night owl or an early riser? Do you, like me, consider the afternoon suitable for little more than breathing? Knowing your own best work rhythms will save you both from making excuses, and from expecting too much of yourself at the wrong moment. You will also learn to identify quite distinct phases — knowing when it is good to sense the accumulation of energy and focus without perhaps yet putting pen to paper or fingers to keyboard; knowing when you are on song, as opposed to merely competent; when to take a break, when to discard.

Recognition of what works best for you is a useful prelude to discovery, in terms of the writing itself, if not a precondition. For me this has resulted in a cycle with, at one end, intense bursts of work; at the opposite one, quiescence or apparent blankness, though this is by no means an empty quarter. I've also become more aware of the need to attend to the material as it evolves, testing it with the ear as well as the eye by reading it aloud.

Of course, your approach will vary with the material. In making poems, I handwrite and never work on screen: for prose, I start with handwritten notes, then work on screen but also print out the work at key stages.



Whatever the task in hand, the imperative question is always ‘How do I write this?’ This particular chapter, this paragraph, this poem, working with these particular words. Sometimes progress is easy, sometimes seemingly impossible: then, you need the self-belief to look to continuance, a resumption beyond hiatus.

It’s important, I think, not to be tyrannised by your own rules and prohibitions, and to be flexible. For instance, when it comes to working hours, over time my approach has changed. Like many writers, I began as a night-owl; as a parent, I continued to work after dark; latterly I have favoured the morning. You don’t have to argue with T. S. Eliot’s contention that ‘old men ought to be explorers’ to think that by then the *how* of it – recognising what you do best, and the routes to that – will have been pretty much decided. Along the way, it’s hard to think of a better companion than the surprisingly encouraging words of the well-known Samuel Beckett quotation: ‘Try again. Fail again. Fail better.’ And it’s good to keep in mind the sheer interest and enjoyment of wrestling with the richly volatile nature of language itself.